

Deborah Kendrick commentary: People who are deaf and blind can get aid

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Kevin Parker didn't talk until he was 4. That was when the adults in his life realized he wasn't hearing well enough to repeat the swirl of words around him.

In adolescence, his vision was not typical, either. He had trouble seeing the sidewalk and needed letters that were large in order to read. Then, in 2011, at age 26 and grappling with the medical leave from his job as an operating-room assistant, he finally got a diagnosis: Type II Ushers Syndrome, a genetic condition that depletes both sight and hearing.

This was why he sometimes missed what was being said to him in the operating room. He didn't always hear the words and, sometimes, he didn't see the lips moving with an instruction for him, either.

"In a trauma situation, everything is fast," he says matter-of-factly. "You have to understand and respond quickly. There is no time to hesitate."

Parker wasn't bitter about the medical leave. A little aggravated, perhaps, that the reason he struggles both to see and hear took so long to diagnose, he is ready to figure out how to proceed as a person who is legally deaf-blind and wants to learn what he'll need to know to go to school, work and have a family someday.

Ohio Health found another job for Parker. He works in environmental services, a kind of specialized janitorial set of tasks, cleaning hospital rooms, but this smart, amiable 28-year-old is looking forward with optimism.

One tremendous boost has been the assistance he has recently received from a new program, enacted with the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act, which became effective last July. The part of that law for which Parker is deeply grateful is the part administered by the Federal Communications Commission, called the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program, designed to provide qualifying individuals with telecommunications and other technology that will enable them to connect to the world around them.

In Parker's case, the equipment selected by professionals assessing his needs was an iPad and a Windows laptop with software called ZoomText. ZoomText magnifies characters up to 36 times their original size and offers a variety of contrast options, so that someone with "tunnel vision" like Parker's can change the contrast to a more legible white on black, increase the font size, and thus be able to read email and websites, and access other networking and connectivity advantages most of us take for granted.

There are 1 million Americans whose combined sight and hearing loss warrants classification as deaf-blind. The nature of that combination varies. Some are profoundly deaf with limited vision. Some are totally blind with limited hearing. While there has arguably been no better time in history for a person to cope with these combined disabilities — due to instant access to people and information via the Internet, mobile phones, computers and tablets — most deaf-blind Americans lack the financial resources or even awareness of such tools to come inside the circle of productive, engaged, contributing citizens.

In this pilot stage of the program, \$10 million per year has been allocated, with about \$300,000 coming to Ohio. Eligibility is based on income and proof of disability. The FCC has designated one organization in each state to process applications, assess need and train qualifying individuals. In Ohio, that organization is the Ohio Deaf-Blind Outreach Program, housed in the Columbus Speech and Hearing Center and directed by Jennifer Smith-Dudash. The Ohio program is partnering with the Perkins School for the Blind in Massachusetts and the Helen Keller National Center in New York.

“The hardest part,” Smith-Dudash says, “is getting the word out to people who need the program.” When you consider the nature of combined deafness and blindness, that is no surprise. Still, slowly, word is indeed getting out. Applications are coming in from people ranging in age from 5 to 89.

Assistance can cover a wide array of equipment, including laptops, tablets, mobile phones, amplifiers, signalers converting the ringing of a phone to light or vibration, software and hardware converting web pages to magnified print or Braille.

We all know the story of Helen Keller, whose teacher relentlessly spelled into the wild child’s hand until, finally, the communication connection was made. This new FCC program represents the promise of a similarly magical connection to the world for Kevin Parker and a million others, 21st century style.

For additional information, visit www.iCanConnect.org.

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