

Media Release

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New kiosks helping blind and visually impaired in employment search



Don Ramsey, Training Representative with DWS and DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Debera Coleman watch as Sheree Fagan, a DSB consumer, researches job openings and other information on the DWS website using the accessible kiosk.

Unemployment is hard. Trying to find a job when you're blind or severely visually impaired can be even harder.

The Arkansas Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) is trying to change that.

Seven new computer kiosks with specialized software that helps people who are blind or visually impaired search for jobs are being installed at Arkansas Department of Workforce Services (DWS) offices in Arkadelphia, Hot Springs, Benton, Russellville, Conway, Monticello and Searcy.

They should be operational by early

September. These offices were chosen because they are in cities located near college campuses.

The computers have been installed in DWS offices statewide using \$50,000 in funding to the Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Ten similar accessible computer sites were installed over the last 18 months and are located at DWS offices in Little Rock, Pine Bluff, Texarkana, El Dorado, West

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Memphis, Jonesboro, Batesville, Harrison, Fort Smith, and Fayetteville. To date, 413 persons with vision impairment have taken advantage of the facilities.

The need for computers at state employment offices that are accessible to blind and severely visually impaired consumers was identified in a 2006 survey conducted by the Arkansas' Workforce Investment Board. Having these tools to find employment has become even more important as the U.S. economy has weakened.

“Persons with vision problems are disproportionately affected by the weak economy because the pool of available workers is larger and more multi-skilled (such as driving) and thus more competitive,” said Katy Morris, director of the Division of Services for the Blind.

“This makes free, on-line job search crucial and makes the state Workforce Center the ideal environment for job-readiness, job-search and job placement, if it is made reasonably as accessible to a person with vision impairment as it is for sighted individuals.”

“These computers and software basically put DSB consumers on equal footing with other job seekers,” said Jim Pearson, manager of the DSB Business and Technology unit.

The computers have special programs designed to make computer use easier for blind or severely visually impaired people. JAWS, or Job Access with Speech, is a screen reading software program that makes personal computers accessible to people who are blind and visually impaired. Information is displayed on the screen via text-to-speech or a Braille display. Another program called MAGic can magnify the typical text size up to 36 times.

Each computer kiosk setup costs about \$2,800. Personnel from the DSB technology staff set up the systems, and train local DWS staff to operate and troubleshoot them. In addition, DSB employees train DWS staff on how to work with a person with vision impairment who comes into their office for assistance

Before these special kiosks were installed, DWS offices couldn't adequately serve persons needing non-visual access, so they historically didn't go to the DWS offices for employment services, said Larry Wayland, DSB technology specialist.

Persons with limited vision who do choose to take advantage of these special kiosks at DWS offices also need training on how to use the specialized software.

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Training classes are offered through DSB at the division's computer lab in Little Rock.

Most consumers who already have some experience using a computer can learn how to use the software within a day or two of training, said Wayland. "Learning how to create resumes, etc. takes more time."

Little Rock resident Sheree Fagan, 38, has used the DWS computer kiosks for job searches since she moved to the state about 18 months ago.

"It's made things a lot easier," said Fagan, who has been legally blind since birth. "It just takes longer for someone who is blind or visually impaired to use a computer. People are a lot more patient and helpful when they see you're disabled. Now I can take as long as I want and really put effort into searching for a job. "

Fagan earned a degree in Textile, Merchandising and Design from Middle Tennessee State University and previously worked as a stylist for a modeling agency in Nashville, Tenn. She is currently taking an on-line training course to qualify for a job with the Department of Defense.

Placement of the kiosks at DWS offices has also allowed DSB to offer information to people who may not be familiar with the Division or its services. One DSB counselor checks the sign-in roster at the kiosk and compares the names to people on his caseload. If a visually impaired person who's not a DSB consumer uses the kiosks, he contacts him or her to ask if they may need services.

"We are pleased to partner with DSB to assist those individuals who are 'differently-abled' to access services which make it easier for them to obtain gainful employment," said DWS Director Artee Williams.

"The partnership with DWS has demonstrated that self-directed job search is reasonably attainable in local workforce centers regardless of vision limitation," said Morris. "It takes the right mix of resources, education and perseverance from both consumers and their support networks, and working together, we are seeing some promising results in a very difficult economy."

Recent reports show 222 DSB consumers have become successfully employed since October 1. They occupy positions such as Secretary, Quality Assurance Coordinator and Elementary School Teacher and earn an average wage of \$357 weekly.