



Protection & Advocacy Project

400 E. Broadway, Suite 409
Bismarck, ND 58501

701-328-2950

1-800-472-2670

TTY: 711

www.ndpanda.org



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ND Protection and Advocacy Project - Workforce and Technology Project

Testimony of Jordan Wetsel, P&A Project Coordinator

Greetings Chairman Dever and Members of the Human Resource Division of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am Jordan Wetsel, Project Coordinator for the Workforce and Technology Project with the North Dakota Protection and Advocacy Project. Our agency, an independent state organization established in 1977, works tirelessly to assert and advance the civil, human, and legal rights of individuals with disabilities. It is through initiatives such as the Workforce and Technology Project that we work to fulfill this mission and improve the lives of those we serve.

The Workforce and Technology Project empowers individuals with disabilities by providing access to assistive technology (AT) that significantly enhances their independence. Through the integration of innovative AT solutions, we've seen firsthand how these tools can transform lives, reduce reliance on costly institutional care, and foster greater community participation.

Assistive technology provides individuals with the tools to perform daily tasks with greater independence, helping to break down barriers that traditionally required the presence of caregivers or institutional care. These tools range from simple, low-cost items like smart light bulbs and automatic door openers to more specialized devices such as medication management systems, smart security devices, and remote monitoring solutions. The versatility and cost-effectiveness of these technologies have been revolutionary, not only in improving the quality of life for individuals with disabilities, but also for alleviating pressures on workforce and in creating substantial savings for the state.

For example, a participant in our pilot program, previously residing at the Life Skills and

Transition Center (LSTC) was supported with an annual cost of \$560,647, transitioned to a community-based apartment with just \$1,250 worth of assistive technology. This technology, including tools for medication management, visual cues for daily tasks, and smart home devices, reduced the need for intensive staff support and allowed the individual to live more independently. This transition resulted in a savings of \$402,967 annually for the state.

The benefits of assistive technology extend beyond cost savings. Technology promotes greater independence, autonomy, and dignity for individuals with disabilities, enabling them to make choices, manage their environment, and engage in daily activities without the need for constant supervision. AT solutions like smart locks, voice-activated devices, and medication dispensers allow individuals to maintain control over their lives in a way that was previously not possible, improving both physical and mental well-being.

Furthermore, the integration of AT has a far-reaching positive impact on workforce challenges. By reducing the amount of direct support required, AT alleviates some of the pressure on the already strained workforce of direct support professionals (DSPs). Through the transformative use of assistive technology, we've seen individuals go from requiring around-the-clock staffing to needing only part-time support, saving both the state and families money while allowing for more effective use of limited resources.

For instance, in one case, a participant with severe muscular dystrophy and a profound intellectual disability required 24-hour care in a facility. By implementing assistive technologies such as a ceiling lift, automatic door openers, and environmental controls, the participant's care needs were significantly reduced, allowing one caregiver to safely provide support. This resulted in a savings of approximately \$10,900 annually by reducing just one hour of daily care at an average LPN wage. These kinds of savings are sustainable and increase over time, especially when considering the long-term benefits of reduced reliance on institutional care. To highlight the real-world impact of this technology, we have created a video demonstrating how assistive technology enhances daily life and independence. You can view the video here: [Empowering Independence with Technology](#)

Additionally, assistive technology empowers individuals to remain in less restrictive, community-based environments. This not only enhances their quality of life but also encourages greater social inclusion and participation. A participant who has had the opportunity to move into his own apartment with integrated AT can now accomplish tasks such as opening doors, adjusting environmental settings, or reaching things out of the upper cabinets in his apartment, all of which he otherwise would require assistance to do. This not only reduces reliance on caregivers but also

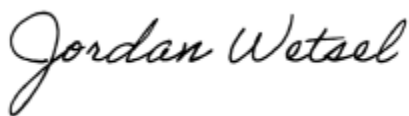
provides a sense of empowerment and control over his daily routine.

The success stories from our pilot program are powerful testaments to the potential of assistive technology to change lives. One of the major takeaways is that AT is not just about reducing costs—it's about enhancing lives. By fostering inclusion, independence, and a greater sense of control, AT provides individuals with disabilities the opportunity to live, learn, work, and play on their terms. It is an investment in the future of our state, ensuring that people with disabilities have the tools they need to thrive in their communities.

Through collaborations with organizations like Warehouse 13, ND Assistive, the DD Council, and Anne Carlsen, we've expanded the availability of AT, integrated it into Medicaid billing codes and state waivers, and we are working to increase knowledge and awareness about the potential of assistive technology, ensuring that more individuals and providers understand how these life-changing solutions can be utilized to enhance independence and quality of life. We've also gained invaluable insights from other states like Ohio, Minnesota, Tennessee, and Washington, which have successfully implemented AT to support individuals with disabilities, further cementing the potential for positive outcomes here in North Dakota.

However, this work is far from complete. The demand for assistive technology continues to grow, and the need for dedicated support to maintain and expand these initiatives is paramount. That is why I urge you to support the continued funding of the Workforce and Technology Project and the creation of a permanent full-time employee to oversee and expand this crucial work. Investing in AT not only improves the lives of individuals with disabilities but also supports our state's efforts to reduce costs, improve workforce efficiency, and build a more inclusive society. For more information on the benefits of assistive technology, please see the appendix where I have included information on our pilot participants.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am more than happy to provide additional data, participant testimonials, or further clarification to illustrate the impact of this initiative on the lives of North Dakotans with disabilities.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jordan Wetsel".

