February 12, 2016

The Honorable Tom Cole  The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Chairman  Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Subcommittee on Labor, Health and
Human Services, and Education Human Services, and Education
2358 Rayburn House Office Building 1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515 Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Cole and Ranking Member DeLauro:

On behalf of the National Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs (ATAP) and the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN), we strongly urge you to support the inclusion of $38 million in the FY 2017 House Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Appropriations (LHHS) bill for the Assistive Technology (AT) Act programs. Funding provided through the AT Act supports programs that assure people with disabilities have access to and acquisition of the assistive technology services they need to live, work, and attend school in their communities.

We are very grateful that the final FY 2016 budget provided an additional $1 million for the AT Act programs. This increased amount has helped states increase the amount of people with disabilities served. Unfortunately, while very grateful for this increase, this amount does not meet the demand for these important programs, nor does it fully fund the program according to the statute. While we do recognize the fiscal restraints on the federal budget and were very grateful for the allocation, fully funding the AT Act at $38 million would allow the programs to provide the full breadth of services intended by the law.

State AT Act programs operate in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and four territories and are available for persons with all types of disabilities, all ages, in all environments (education, employment, community living and information technology). State AT programs provide a continuum of services that increase the access to, and acquisition of assistive technology, including state financing activities (such as financial loans, cooperative buy, funds of last resort, etc.), device reutilization (including recycling, repair, refurbishment and device exchange), device loan/borrowing and device demonstration services. While individuals with disabilities, their families and guardians are the primary beneficiaries of services, State AT Act programs provide a wide range of services and supports to other targeted individuals such as educators, employers, health care providers, rehabilitation providers, and technology experts, including web designers, procurement officials and AT manufacturers and vendors. State AT programs provide cost effective services and supports that improve the lives of people with disabilities and warrant an ongoing federal investment. Still, there are 11 State AT Act programs that do not receive the minimum grant authorized in the law in 2004 ($410,000).
The nationwide network of Protection and Advocacy for Assistive Technology programs in every state and territory has been similarly under-funded, with 32 P&As receiving a minimum allotment of just $50,000 and territories receiving $30,000. Larger states such as Pennsylvania ($135,379), Georgia ($105,899), Florida ($207,225), and Ohio ($122,630) receive insufficient funding when compared to their populations. The PAAT programs use these very limited funds to provide needed advocacy services to children and adults with disabilities. Every PAAT program conducts trainings and works with families, medical providers, schools, employers, and communities to ensure that individuals have access to the assistive technology they need. Given the current level of demand experienced by P&A agencies -- as well as the heightened demand for the assistive technology needs of returning wounded veterans and an aging population – reaching the level of fully funding the AT Act is needed, but at least maintaining the current level given the current status of the federal budget is equally vital.

The AT Act puts assistive technology in the hands of citizens whose lives and livelihood depend on it. If $38 million were allocated for FY 2017 for authorized AT Act programs, it would be well spent and would generate matching investments from states and from the private sector. Despite the reauthorization of the AT Act nearly eleven years ago in 2004, 20 percent of the Statewide AT Programs currently funded under the AT Act have yet to receive the minimum grant award provided under the statute ($410,000 for states and $125,000 for territories). An appropriation of $38 million would enable 50 Statewide AT programs, the District of Columbia and the US Territories to receive the minimum grant provided under the statute. If you need further information about the AT Act and the programs and services it supports please contact Audrey Busch at Audrey.busch@ataporg.org, or Eric Buehlmann at eric.buehlmann@ndrn.org. Thank you for your ongoing support.

Sincerely,

Audrey Busch
Director of Policy and Advocacy
ATAP

Curt Decker
Executive Director
NDRN