



ASSISTIVE DEVICES ENABLE NORTH DAKOTA SENIORS TO LIVE AT HOME LONGER

As in many states, the number of senior citizens in North Dakota is increasing. By 2030, it is projected that 183,897 (30.3%) of North Dakota residents will be age 60 and older and 3.8% will be age 85 and older. This is higher than the national average.¹ Since 2003, North Dakota (ND) Assistive has been helping many of these seniors stay safe in their homes through its Assistive Safety Device Distribution Service program, also known as the Senior Safety program.

“Many seniors want to stay in their homes but are at risk of going into a nursing home or other long-term care facility due to aging-related disabilities,” explains Jeannie Krull, program director for ND Assistive. “Through our program, eligible North Dakota residents can receive assistive safety devices (up to \$300 worth) that will help increase safety and independence, and often allows them to stay in their own homes longer.”

Any North Dakota resident, age 60 or over, who is not living in a basic or skilled nursing facility, is eligible for the Senior Safety program. Due to the tremendous demand, however, priority is given to individuals with greatest economic need, those at greatest risk of institutional placement, and those living in rural areas.

“Our staff includes consultants – located on both sides of the state – who evaluate needs and match equipment to those needs,” says Krull. “It is really important for us to prioritize equipment distribution based on needs to make the most of the resources we have.”

A NIMBLE NON-PROFIT

ND Assistive is a non-profit organization that was designated by a former governor in 1993 as the implementing entity for the Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1988, which later became the Statewide Assistive Technology Act Program in 1998. In addition, ND Assistive is the implementing agency for several other assistive technology related state and federal contracts. ND Assistive acquired the Senior Safety program contract from State Aging Services in 2003, and in 2005 ND Assistive moved out of state government and became housed under a non-profit. In 2009, they formed their own non-profit.

“We try to look beyond the immediate reason each person contacts us,” Krull explains. “We try to treat each person as a whole, which means listening and seeing other needs that we may be able to address.”

“As a non-profit, we have the flexibility and agility to make decisions, implement new ideas, add services, set up vendor accounts, manage our own accounting, and allocate resources quickly,” notes Krull. In addition to four assistive technology consultants, an AT technician, and Krull, the ND Assistive staff includes the organization’s executive director; an accountant/business manager; and two program coordinators who handle a variety of responsibilities, including program coordination, ordering equipment, and applications to the State. Everyone on the 10-person team contributes to the Senior Safety program as well as to ND Assistive’s other services and programs.

ONE-STOP SHOPPING AND PEACE OF MIND

Krull says that oftentimes, the Senior Safety program serves as an entry point for seniors who can benefit from other assistive technology services offered by ND Assistive, making ND Assistive a sort of “one-stop shop” for seniors and their families.

Recently, for example, ND Assistive was working with an elderly person’s family to set up an emergency alert system. Through those conversations, the ND Assistive staff person became aware that the senior also had difficulty hearing on the phone, so suggested they apply for their Specialized Phone Program. Further discussion revealed the family was planning to install a shower and ramp to address mobility issues, but was not sure how it would be paid for, and ND Assistive referred them to low-interest loans, grants, and federal programs that could help cover those costs.

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In addition to making seniors safer in their homes, the devices and services offered through ND Assistive also bring peace of mind to families. “We hear from families all the time, saying that they are less fearful about the safety of their elderly loved ones because of the devices we have been able to provide.”

RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR THE STATE

“Obviously, it’s critical to fund efforts like this for the safety, well-being, and quality-of-life of our seniors,” says Krull. “But it’s also important to note that the program’s return on investment (ROI) is worth every dollar. Enabling people to stay in their homes instead of moving to state-supported institutions saves the state a lot of money.”

The majority of ND Assistive’s funding comes from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Community Living; the North Dakota Department of Human Services, Aging Services and Vocational Rehabilitation Divisions; and the State of Minnesota, MN STAR. They also are supported by private donations and grants, such as the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation grant that helped them get up and running with smart home technology, which is featured in their Home First Demonstration Centers.

Krull shares an example of how a modest investment in an assistive safety device can save the State of North Dakota thousands of dollars: “Awhile back, an elderly woman had been hospitalized because she overdosed on one of her medications. She was facing the prospect of going into a nursing home in order to prevent another accidental overdose. Her speech pathologist recommended that she apply to the Senior Safety program for a locked medication dispenser. That one simple \$150 device allowed her to avoid nursing home placement. In fact, a decade later, she was still living in her apartment. Had she gone into the nursing home after her overdose, the cost of her care to the State would have been well over \$750,000 at that time, and much higher in today’s dollars.”

The Senior Safety program serves around 750 people every year for less than \$170,000 in state funding. This is a good case to make for organizations like ND Assistive when appealing for state funding: the ROI of assistive technology is strong.



While the most popular devices available through the Senior Safety program are medication dispensers and no-monthly-fee emergency alerting systems, there are dozens of devices available. A simple device, such as this locking medication dispenser, can help a senior live more safely and stay in their home longer.

MANY TYPES OF EQUIPMENT ARE AVAILABLE TO SENIORS THROUGH THE SENIOR SAFETY PROGRAM, INCLUDING:

- Alerting Devices for Hearing Loss
- Anti-Elopement Devices such as Wandering Alarms
- Bed Rails
- Caregiver Pager Systems
- Couch Canes
- Emergency Response Systems – for Landline Only
- Grab Bars (stainless steel)
- Handheld Shower Heads
- Medication Dispensers and Reminders
- Personal Hearing Amplifiers
- Portable Seat Lift
- Shower Chairs
- Adaptive Silverware
- Toilet Safety Frames/Rails
- Toilet Seat Risers
- Tub Rails
- Tub Transfer Benches
- Voice Amplifiers and Accessories

In addition to free equipment, installation may also be provided, if needed.



5 Tips for Standing Up a Senior Safety Program

Krull says the North Dakota program has evolved as needs and technology have changed, but offers several best practices that could help other organizations set up a similar program:

1. Diversify funding sources. It is unlikely that any single funding source can support a program like the Senior Safety program. The first place to look is whatever organization within your state administers Older American Act dollars. The Assistive Technology Act is a good resource, too, but it doesn't allow a lot of funding for staff, so that's why you need to find multiple funding sources.
2. Use a highly organized purchasing and accounting system. You will need a way to purchase devices quickly. Establishing vendor accounts is a good way to do this and can also help you negotiate discounts. And with the thousands of dollars in orders every month, you need a very good system of checks and balances. Having your own accountant can make that even more efficient.
3. Secure revenue or resources. You may need a revenue stream or a financial "cushion" to tide you over while you are waiting for reimbursements.
4. Integrate services. Offering complementary services or products allows you to "cross market," since many of your consumers will have multiple needs that you can meet.
5. Spread the word. Tell your story in as many ways and places possible: press releases and ads in local media; visits to senior centers; presentations and exhibits at conferences; social media/blogs/website; virtual meetings with Aging Services Program managers around the state; blurbs in partner organization newsletters; etc.

"Everyone needs to know about assistive technology," concludes Krull. "Almost every person on the planet will either know someone who needs AT, or they will need AT themselves at some point in their lives. The trick is to know about it BEFORE you need it, so that a more restrictive living arrangement—such as a nursing home—does not happen prematurely. That's why knowing about the existence of programs, like North Dakota Assistive's Senior Safety program, is so important!"

For more information about the North Dakota Assistive Senior Safety Program, visit www.ndassistive.org.

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