

**Plenty of Technology, No Takers in Mississippi**

*iCanConnect Program is an Unclaimed Pot of Gold for People with Vision and Hearing Loss*

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Jackson, MS - What seems like an easy give-away is turning out to be a difficult proposition in Mississippi where Toni Hollingsworth is trying to get potentially life-changing technology – including iPhones and iPads - to people with both vision and hearing loss.

“It’s so crazy to have trouble giving this away,” says Hollingsworth. “People simply don’t know about the program and the equipment.”

The program is called the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program (NDBEDP). The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) launched the program nationwide to ensure that people with vision and hearing loss benefit from the latest communications technology.

Commonly known as iCanConnect, the program provides everything from the newest iPhone to the latest screen reading software to high-end phone amplifiers to people who are deaf-blind.

And, for anyone who qualifies, the equipment is free.

“It’s like being given a pot of gold,” she says. “This population is so often overlooked.”

Hollingsworth started teaching deaf-blind children in 1980.

“Back then something called the teletouch was available,” recalls Hollingsworth, the Director of the Mississippi Deaf-Blind project. “It enabled individuals who are deaf-blind to use Braille to communicate with people who see and hear, but not all individuals who are deaf-blind know Braille.”

Fast-forward to a world where a person who is deaf-blind can press the screen on an iPhone, communicate in sign or Braille and then translate that message to text or voice. It can mean interacting independently with a store clerk, checking in with family or getting help in an emergency.

“For an individual who has vision and hearing impairment to have access to call siblings who no longer live nearby or call for an ambulance,” says Hollingsworth, “it’s phenomenal.”

Portable Braille readers enable someone who is blind and hard of hearing to access email and instant messaging anywhere, at home that same person might communicate using an amplified phone and a specially equipped computer and keyboard. iCanConnect offers a wide array of equipment along with individual assessments and training.

Yet in Mississippi not one person has applied to be part of the program.

Hollingsworth hopes family members and counselors will refer people who are deaf-blind to the Mississippi iCanConnect program. She volunteers to support the program; it’s not part of her regular job. The reward will come when she is able to help people in her state use the latest technology to achieve something fundamental: connection.

“This technology,” says Hollingsworth “is just a wonderful gift.”

You can learn more about the Mississippi iCanConnect program by logging on to [www.iCanConnect.org/Mississippi](http://www.iCanConnect.org/Mississippi) or by calling 1-800-825-4595.

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