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

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

Free iPad anyone?

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 to people who have combined hearing and vision 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, called the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program (NDBEDP), is funded by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC); its outreach component is known as iCanConnect.

Launched last year, the program provides everything from the newest iPhone to the latest screen reader 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 when phones were connected to a cord, face time required being in the same place as the other person and computers were confined to labs not laps.

“Back then something called the teletouch was available,” recalls Hollingsworth, the Director of the Mississippi Deaf-Blind project. “It enabled deaf-blind individuals to communicate with others who were not deaf-blind, but you still needed to know Braille.”

Fast-forward to a world where we can press the screen on an iPhone, communicate in sign or Braille and then translate that message to text or voice. Now a person who is deaf-blind can connect with anyone, anytime. 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.”

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 is volunteering her time to run the state program. She says 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 is just a wonderful gift.”

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