For many years the field of assistive technology has been a major contributor to help individuals with disabilities gain and maintain as much independence as possible. These devices also help individuals with disabilities have a better quality of life. New products are released almost every day but none have been as effective nor experienced the rapid growth in popularity as Amazon’s Alexa. This device has many built-in capabilities that allow people.

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to complete daily tasks with ease. By using just a few basic commands users can have access to endless information at a moment’s notice. Some simple tasks include checking the weather, sports scores, and help with maintaining a calendar. The disability community has really taken to this device in a number of ways. For those with visual impairments it has the capability to tell time, schedule an Uber, and play the audio version of books. For those who have physical impairments it can turn lights on and off, lock your door, control your thermostat, and lower blinds up and down. Certain functions require the purchase of switches and plugs in order to work properly. For those who use communication devices it works extremely well and doesn’t require an extensive amount of training like other devices on the market. Users can simply plug it in and start using it. Amazon’s Alexa also solved another issue that many disabled people face which is cost. Depending on the level of sophistication a piece of assistive technology has, it can cost the consumer several thousand dollars. Amazon released a product called the Echo Dot that can do many of the same functions for approximately $50. This makes the product and the prospect of greater independence more feasible for all who need it. In my own personal life, it has greatly increased my independence. It is the main component I am currently using in order to make my apartment as “smart” as possible. I turn my lights on and off with it as well as listen to music without the hassle of changing a CD in a player. Another great feature is it is able to be used as a phone to make calls to anywhere across the country and certain parts of the world.

Amazon’s line of Alexa products has really made a tremendous impact on the assistive technology market. Within the ever-changing world it still has plenty of room for growth and improvement to adapt to the needs of a unique consumer. Disability often times does not have a one size fits all solution and Alexa has the ability to meet a wide variety of needs for many years to come.
The Ready to Achieve Mentoring Program (RAMP) has gotten off to a great start! Initially introduced by the Progressive Center last spring RAMP is a career focused program that has brought a structured mentoring approach to many communities across the nation and now to Mercer County. RAMP uses a combination of group, peer, and one-on-one mentoring to help youth learn about job options, post-secondary education, goal setting, and accomplishing those goals. Funded by a federal grant, RAMP is assisting youth with learning and cognitive disabilities, emotional and mental health needs, court involved, physical impairments, as well as other youth who may be at risk of not making a successful transition to adult life.

RAMP has mentors who volunteer their time to assist in making a positive impact in the lives of young adults. Mentor programs are currently being held at Lawrence High School, Ewing High School, and Rivera Middle School in Trenton. In a regular programming session mentees set weekly attainable short term goals and discuss how they accomplished or failed to meet goals from the previous week. After the goals are discussed the mentees engage in career based and life skill activities that are needed now and after high school. The program also bring in professionals from all walks of life to give the mentees an up close and personal aspect on how they settled into their careers, obstacles that they faced, and what it takes to be successful in that field. Mentors also keep in contact with their assigned mentees weekly through face-to-face meetings, phone calls, emails, or texts to catch up on any issues that the mentee may have and to continue to build a positive mentor-mentee relationship that will help guide them to a successful adulthood. PCIL is looking forward to more success with RAMP in 2018! If you are interested in becoming a RAMP mentor please contact Antoine Nelson, Mentor Coordinator, at 609-581-4500 or antoine.nelson@pcil.org.
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I know it may seem cruel to be writing about the activities of summer when the temperatures outside are below freezing but I want to make sure you know about the opportunities that exist to help make use of the warm weather months. For the last several years PCIL has managed the Campership Award program from the Mercer County Office on Aging/ADRC. The Campership Award is a financial stipend for people with disabilities to attend summer activities. These activities can be traditional summer camps (as the name implies) but it is not limited to that by any means. The program has helped people take part in college courses, driving lessons, video game development classes, and a host of other enriching activities that can broaden horizons, prepare for the future, and build relationships and social skills.

