

21st Century Assistive Technology Act (H.R. 9028)

A bipartisan proposal to increase access to assistive technology for individuals with disabilities.

Background

Originally enacted in 1998, the *Assistive Technology Act* has increased the availability of technology that enables people with disabilities to live, work, and participate in their communities more independently. Specifically, the statute provides grants for statewide programs that help disabled people access assistive technology (AT). These programs offer device reutilization and loans, financing, and demonstration activities, which provide information to consumers about the use of assistive technology.

The Problem

The *Assistive Technology Act* has not been reauthorized since 2004. However, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, people with disabilities, especially those from marginalized communities (such as disabled older adults and non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic disabled people), and disabled residents of homeless shelters were [disproportionately affected](#) in terms of not only hospitalization, but also the degree of social isolation and lack of access to the technologies we relied on to stay connected.

The need to ensure access to AT has never been greater. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, [over 40 million people](#) currently live with a disability, and estimates indicate that [77 million people](#) will be 65 years old or older by 2030. A desire—and the right—to live at home, rather than in institutions, is likely to drive growth in the need for AT. AT may be a high-tech device, such as smart home technology and specialized computer software (i.e., screen readers), or something as simple as a magnifying glass.

The Solution

The *21st Century Assistive Technology Act* is a bipartisan modernization of the AT Act, introduced by Rep. DeSaulnier (D-CA-11) and Rep. Sempolinski (NY-23). The bill—similar to the bipartisan bill of the same name introduced in the Senate by Senator Casey (D-PA)—will increase the quality of life and expand work opportunities for people with disabilities through increased access to technology, equipment, and services. Specifically, this legislation:

- **Facilitates access to AT by providing increased funding** for the four state-level activities, including state financing activities, device reutilization programs, device loan programs, and device demonstrations.
- **Enhances capacity building and services** for Protection & Advocacy agencies and increases the grants for states with minimum allotment once the program reaches \$8 million in funding.
- **Establishes technical assistance support** for state-level activities and Protection & Advocacy systems.
- **Encourages Innovation and Collaboration:** If the amount appropriated exceeds \$49 million, the legislation provides funding for “Projects of National Significance” that may focus on the needs of specific populations, such as youth in transition, or on collaboration among state agencies that provide AT and other services to people with disabilities.