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Devices boost disaster communication for deaf

With hurricane season in full swing, ADRS Deaf Services is better prepared than ever to ensure that the communication needs of people who are deaf and hard of hearing are being met during emergencies or disasters.

To assist in this effort, the department received a \$100,000 grant from the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) to purchase devices to assist in communicating with members of the state's deaf population.

ADRS is collaborating with several state agencies and private organizations to distribute the devices to local shelters during an emergency or disaster. Among the organizations involved are the Alabama Emergency Management Agency (EMA), the Alabama Department of Mental Health, the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB), the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR), 2-1-1 Connects Alabama, the Alabama Red Cross, the Alabama Association of the Deaf, and Sorenson Communications.

"We are trying to develop a national model for communicating with the Deaf during emergencies," said Evon Black, ADRS coordinator for deaf technology, through an interpreter. "We just have to iron out some wrinkles."

The department used a portion of the grant money to purchase 49 UbiDuos, which provide face-to-face communication by means of two displays and two keyboards. Other funds were used to buy 30 Purple netbooks with P3 Software. The netbooks are similar to a videophone, providing point-to-point video calling and allowing people who are deaf to communicate using American Sign Language.

The equipment is currently being used by ADRS staff throughout the state, but will be distributed to shelters in the event of an emergency. Staff members are using UbiDuos at front desks in local offices.

The remainder of the grant funds were used to purchase special weather radios that use lights and vibrations to alert the deaf and hard of hearing about inclement weather. The weather radios have already been distributed to consumers in the deaf community.

In addition to purchasing communication equipment, the initiative has involved dividing the state into seven regions with teams comprised of volunteers from each of the collaborating state agencies. During an emergency, the team in the region will report to local shelters and assist in communicating with people who are deaf.

We want to make sure smooth communication occurs," Black said. "That's the goal."

Black has been working with Rehabilitation Specialist Denise Holmes to form the teams in each region, which are identical to the regions used by Alabama EMA. She is also hoping to present the deaf emergency plan to other states. The two women have already shared details about Alabama's efforts at national conferences for the deaf.

"We see this plan as an opportunity to reach out to other states and share out experience and ideas," Holmes said.