**Debra Holst profile - FINAL**

**April 2018**

**iCanConnect Connects Chicago Woman to the World**

Debra Holst has faced and overcome some very tough challenges in her 58 years. Born deaf and with limited vision, which she began losing at age 30, Debra had been neglected for most of her life. That changed in 2015 when Debra’s brother and sister-in-law discovered her living conditions and transferred Debra from a facility in New Jersey into their home in Alsip, IL., a suburb of Chicago.

When Debra arrived at her brother’s home, her only way to communicate was through American Sign Language (ASL), a language her family did not understand. She was isolated and unable to connect with those around her. It wasn’t until Father Barrett of St. Terrence Catholic Church referred her sister-in-law to [The Chicago Lighthouse](https://chicagolighthouse.org/), an organization that serves individuals who are blind and visually impaired, that Debra was introduced to [iCanConnect](http://www.icanconnect.org/), The National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program.

Through iCanConnect, Debra received a desktop computer, an iPad Pro and an iPhone. Twice a month, Joann Rushing, the director of the DeafBlind Program for The Chicago Lighthouse, went to Debra’s home and helped her learn to communicate with her new equipment.

With training provided through iCanConnect, Debra learned how to use her iPhone to receive text messages from members of her family, including her brother and sister-in-law, their children,11 grandchildren and numerous cousins. Now, Debra, with very little residual vision in only one eye, is able to send text messages back to them using a magnifier on her phone.

She has also mastered FaceTime and loves communicating with relatives and newfound friends near and far. According to her family, “her face lights up when she sees an incoming message or FaceTime call.”

In June 2017, Debra graduated from a program at the Illinois Center for Rehabilitation and Education – Wood ([ICRE-Wood](http://www.dhs.state.il.us/onenetlibrary/27897/documents/brochures/4157.pdf)) - where she took braille and keyboarding classes. She keeps in touch with friends she made in her classes through text messaging and FaceTime. Debra also actively participates in [Deaf Coffee Chats](http://happy.deafcoffee.com/about-deaf-chat-coffee/), local coffee shop get-togethers for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, where she interacts with fellow attendees by using a mix of ASL and text messaging on her iPhone.

Debra says her newfound ability to communicate with her family and friends has made her “life worth living.” “It’s been an unbelievable journey,” she said.

“The equipment Debbie received through iCanConnect has been incredible in helping her improve her social skills by giving her the ability to communicate with her friends and family,” says Debra’s sister-in-law, (also named) Debra Holst. “iCanConnect has given her the tools to help her live her life and achieve her full potential.”