



National Assistive Technology Technical Assistance Partnership

Improving State Assistive Technology Programs

**Moving an Advisory Council from
Good to Great**

Recruiting, Maintaining, and Engaging Council Members

February 2007

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Under the Assistive Technology Act of 1998 (AT Act), as amended, states must establish and maintain advisory councils to help plan, implement, and evaluate activities of their state AT Act programs. The majority of the membership of an advisory council is required to be individuals with disabilities who use assistive technology (AT), or their family members or guardians. In addition, representatives of several state agencies must be included on the council.

Specifically, Section 4(c)(2)(A-C) of the AT Act states the following:

(2) Advisory council.—

(A) In general.—There shall be established an advisory council to provide consumer-responsive, consumer-driven advice to the state for planning of, implementation of, and evaluation of the

activities carried out through the grant, including setting the measurable goals described in subsection (d)(3).

(B) Composition and representation.—

(i) Composition.—The advisory council shall be composed of

(I) individuals with disabilities that use assistive technology or the family members or guardians of the individuals;

(II) a representative of the designated state agency, as defined in section 7 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 705) and the state agency for individuals who are blind (within the meaning of section 101 of that act (29 U.S.C. 721)), if such agency is separate;

(III) a representative of a state center for independent living described in part C of title VII of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 796f et seq.);

(IV) a representative of the state workforce investment board established under section 111 of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (29 U.S.C. 2821); [[Page 118 STAT. 1717]]

(V) a representative of the state educational agency, as defined in section 9101 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 7801); and

(VI) representatives of other state agencies, public agencies, or private organizations, as determined by the state.

(ii) Majority.—

(I) In general.—A majority, not less than 51 percent, of the members of the advisory council, shall be members appointed under clause (i)(I).

(II) Representatives of agencies.—Members appointed under subclauses (II) through (VI) of clause (i) shall not count toward the majority membership requirement established in subclause (I).

(iii) Representation.—The advisory council shall be geographically representative of the state and reflect the diversity of the state with respect to race, ethnicity, types of disabilities across the age span, and users of types of services that an individual with a disability may receive.

(C) Expenses.—The members of the advisory council shall receive no compensation for their service on the advisory council, but shall be reimbursed for reasonable and necessary expenses actually incurred in the performance of official duties for the advisory council.

This technical assistance publication summarizes a nationwide teleconference on strategies for operating effective advisory councils. The teleconference was led by two speakers—Christie Hammes and Judy

Sharcken Simon—from the Management Assistance Program (MAP) for Nonprofits with input and discussion from state AT Act program directors and staff members. The training and discussion session was hosted by the National Assistive Technology Technical Assistance Partnership (NATTAP) on October 26, 2006.

AT Advisory Council Requirements

A state AT Act program must have a fully constituted advisory council to receive full approval for a state AT plan. And a majority of those council seats must be filled by people with disabilities who use AT—or by their family members or guardians. However, maintaining a full advisory council can prove challenging because advisory council members may leave the council as a result of personal obligations or changes in state government. Thus, states that have unfilled positions on their councils are concerned with remaining in compliance with advisory council provisions of the AT Act. In a letter to states issued in October 2006, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) wrote that states are expected “to make an active effort to recruit appropriate new members to remain in compliance with the AT Act.”

Consequently, states have expressed interest in developing new ways to attract and retain advisory council members in a timely manner. The teleconference provided strategies for state AT programs to recruit, retain and advance their advisory councils.

Functions of AT Advisory Councils

Advisory council members assist in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of activities of the state AT Act programs. State AT advisory councils vary in levels of involvement, ranging from limited involvement to very active participation in the AT program. Unlike govern-

ing boards, advisory councils typically do not have legal and management responsibilities.

Advisory councils serve several important functions for AT Act programs by doing the following:

1. Providing expertise that may be missing from current council members or staff members
2. Acting as ambassadors by building bridges into the community
3. Surveying needs for improving current activities
4. Bringing in resources
5. Carrying out evaluation and oversight activities
6. Helping maintain accountability or helping meet the demands of outside constituents
7. Bringing in outside support and expertise, linking the program to everything from community concerns to celebrities, and potential funding sources

State AT Act program participants discussed some of the key ways that advisory councils have assisted their programs in accomplishing significant goals and objectives:

- In Florida, the advisory council assisted the state AT Act program in developing an advocacy platform for the annual state legislative session. Advisory council members then met with state legislators to discuss issues from the consumer's point of view.
- In Rhode Island, the advisory council communicated new initiatives of the state AT Act program to the broader community by maintaining a Web site, by publishing a variety of newsletters, and by having a presence at conferences such as an assistive technology conference and a conference on brain injuries.
- The North Carolina AT program invited advisory council members to attend an open house at an AT center with state legislators and to share their

personal experiences in using AT. Subsequently, the state legislature awarded additional resources to the state AT Act program.