Jordan Wetsel,
P&A Program Coordinator
jowetsel@nd.gov
(701) 328-3994

Appendix

Workforce and Technology Pilot Participant Summaries:

Pilot Participant 1: Cost Savings and Independence

This participant is diagnosed with a combination of developmental, emotional, and physical disabilities, including limited mobility, intellectual disability, and behavioral challenges. He required significant assistance with daily tasks such as medication management, meal preparation, and emotional regulation. His care was initially provided in the Life Skills Transition Center, where the total cost of his care was \$1,536.02 per day, amounting to \$560,647 annually.

With the implementation of assistive technology (AT), including smart home devices, visual cues, habit-tracking apps, and a security system, the participant transitioned to a community-based apartment with a roommate. The total cost for the AT tools was approximately \$1,250. These tools reduced the need for direct staff intervention while promoting independence. As a result, his new living arrangement requires fewer hours of care. The average cost for a DSP is \$18.00/hour, or \$432.00/day, which allows for this individual to have available support, 24 hours a day. The cost of this community care amounts to \$157,680/year, which is a cost-saving to the state of \$402,967, when compared to his previous institutionalized care.

Pilot Participant 2: Empowering Independent Living

This young adult has a severe physical disability and relies on a power wheelchair to navigate daily activities. He faces challenges in accessing essential parts of his home, such as opening doors, blinds, and retrieving items. Before transitioning, he lived with his parents and required assistance with many tasks, including locking doors and adjusting environmental settings. His previous care costs were not specified but included significant support from family and occasional caregivers.

Through the use of assistive technology, such as an automatic door opener, security smart lock, and voice-activated systems, he successfully moved into an accessible apartment. The total cost for the AT equipment was \$5,760.39. This investment has enabled him to perform daily tasks independently, reducing his reliance on caregivers. For instance, cutting back on one hour of daily care—valued at \$18.00 per hour for a DSP saves approximately \$6,570.00 annually. His transition to independent living in a new setting highlights how AT can reduce the need for ongoing caregiver support, ultimately saving costs for the state.

Pilot Participant 3: Mental Health and the Need for Education

This individual faces complex challenges due to a combination of Autism, Diabetes, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and other mental health conditions. Due to medication non-compliance and difficulties managing daily tasks, he had a history of hospitalization and reliance on institutional care. His care was previously provided in a structured environment, which involved significant support staff and costs that were not fully quantified but were high due to his

mental health needs.

The assistive technology solutions provided included a medication dispenser, smart locks for apartment access, and tools for daily organization and mobility. However, mental health barriers, such as resistance to using the technology and challenges with routine changes, have delayed the full implementation of these tools. The cost for the AT equipment was \$572.30, which was minimal compared to the potential savings from reducing hospitalization and external caregiving needs. Although full success has not yet been achieved, he transitioned from a basic care facility to an apartment, which created cost savings by reducing institutional care. The daily rate at a Basic Care Facility is \$146.25/day. Over time, with continued education and support for his mental health, this participant's independence and quality of life are expected to improve, providing long-term cost savings, and decreasing acute care hospitalizations. This individual is provided services through community organizations such as Better Together and Interim HealthCare.

Pilot Participant 4: Enhancing Quality of Life with Complex Medical Needs

This individual has severe muscular dystrophy and a profound intellectual disability, which necessitates constant supervision and assistance with nearly all daily activities, including transfers, mobility, and communication. He also faces challenges in engaging with his environment due to his physical limitations and nonverbal communication. Previously, he required 24-hour care in a highly structured facility, with costs associated with caregiver support and equipment for mobility. For a large portion of his day, he was reliant upon two caregivers, whom were both nurses.

With the implementation of assistive technology, including a ceiling lift, automatic door openers, smart bulbs, and a Bluetooth-enabled neckband for controlling devices, the participant now has more control over his environment. The total cost for the assistive technology was \$17,769.93. These tools have allowed the individual to engage more independently with his environment, reducing caregiver strain and providing for significant benefits to his health and safety. One caregiver can now support him safely within his own apartment. At an average LPN nurse's hourly wage of \$29.88, reducing even one hour of daily care results in an annual savings of approximately \$10,900.00.

This shift to a less restrictive setting allowed the participant to engage more fully in his community while significantly lowering the state's financial burden. AT solutions in this new setting allowed the provider, at times, to reduce staffing from two LPN-level caregivers 24/7 to one LPN-level caregiver 24/7. This cuts the costs associated with his care significantly. The reduction in caregiver time, particularly for mobility and environmental control, translates into significant savings over time. Along with the cost-saving benefits, the implementation of assistive technology has also made the environment safer for both the individual and his staff, providing peace of mind and allowing the caregivers to feel more confident and secure in performing their duties, knowing that the technology supports their efforts and reduces the risk of injury.

Empowering Independence with Technology - Project Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyziMnoZWcE&t=1s>