There is of course a process to participate in this program. Applications get mailed out in the spring and must be completed and returned promptly. Along with the application you must provide a copy of the individual’s birth certificate, and copy of the annual household family income tax or W-2 form, TANF and/or SSI check (if applicable), a copy of the child’s cover page and evaluation stating diagnosis from the IEP (if the child has graduated you must submit the IEP cover page from graduation year, individuals registered with DDD can submit the NJCAT or DDRT). Unlike other programs, everyone who applies within the proper time and with the correct information will receive a financial award ranging from $85-$400. The eligible activities must take place between Memorial Day and Labor Day. The program is flexible as to whether the award gets paid to the activity provider (who must provide an invoice) or as a reimbursement to family (who must provide proof of payment). In either case the activity must have clear start and end dates (not a yearly membership for example), and there must be proof of attendance. The award will not cover any activities which were committed to but not attended.

If you have a loved one or a friend who could benefit from this program now is the time to sign up and receive an application this spring. Awards are given on a first come-first serve basis, so if you’re interested don’t wait. Please reach out to Reed Thomas at The Progressive Center for Independent Living by phone (609-581-4500) or email (reed.thomas@pcil.org) and leave your name, the name of the individual(s) who would use the award, and your mailing address and we’ll be sure to send you an application. Summer will be here before you know it so please contact us as soon as possible to take advantage of this program.

Eligible applicants are those who are between the ages of 4 to 25, reside in Mercer County, and are living with a disability.
I hope everyone had very happy holidays, and that you’re all staying warm this winter. Even though the weather has turned, the PCIL community connections recreation program continues to provide fun activities, exposure to recreation resources, and opportunities to get together with old friends and make new ones! In October we painted pottery at Color Me Mine Studio in Hamilton as well as participated in a charity concert at Saint Gregory the Great Church. November saw the return of bowling at Colonial Entertainment in Lawrenceville which has become a perennial favorite, and in December we hosted the annual PCIL holiday party at the community center of Project Freedom in Hamilton. This year’s party featured the Ugliest Holiday Sweater contest which is turning out to be an annual favorite! I am happy to report that all events were well attended and well received. We continue to see new faces in addition to those who have made use of the program in the past. We have had an increase in volunteers at these events including some long-time participants who have stepped up to lend a hand and new folks such as the Steinert High School Choral group who added a special touch to this year’s holiday party by performing holiday songs (special thanks to Rich Schneider, the Steinert High School Choral Director). If you, a loved one, or a friend wants to get involved as a participant or volunteer please contact us. The more we work together, the more successful we will all be, and the more we’ll get to know the communities we share.
SENSORY-FRIENDLY SANTA WELCOMES KIDS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

By Ally Marotti, Chicago Tribune Chicago

Hours before Woodfield Mall opened on a recent Sunday morning, before workers turned on the holiday lights and the halls filled with shoppers, 4-year-old Liam Munnelly’s parents placed him on Santa’s lap. Though Liam couldn’t talk back, Santa spoke to him, pointing at the decorations overhead. The little boy with the blue-rimmed glasses and red bow tie poked Santa’s belly and touched his beard, then smiled briefly at the camera before hurrying back to his dad.

Liam was born premature, has cerebral palsy, and likely doesn’t know who Santa is, said his mom, Erica Munnelly. But “it’s important to have the memories, to be able to look back and have the pictures,” she said. Liam was Santa’s first visitor that morning at Woodfield Mall’s Caring Santa event, one of more than 375 sensory-friendly Santa events planned at malls and other locations nationwide this year by New Jersey-based Cherry Hill Programs and the advocacy organization Autism Speaks.

Families register in advance to see Santa and the visits take place before malls and stores open, to lessen any anxiety the sounds and sights of the season may bring. At Woodfield, the loud music and “Despicable Me 3” ads on seven screens that typically greet kids on their way to Santa were turned down.

For Liam, lights and sound are not an issue, Erica Munnelly said. “We just need the patience because muscle movements are hard for him.”

Cherry Hill, which provides the Santa experiences in malls throughout the U.S. and Canada, launched its sensory-friendly Santa programming in 2011. It has seen rapid growth recently, partially because of awareness and high demand, said Lisa Goring, chief program and marketing officer for Autism Speaks, which partnered with Cherry Hill about three years ago. This year, sensory-friendly Santa events are set to be held at more than 300 locations, up from 180 last year.

“We ask every family, ‘Are the lights OK? Is the sound OK?’” said Heather Lloyd, director of marketing and business development for Woodfield. “There’s already one family that has proactively said they can’t handle the flash.”

