

iCanConnect

Organization raising awareness about available technology to help the blind, deaf in the territory

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ST. CROIX — Sitting in the federal piggy bank is thousands of dollars in grant money to help the deaf and blind make phone calls, send emails and access the Internet. But according to Perkins President Steven Rothstein, not enough eligible Virgin Islanders are signing up.

The program is called iCanConnect, and it means free access to special communication technology for individuals with hearing and vision loss. It's the result of federal law, the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010 (CVAA).

The available technology comes in the form of hardware, software and applications to make the lives of the deaf and blind easier when it comes to communicating through voice, data and video services. Examples include screen enlargement software, screen readers and Braille displays.

Perkins, a Massachusetts-based organization dedicated to serving the visually impaired, leads the iCanConnect equipment distribution campaign, and they're ready to hand the territory \$50,000 worth of technology and training each year, according to Rothstein.

"Money has already been allocated," Rothstein said. "This is a grant, not a loan ... We've already purchased about \$20 to \$25 thousand worth of equipment — specialized equipment that we're going to be giving to the University [of the Virgin Islands] so they'll have for demonstration."

According to Rothstein, a portion of the \$50,000 will go toward a partnership with UVI and other agencies to help train specialists how to use the equipment and how to train others to do so. Another portion of the allocation will go toward maintenance of the machines.

On Monday and Tuesday, Rothstein met with representatives from about 50 different government agencies and nonprofit organizations as part of an outreach campaign.

Between 300 and 400 Virgin Islanders are currently eligible to receive this equipment that has made it possible for some people to be "in school for the first time" or get "jobs for the first time," according to Rothstein.

But Perkins' research has shown that people don't know about the opportunity.



Perkins President Steven Rothstein, center, visits the Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped in Estate Golden Rock. Rothstein met with representatives from about 50 different government agencies and nonprofit organizations to discuss a federally-funded program geared toward putting communications technology in the hands of the deaf and blind for free.

"We were looking at statistics and people in the Virgin Islands weren't applying," Rothstein said, "so that told us that they didn't know about it so we reached out ... We wanna make sure that every citizen in the Virgin Islands who's losing their hearing and their sight knows about this."

The catch is only low-income individuals who are deaf-blind are eligible to receive the equipment based on CVAA requirements. The act identifies a deaf-blind individual as one who has a combination of "a certain vision loss and a hearing loss" that leads to decreased dependence in daily activities, according to the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program Consumer Guide. A low-income individual, under CVAA, is one whose income does not rise above 400 percent of Federal Poverty Guidelines.

The current pool of eligible candidates within the territory, Rothstein said, are mostly older people who may not realize they're losing their vision or hearing.

"They may not consider themselves blind — but they don't drive anymore — or deaf (so) they

just run the TV really, really loud," Rothstein explained.

However, the goal is to serve people of all ages with iCanConnect technology, according to the Perkins president.

"Having this equipment will hopefully help young people, older people and people working to be engaged in life," he said. "There are people who are in school for the first time ... getting jobs for the first time ... Folks who are deaf and blind are just as smart as anyone else. They just need assistance communicating. This is one way to help to do that."

The iCanConnect campaign is still in the outreach stages here, but according to Rothstein, his visit here has proved fruitful, and there are eligible candidates who will be served in the next few months.

Ingrid Bough, territorial director of Libraries, Archives and Museums, said she was "very enthused ... and delighted to ... learn of the opportunity for the people of the Virgin Islands. She said the CVAA grant was a great asset to assisting the govern-

ment in the midst of an economic downturn and to helping her division carry out its mandate "to serve the underserved."

Bough connected with Rothstein through Lt. Gov. Gregory Francis and, as a result, is now looking forward to "explore ways to augment and subsidize the programs that we have in place right now as part of the national library service through the Library of Congress" with iCanConnect technology. Rothstein visited the Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped in Estate Golden Rock Tuesday. There he discussed donating resources to the library and incorporating iCanConnect technology with head librarian Letitia Gittens.

Both Bough and Rothstein praised Francis, who was present at the library visit, for his support.

"I wish there were government officials as enthusiastic as him all over the country," Rothstein said. "I travel a lot. I don't see the enthusiasm I see down here."

"All my life, I've dedicated my life to helping people who needs

help," the lieutenant governor said in support of the campaign, and he encouraged others to do the same.

Those interested in determining their eligibility for iCanConnect technology or learning more to help others can visit iCanConnect.org or call 1-800-825-4595.

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