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*Media are encouraged to contact Deborah Schow to schedule demonstrations of the DeafBlind Communicator and see why users call it "life-changing." We can also arrange for interviews with Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing staff and new recipients of the device who are deaf-blind. Photographs are available upon request.*

## **DSHS leads the nation in life-changing technology with DeafBlind Communicator**

**OLYMPIA** -- A telecommunication device is making a profound impact on the lives of deaf-blind people, thanks largely to the efforts of the [Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing](#), part of the Department of Social and Health Services.

The agency teamed with manufacturer [HumanWare](#) to design and manufacture the device trademarked as the [DeafBlind Communicator](#) to enable Washington residents who are legally both deaf and blind to communicate with greater independence. The device offers users unprecedented access to make telephone calls as well as engage people in two-way face-to-face conversations, anywhere they go.

Internationally, the disability community heralds the DeafBlind Communicator for its unprecedented portability and ease of use. Users say it's the first truly portable and user-friendly telecommunication equipment for the deaf-blind.

In a unique collaboration of government and business, the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing and Human Ware developed the technology with direct input from the consumers. "Input from deaf-blind users who tested prototypes of the product had a direct impact at every stage of development. Instead of presenting a device to clients and saying 'now you have to make it work' we designed this around their ideas and needs," said Eric Raff, director of the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

Now other states, governments, businesses and agencies internationally who serve the deaf-blind are following Washington's lead and making the life-changing telecommunication equipment available for their clients.

### **How the DeafBlind Communicator works**

See photograph at: [http://www.humanware.com/en-usa/products/blindness/deafblind\\_communicator/details/id\\_118/deafblind\\_communicator.html](http://www.humanware.com/en-usa/products/blindness/deafblind_communicator/details/id_118/deafblind_communicator.html).

For face-to-face conversations, the deaf-blind person hands the separate smaller device with a text display and keyboard to the person they want to communicate with.

A retractable tether is attached. With one click, the deaf-blind person who is operating the other half of the device sends the following opening message;

“Hi, I’m blind and I can’t hear. To communicate with me, type a message on this keyboard and press (the return arrow).”

This message is both spoken through speakers and displayed on the text screen. The person who is deaf-blind can read the response via a display with Braille characters. Both parties can then communicate back and forth.

At one fast food restaurant the employee taking orders looked momentarily puzzled when the DeafBlind Communicator was put on the counter. He quickly called co-workers over and soon all wanted to take a turn at communicating with the deaf-blind woman and wanted to take her order. This is a marked difference with other situations where the deaf-blind person only has a card with written words to present to a counter person and little possibility of interaction. A person who is deaf-blind would often be ignored in these situations only because there was no clear option for communication.

People who were approached randomly in tests all reported that they had never had any kind of contact with a deaf-blind person before and all reported that they would stop again if approached by a person with the device. With widespread familiarity with keyboards and text messaging, most said they had no difficulty operating the face-to-face device. All who participated said they "felt good" about the interaction.

The DeafBlind Communicator can receive incoming telephone calls and make outgoing calls. In telephone communications the device converts text into Braille characters. People who are deaf-blind can make or receive calls with other deaf or deaf-blind people directly, as well as with hearing people through the Telecommunication Relay Service, also known in our state as Washington Relay. Deaf-blind users confirmed that the device gives them added confidence and independence, especially when traveling, working or doing errands without a tactile American Sign Language interpreter.

### **The cost and the benefits for users and the community**

The DeafBlind Communicator is available free or on a sliding fee scale based on income to eligible people in our state. As a result of the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing’s major role in the research and design of the product the agency is getting a reduction of two thousand dollars below the usual \$8,000 retail cost per device.

At focus group sessions, prototype users said that having the Deaf-Blind Communicator would be "life-changing." Deaf-blind product testers broke into broad smiles, shared laughter, and exchanged hugs with their peers and social services staff during trial runs of the device.

When Director Raff and Program Manager Colleen Rozmaryn of the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing saw the expressions of delight and immediate sense of empowerment that filled the room during test and training sessions they knew it was worth the years of effort to complete the project to benefit their clients. “Access to assistive technology for those who require it is not a convenience; it is essential to independence and employment for our clients,” Raff said.

For most people who are deaf-blind in North America, tactile American Sign Language is their first language. They communicate by touching letters and words in the hands of another person who knows tactile American Sign Language. An interpreter is needed for deaf-blind individuals to have conversations with hearing people who cannot sign.

It is financially and otherwise impractical for most people who are both deaf and blind to have the services of a qualified interpreter around the clock. While the DeafBlind Communicator cannot replace an interpreter, it does open doors to direct communications in employment, business and social situations that the majority population take for granted.

The Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing expect to distribute the first order of 35 devices this month. Free training will be provided for all deaf-blind users.

For people who are deaf-blind, a device that connects with the entire community adds to a better quality of life. For the general population, it offers the opportunity to interact with a vital group of people who have been isolated from society. With the aid of cutting-edge technology and communities that embrace diversity, the DeafBlind Communicator will be a tool that will give them a voice in the mainstream.

“All too often people who are deaf-blind are simply ignored and isolated by the greater public because of a perceived inability to communicate. Everyone loses out when one group is isolated from the community at large. People who are deaf-blind have so much to contribute and we are all poorer for not including them in the conversation.” Rozmaryn says. “The DeafBlind Communicator is one more open door to communication. I think some people may be surprised by the accomplishments, the sense of humor and the worldliness of these individuals despite this isolation. This is going to start some great conversations and new relationships.”

### **The history of Tele-Braille devices and why ODHH became involved in the DBC design**

"Tele-Braille" was the first product that could incorporate Braille text from Tele-type Text Telephones (TTY) designed for the deaf to visually read text displays. Released in the 1980's it was a major breakthrough in accessing the telephone for the deaf-blind. Tele-Braille was cutting edge technology when first put on the market more than 25 years ago. But it was heavy and limited to home use with few major upgrades since its initial impact. It became outdated in the mid 1990s and the sole manufacturer at the time has since disbanded. The devices then sold for around \$6,000 each.

Like an old computer or car, the cost of upkeep became impractical or impossible, as parts wore out and devices were quickly failing beyond repair. Still, the Tele-Braille device remained a vital door to telecommunication for its deaf-blind clients, and the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing continued to patch up the much-needed machines while an alternative was sought.

It is part of the ODHH's core mission to provide resources that enable its clients to have equal access and effective communication. When no company stepped up to offer an improved Tele-Braille device the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing mounted an international search to find a manufacturer to partner with. Their efforts lead them to assistive technology manufacturer specializing in products for the blind, [HumanWare](#).

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