During the Woodfield event, each family was given 15 minutes with Santa, and provided with crayons and snacks when they arrived. Some families came in matching outfits; some children wore footed pajamas. Some children hurried through the Ice Palace, something like a giant snow globe lined with TVs, to get to Santa. Others lingered, playing in the fake snow that fell from above. If a family stayed in one spot, another moved in front of them. If it took time for a child to

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work up the courage to approach Santa, he or she was not rushed.

“When you have a sensory-sensitive child or a special-needs child, you can’t (rush),” said Mickey Teply of Hoffman Estates, who attended the event with her daughter, son-in-law and their two foster sons. “It’s their time, not your time.”

Many of the Santas deployed to the sensory-friendly events receive special training on how to interact with children with autism and other special needs, said Ruth Rosenquist, Cherry Hill spokeswoman. “It’s really about letting the child and letting the caregiver take the lead,” she said. “The child will give Santa clues.”

For the full article please visit: https://www.disabilityscoop.com/2017/11/30/sensory-friendly-santa/24471/

Sensory-Friendly Santa

Rian Bee helps his foster son Justin, 5, who has autism, as they meet Santa at Woodfield Mall in Schaumburg, Ill. (Nancy Stone/Chicago Tribune/TNS)

Video games have long since out grown the 1970’s arcade scene and have become a multi-billion dollar industry. Video gaming has been a part of my life for as long as I remember. One of my earliest memories is of my parents playing their ColecoVision console in the early 1980’s and I have had a constant string of gaming systems from Atari, Nintendo, Sony, Microsoft, and others over the last 40 years. Now GAME-U, an innovative company run by professional video game developers, is offering the opportunity to learn how to build games and robotics to people with disabilities in New Jersey. Game-U is an approved vendor for the NJ DDD’s Self Directed Services. They are classified as a habilitation service by the DDD and their educational programs help to develop and maintain independence in self-care, as well as promote physical and emotional growth, socialization, communication and vocational skills. In Game-U’s Accelerate program they teach STEAM concepts which introduce science, technology, engineering, art, and math concepts to help students learn how to solve challenges and make their own projects become reality. Students work towards developing skills such as coding, 3d modeling, and game design.

They’ve Got Game!

By Reed Thomas

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that are applicable to a career interest. The education from Game-U increases the skill-set needed to obtain competitive employment. Participants are introduced to basic computer programming helping them improve their problem solving skills. They learn to identify and implement their program’s key features, test and evaluate performance, then fix any issues. These same skills can be applied to a wide range of areas, helping them make decisions in everyday life.

Game-U was started in 2013 by Mike Kawas who has done design work for some of the industry’s biggest names. Game-U’s instructors have experience working for Microsoft, Sony, EA, LucasArts, Activision, and more. In 2014 they began working with special needs students. All of their locations are ADA compliant and can accommodate a wide range of physical disabilities. They can provide students with a variety of devices such as touch-pads and game controllers to allow for easier input and they also have large screens and TV’s to aid the visually impaired. I spoke to Brad Cohen, Director of the Accelerate Program and Vice President of Sales and Marketing, about how the special needs program started. It began with one student who was on the Autism spectrum. After seeing this student have success and talking with his father (who now works for the company) GAME-U became aware of the DDD supports program and signed up to become a provider. That marked the beginnings of the Accelerate Program, but they took it slow and for the first year and a half as a provider they had only a few students. “We didn’t want to jump into things, we wanted to make sure we were good at it,” said Cohen. That handful of students has blossomed into almost 100 students in New Jersey and 40 students in New York learning with the help of their supports budgets. Quality is still a major concern, according to Brad Cohen, “We don’t just want a paycheck; we want to make sure the students are gaining something from it and actually learning.” And in this case, the proof is in the pudding! Game-U has begun hiring individuals living with a disability who have been, and are still part of the Accelerate program. Currently they have four students working on 3D modeling for professional projects the company is sub-contracted to assist with, and two who are going to be teaching for the program. For information on this and other programs please visit: www.game-u.com.
The Office on Aging/ADRC would like to highlight additional programs/services offered to Mercer County residents. Federal, state and local funding make it possible for older adults, those living with disabilities and their caregivers to receive the help they need to care for themselves and those close to them. For more information regarding these and other programs call the ADRC Help line at 609-989-6661 or reach out to them directly.

