

Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs (ATAP)



July 27, 2015

Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20554

Re: NDBEDP Comments, CG Docket 10-210

The Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs (ATAP) is pleased to provide comments to the Federal Communications Commission regarding the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program (NDBEDP). ATAP represents 54 of the state Assistive Technology Programs funded under the Assistive Technology (AT) Act of 2004. At least 14 of these state Assistive Technology Programs are the certified NDBEDP entity in their state or play a role in operations of their state program.

Certification

We are pleased with the FCC's proposed retention of the current structure of the NDBEDP, certifying one entity within each state to be responsible for the administration of the program, distribution of equipment, and provisions of related services. Clearly, this approach has demonstrated success and created efficiencies in meeting the unique needs and demographics of deaf-blind residents in states and in utilizing available state and local resources.

The NPRM notes that 10 of the 53 state programs have relinquished their certifications, requiring the Commission to seek replacement in those states. We applaud the Commission proposal that certified programs seeking to relinquish certification provide written notice to the Commission at least 90 days in advance of its intent to do so. A related issue deals with the timing of the FCC announcements inviting applications from new entities interested in replacing entities relinquishing certification. In some cases, following the FCC announcement, when interested qualified state entities began making inquiries around their state immediately upon the announcement, it appeared that a national entity had already been making contacts in those states to line up support. We would encourage the Commission to ensure a process that encourages and gives preference to the selection of qualified state programs as certified

NDBEDP entities to reduce administrative layers and to more effectively serve residents within those states who are deaf-blind.

The Commission is proposing that each certified entity under the pilot be required to re-apply for certification under the permanent program. We believe that currently certified state entities should continue in their role unless the Commission sees issues with program performance as evidenced by the extensive program data and information that the Commission has required and received under the pilot. The Commission's alternative proposal to allow state entities to demonstrate their ability to meet any new criteria that is established makes much more sense in terms of avoiding potential disruption of services.

The duration of certification should be no shorter than the Commission's proposal to be certified for a period of five years. Shorter timeframes would result in an unnecessary administrative burden on states, as well as possible disruption of the system of services within states to individuals who are deaf-blind.

Centralized Database for Reporting and Reimbursement

The Commission is proposing that a centralized national database be created to assist state programs in the generation of reports to the Commission, to enable the submission of those reports electronically to the NDBEDP Administrator, and to allow for the aggregation and analysis of nationwide data on the NDBEDP.

The Commission comments that difficulties ensued because some of the data submitted by states not using the Perkins database was not uniform. It is our understanding that states utilizing their own databases were submitting data in a format as prescribed by the Commission, and yet in presentations about the NDBEDP over the pilot period, it appeared that data from all states were excluded unless they used the Perkins database.

If the FCC moves forward to implement a centralized database, it should only be required and implemented if it streamlines the reporting and reimbursement process. It should have the capability to allow states to input data and information that can, for the most part, be entered a single time for both reporting and reimbursement functions. It should streamline the process, and greatly reduce the current duplicate input as is currently required for the FCC reporting and RLSA reimbursement. It is unclear what kinds of trends or conclusions can be drawn from some of the information required. We would encourage the Commission to look at reducing the data burden on states in addition to looking at a national database to resolve data issues.

If a centralized database is required by the FCC, the commission should invite entities via a public notice to submit applications for the development and maintenance of the database. Input should first be obtained from states that reflect the diversity of state programs before a national database is pursued. The cost of any national database should not be part of costs assumed by states that would have to be diverted from serving consumers.

Security issues are one key consideration of a national database. States need specific information on how security of data will be achieved. Personally identifiable information about consumers should not be required in any national database used for reporting purposes.

National Outreach

State and local outreach have been more effective than national outreach efforts. The amount of funds allocated to national outreach efforts should be adequate to maintain the national website, 800 number and call center and to provide marketing materials in electronic format that can be customized by states and that can be provided at no additional costs to states. The majority of outreach should be left to state entities.

Assessment and Training Costs

We agree that reimbursement should be allowed for costs of travel for consumers for assessment and for training. While, it may be typically advantageous to the consumer to have assessment and training in their home or natural setting, there are circumstances in which the ability to travel to a centralized location will be more appropriate, such as to try out equipment that is not easily transported, the ability to interact with a peer, and for other reasons. Lodging and accepted per diem rates should be included when necessary, in addition to travel costs. The Commission should consider allowing costs for both in-state travel and for travel to adjoining states when needed.

Training Trainers

We support the concept that expenditures for train-the-trainer activities should be reimbursable under the NDBEDP. Ideally, the concept should be focused on activities within states or regions, rather than on a national train-the-trainer program in order to continue to build capacity within states. Train-the-trainer activities should not be considered administrative costs, as they directly relate to benefitting state residents who are deaf-blind.

Reimbursement Mechanism

We agree with the Commission's proposal to continue to allow states to submit claims on a monthly, quarterly, or semi-annual basis. This approach allows certified programs to select the timeframe that best meets their programmatic and administrative needs.

Reporting

We agree with the Commission proposal to retain the six-month reporting requirement. While an annual reporting period would also be acceptable, a period shorter than six months should not be considered.

Administrative Costs

We agree with the Commission's proposal to reimburse administrative costs as they are incurred and claimed based on the annual allocation, rather than on a percentage of "direct costs" expended.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the establishment of a permanent National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program. Please feel free to contact Audrey Busch, ATAP Director of Policy and Advocacy, at 202.344.5674 or audrey.busch@ataporg.org with any questions.