Many organizations experience difficulties when setting up advisory councils. Common pitfalls of organizing and running advisory councils may include these:

1. Passivity, which can occur when an advisory council does not meet on a consistent schedule or does not have a structure, such as committees, to carry out activities
2. Lack of clarity of the council's purpose, role, or scope
3. Lack of awareness of, or commitment to, the organization or its mission
4. Unclear expectations and understanding of an advisory council member's role
5. Haphazard recruitment process with no recruitment strategy
6. Lack of clarity with the governing or appointing authority, plus lack of understanding of the advisory council's place in the overall organizational structure, which may lead to the council overstepping its bounds
7. Underuse of individual members
8. Absence of orientation and continuing education

State AT Act program participants discussed some common problems that had occurred in the operation of their advisory councils, and the solutions they had created to address those problems. Here are some examples:

- In Nebraska, the advisory council needed a better structure for meetings to operate more effectively. The state AT Act program brought in a meetings expert who presented a training session for advisory council members on *Robert's Rules of Order*, which detailed the process that a group uses to make decisions. Subsequent advisory

council meetings were much more productive.

- In Arkansas, advisory council members were having difficulty attending meetings because of transportation problems or because of costs associated with long-distance travel. To alleviate the problem, the state AT Act program began using conference calls for some advisory council meetings.

Establishment of a Framework for Recruitment

A comprehensive approach to recruitment will help ensure a balanced and active advisory council. Several measures can be used to effectively recruit new members such as these:

1. Establish a nominating committee or task force of committed, influential people. Ask current advisory council members and other community leaders to assist in recruiting new members. Select nominating committee or task force members who would be good at follow-up to ensure that nominees are contacted in a timely manner. Provide potential recruits with information on the important functions of the advisory council.
2. Define the responsibilities of advisory council members and officers. This information will help staff members identify potential candidates who may be interested in joining the council. Moreover, it will enable the staff and current council members to give information to candidates on the benefits and expectations of serving on the advisory council.
3. Analyze the make-up of the current advisory council; then define recruitment needs, keeping in mind statute requirements and determining charac-

teristics that may be desired in future council members to attain a balanced advisory council. To define the composition of the current council, one may find it helpful to construct a grid or table that categorizes the traits of current advisory council members. Those traits can include gender, age, ethnicity, geography (inner-city, suburban, or rural), sector (business, government, or community), and skills (public relations, financial, legal, or program and product expertise). Additional traits may include personality attributes (for example, introversion or extroversion) to help ensure a balance of personality types on the advisory council. Recruitment grids also may include other factors for advisory council members, if specific factors are defined in federal statutes.

4. Plan the recruitment and selection process. Put in place a process that anyone on the nominating committee or task force can follow. This procedure helps delineate the responsible parties and timelines for the several steps involved in adding new members. Those steps include identification of potential members, follow-up with those identified, and establishment of a comprehensive timeline for replacing current members who may be leaving the council. The timeline may take into account the time needed for the following: the recruitment and acquisition of pertinent information including skills, interests, and backgrounds of potential members; an interview process, an application, or both; and the selection process.
5. Recruit, interview, and select candidates.
6. Orient and engage the new member in the advisory council's work.
7. Evaluate the recruiting process for effectiveness. An evaluation can in-

clude questions such as (a) Was the interview process effective? (b) Was adequate time allotted for recruiting or for meeting potential advisory council members? (c) Were enough methods made available for gathering names of potential new advisory council members?

Use of the Needs and Interests of Advisory Council Members

Recruiting can be made easier and more successful by focusing on the reasons individuals might want to join the advisory council. Knowing a person's motivations for joining the advisory council can help a recruiter ensure that the person's needs will be met. Such needs or reasons could include the following:

1. Commitment to a mission;
2. Desire to contribute to a cause without the legal responsibilities of other types of commissions, such as governing boards;
3. Inspiration from the organization's work or the work of an AT program staff member or advisory council member;
4. Interest in building a set of skills in a specific area or areas, for example, leadership skills; or
5. Interest in networking with other people on the council.

State AT Act program participants shared strategies they had developed for the successful recruitment of advisory council members:

- An effective recruiting strategy in Tennessee involved the compilation of in-depth information on the advisory council member position. The resulting description listed advisory council members' duties and expectations. This list helped in recruitment because individuals knew what would be ex-

pected of them when they joined the advisory council. The AT Act program also developed expectations and position descriptions for the officers of the council.

- The AT Act program in Rhode Island set up information booths at conferences on disabilities to recruit potential advisory council candidates. Each person who showed an interest in the display of the AT Act program was indirectly "interviewed" by one of the AT Act program staff members during a casual conversation. Those people who seemed interested in the program later were recruited to be on the advisory council.
- A successful mentoring program for council members with disabilities was established by Wyoming's AT Act program. A senior advisory council member, who lived in the same locale or who had the same interests as a new council member, mentored the new member by sharing drivers for meetings or helping with other needs. The senior member also shared knowledge and insights on issues such as behavior, expectations, and contributions of advisory council members.
- A mass mailing to regional centers, independent living centers, and community-based organizations in California produced an increased interest in advisory council positions for individuals with disabilities. Because the California AT Act program is based in the state's department of rehabilitation, the rehabilitation counselors also acted as recruiting agents for the AT advisory council.

