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High-tech phones helping hearing-impaired in Utah

By Brice Wallace
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Warren Ashton had suffered with poor hearing in one ear for several years. About six weeks ago, he lost half the hearing in his "good" ear.

"I don't know why. The doctor can't tell us why. They tell us it's nerve-oriented," said Ashton, of Cottonwood Heights. "This limited my social involvement and civic involvement because I couldn't communicate with people."

Fortunately for him and other Utahns, a program helping deaf and hard-of-hearing Utahns is 20 years old and as strong as ever. Relay Utah, a relay service to help those people make telephone calls, distributed 566 specialized telephones between January and September, putting it on track for its busiest year. Ashton and his wife, Mae Dean Ashton, got a new phone through the program on Thursday.

A dedicated Relay Utah employee, TV spots and other publicity have helped boost awareness of the program, according to Julie Orchard, administrator of Relay Utah and secretary for the Utah Public Service Commission, which manages the program.

"It's really been about getting the word out, plus we've had word-of-mouth," Orchard said. "Some people haven't been able to talk on the phone for the past 15 years, and suddenly, with this equipment, they're no longer isolated because they have access to this free piece of telephone equipment."

Relay Utah offers both relay translation services and equipment. The devices include amplified, Captioned Telephone (CapTel) text captioning phones and text telephones, also called TTY phones. TTY phones allow a person to type a conversation that a communications assistant reads to a hearing person, and a hearing person's spoken words are typed back to the TTY user. Amplified phones are compatible with hearing aids and let the user hear words clearly without distortion. CapTel phones have amplification but also include a text display, letting users read a captioned version of their phone chats. It uses voice-recognition technology to quicken the conversation process.

The equipment is loaned at no cost to qualifying Utahns. The free service is done by calling 7-1-1, and a communications assistant facilitates the calls between deaf, hard of hearing and hearing people. The service also is offered in Spanish by calling 888-346-3162.

The Ashtons' new phone replaces an older model and does a better job at amplifying sounds. It also allows them to adjust the tone and volume better. That's great for Mae Dean Ashton, 80, who has had hearing loss for 13 years.

"With a regular phone, our hearing is such that we have a hard time understanding people when they call us," she said. "This helps make it clearer and make it louder."

"I really appreciate what they're doing," Warren Ashton, 78, said of people involved in Relay Utah. "They responded to a need."

His need was reflected recently as he tried to make assignments within his LDS Church ward as part of a 1,600-person effort to prepare supply containers to hurricane-ravaged areas. "The telephone," he said, "is my principal means of communications with the 12 wards."

"Sometimes people who have not talked on the phone for 10 or 15 years would ask their neighbor to call their doctor for them," Orchard said of people without the devices. "We're making it possible for people to directly call their doctor. They can then either read what is being said to them using a CapTel phone or use increased amplification to talk to the doctor."

Orchard herself has seen the benefits of the program. Her mother, nearly 90 years old, uses an amplified phone. "It's a cell-type phone, so she can walk around her house and be able to talk to the grandkids and can hear and understand them," Orchard said. "It's really been a great service for her. I have personal experience seeing how it's changed their lives."

Orchard said about 2,500 Utahns use Relay Utah equipment and she expects the equipment distribution and phone call figures — more than 35,000 calls are made through Relay Utah every month — to rise.

Relay Utah, one of the first relay services in the country, is subsidized through a 10-cent monthly telephone surcharge on Utahns' bills. People getting the service or equipment must be receiving Social Security or benefits from a low-income program or be on a fixed income. Details are available at www.relayutah.gov or by calling the PSC at 801-530-6638.

E-mail: bwallace@desnews.com

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