

ODS Announces New Communication System will Aid Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Oregonians

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Thousands of Oregonians who are deaf, hard-of-hearing or have a speech impairment are about to have an easier time communicating with the Oregon Department of Human Services Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services thanks to a new software system the agency is installing.

The software replaces the traditional teletypewriter (TTY) with a network telephony service that combines telephone technology with the Internet and gives users the feeling of a more natural conversation.

"Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals face challenges with everyday communications that hearing people take for granted," said OVRS Administrator Stephaine Parrish Taylor. "Now, anyone with an Internet connection can call, or be called, by a TTY. Network telephony allows users to chat live with each other over the Internet, anytime, anywhere."

In addition to improved customer service, other states using network telephony services also have reported increased productivity and increased savings from not having to repair or replace TTY machines, Taylor said.

With software called NexTalk, users can answer calls from a TTY or a computer, eliminating the need to own special TTY-compatible hardware. The calls ring directly to a person's PC, allowing real-time communication.

The software features a split screen that shows each party's portion of the text conversation in a distinctive color, allowing a more natural conversation flow. The software also has an instant messaging feature. But unlike instant messaging, where the recipient can't read a sender's response until received, NexTalk provides letter-by-letter interactive communication.

"The ability to communicate continuously and effectively is critical to employment, social life and general well-being," said Taylor. "People with hearing or speech disabilities need to communicate with the rest of the world, just like anyone else."

OVRS serves more than 18,000 Oregonians through its four core programs -- Basic Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Youth Transition Program, Supported Employment and Independent Living. About 97 percent of clients meet the federal definition for persons with severe disabilities.

Clients typically have multiple and complex disability issues and require services that include professional counseling, evaluation of strengths and challenges, vocational skills training, job placement, and support services to achieve and maintain employment.

Oregonians served through OVRs annually earn more than \$41.8 million and generate more than \$9.6 million in tax revenue.

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