State AT program participants also discussed the need to find additional approaches for recruiting individuals with disabilities to be on the advisory councils. Some states have found

that those who expressed an interest in serving on an advisory council often already were serving on several other councils or boards and did not have time to take on additional responsibilities. Additionally, once people were identified and said they were interested in advisory council membership, some of those individuals were unable to travel the potentially long distances to attend council meetings because they lacked a driver or had other logistical problems.

Retention of Advisory Council Members

Organizing Orientation and Involvement

After individuals have agreed to serve on an advisory council, a well-organized orientation is a key factor in getting them involved and engaged in the work of the council. A good orientation program can assist council members in becoming committed to the advisory council's work.

An orientation program provides several important benefits to a new advisory council member such as the following:

1. Program history, services, clients, and other background information;
2. Interaction with other members of the advisory council, and the provision of background information on the council's structure and processes; or
3. A buddy or mentoring system.

After orientation, new advisory council members should be provided with opportunities for immediate involvement in the advisory council's work. This integration can be achieved by use of the following methods:

1. Assigning the new member to a committee or task force
2. Having new council members assist with an AT event or attend an AT-related conference

Particularly during the introductory period for new advisory council members, AT program staff members should ensure that new members receive adequate staff support, including needed resources such as phone numbers and handouts. Finally, during this time, the advisory council meetings should be especially meaningful. Meeting agendas should have considerable substance. Research shows that people will continue to volunteer if they believe their skills are being used for the benefit of the organization.

Building Relationships with Council Members

To retain members on its advisory council, AT program participants should build relationships with council members that emphasize the members' importance in helping achieve an effective state AT Act program. Those relationships can be encouraged through many methods including the following:

- Personal calls and visits with the advisory council chair or program director and with the advisory council members
- Time for socializing with other advisory council members
- Involvement of advisory council members in program demonstrations, activities, or other modes of learning with AT staff members
- Educational opportunities for council members provided by staff members or experts on topics that are of interest to the council.

Engaging and Energizing an Advisory Council

To help ensure the retention of advisory council members, programs should develop strategies to engage members in meaningful meetings and activities. Programs should aim for at least 75% attendance at their advisory council meetings. This section lists

several strategies that can help engage attendees and can energize advisory council meetings:

- Plan lively, dynamic meetings that are focused on agenda items important to the successful operation of the state AT Act program. Structure meetings around strategic initiatives, important campaigns, legislative issues, or other items that are critical to the AT Act program at that particular time.
- Provide stories of individuals who have been helped by the AT program to showcase the AT program's work and successes. Advisory council members need to hear that the program is helping people with disabilities. Members also can use those stories when they go into the community as ambassadors for the state AT program.
- Provide an educational component at each meeting to keep advisory council members abreast of new ideas and current concerns.
- Evaluate the meetings. Periodically check in with members to obtain their opinions on meeting agendas and processes, and to hear their thoughts about what is working well and what the AT program could do better. This step can help solve problems that arise within the council and can preempt a council member's leaving the council because he or she thinks that the meetings are not worthwhile or productive.
- Provide a "graceful exit" for council members who choose to leave the advisory council. This step not only will honor that person's service to the council, but also will signal to other current and potential council members that everyone's service is valued and that there are no recriminations against those who choose to leave the council.

- Finally, do not be afraid to "recycle" strategies or events that were used successfully in the past. Because advisory council members come and go, many council members may not have been present at previous special training sessions offered by staff members, or they may not have participated in other events, such as an open house for state legislators. Additionally, good ideas are interesting even to members who have encountered them before.

Dealing with Troublesome Members

Another important component of operating an effective advisory council is to successfully handle "troublesome" members who are distracting other council members and preventing the council from completing its objectives. It is important for staff members to deal with a troublesome advisory council member because the negative effect on others may discourage their continued involvement with the advisory council.

Methods for handling troublesome members include the following:

- Set term limits, which provide an end point to a person's time on the advisory council.
- Find venues other than council meetings in which the problematic council member can use his or her skills and talents. An assignment other than council meetings may be necessary to channel the person's energies in a constructive manner.

Resources

Information and materials, including a transcript, from the October 26, 2006, teleconference can be found at the NATTAP Web site located at <http://www.resna.org/taproject/>

management/cacr.html. The Web site also provides examples of tools and forms collected by NATTAP from states about the implementation of state advisory councils. The examples include state advisory council applications, bylaws, consumer surveys, nominee qualifications, position descriptions, and operational policies. Resource material from the teleconference prepared for NATTAP by MAP for Nonprofits personnel is also located at this website under the Resources section for the teleconference. The information includes a sample grid for identifying and recruiting advisory council

members. The Web site for MAP for Nonprofits is www.mapforprofits.org.

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