Mercer Home Health Care
As one ages there is an increasing possibility that some health situations could compromise one’s ability to be a fully functioning individual. Fortunately, Mercer County has a home health care agency to turn to for short-term and long-term assistance for many facets of their well-being. Mercer Home Health Care offers a spectrum of services from skilled nursing for someone just released from the hospital to diet and wellness services that

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Notable Programs & Services
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include nutrition counseling and vital signs monitoring.

It is not secret that most of us want to remain in the comfort of our homes as we age, experience a temporary/permanent disability or become a caregiver of a person close to us. Mercer Home Health Care offers additional services such as: in-home nursing care; physical, occupation and speech therapies; transitional assistance from facilities such as hospitals/rehab unit to home; regular health assistance and medication management; wound care, monitoring and instruction; diabetes management and instruction; self-injection instruction; and behavioral health nursing.

To learn more or to reach out to them in your time of need by calling 609-227-2727 or by visiting www.mercerhomehealth.com

• Neighbors Helping Neighbors matches care-receivers who are 60 years of age and older with professionally screened and trained volunteer caregivers. The services available include: friendly visiting, shopping and errands, transportation to appointments, indoor/outdoor chores, minor household repairs, occasional meal preparation, clerical assistance, short-term respite and telephone reassurance.

• Project Healthy Bones encourages participants to learn the benefits of well-being, nutrition, safety, drug therapy and lifestyle factors during this series of exercise and education programs. This program is an evidenced-based program which lends credence to its success given that it has been proved effective when followed accordingly.

Another program through IFCG, offers support for those needing guidance as caregivers of those with dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. In partnership with the NJ Division on Aging Services and Rowan University, caregivers sign up for this free, 9-week program that includes discussion on stress management and relaxation techniques, grief, loss, depression, dealing with challenging behaviors and learning how important it is to care for oneself.

Interfaith Caregivers of Greater Mercer County (IFCG)
With the ever-increasing need and desire for older adults, those living with a disability, and their caregivers to age in the comfort of their chosen residence, Interfaith Caregivers offers services that will help!

With funding assistance partly provided by the Mercer County Office on Aging, two programs in particular give residents the opportunity to receive assistance according their need and to take responsibility for their well-being in the quest for safety and security as they age in place.

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Notable Programs & Services

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Learn more about all the programs and services or how you can become a volunteer by calling 609-393-9922 or by visiting www.icgmc.org. You will be glad you did!

Meals on Wheels of Mercer County
“So much more than a meal” is the slogan for Meals on Wheels of Mercer County. A more emphatic statement could not be made about the value of the service of a daily meal delivery to Mercer County’s homebound older adults. This comprehensive nutrition program delivers important nourishment – either one hot meal and, in some cases, an additional cold meal. There are a limited number of weekend meals available as well. As a comprehensive nutrition program, Meals on Wheels of Mercer County also offers nutrition counseling and education, the availability of shelf-stable groceries once a month, ‘Blizzard Bags’ meals for inclement weather, and pet food for our recipients’ furry companions. They currently deliver meals in East Windsor, Ewing, Hightstown, Princeton, Trenton, West Windsor, and specific areas within Hamilton and Lawrence.

Meal delivery is only part of the story though! Meals are delivered by a cadre of volunteers who give of their time, their energy and compassion to make a difference in the daily lives of these homebound residents. Volunteers express great satisfaction and enjoy a sense of purpose when they witness the joy they bring to those receiving the meals. In some situations the meal deliverer is the only contact with another human being that the person gets routinely!

The website offers great testimony from meal recipients and their meal deliverers.

Learn more about this service for you, someone for whom you care or learn more about becoming a volunteer who delivers “so much more than a meal” by calling the Meals on Wheels office at 609-695-3483 and by going to www.mealsonwheelsmercer.org.
GOODWILL HOME MEDICAL EQUIPMENT HAS MOVED

By Pam Mazzucca,
Disability Information and Assistance Specialist, Mercer County Office on Aging/ADRC

Goodwill Home Medical Equipment has moved its offices to accommodate additional areas of Mercer County. It is now located at 2901 Brunswick Pike as part of the Route 1 Plaza (on the Southbound side of Route 1) in Lawrenceville. The new space allows for a vast inventory of manual and power wheelchairs, pediatric equipment, unopened medical supplies, walkers, canes, crutches, bath and shower items, scooters, hoyer lifts, exercise equipment, hospital beds and incontinence products and more! Goodwill Home Medical Equipment operates through donations of gently used medical equipment and unopened medical supplies. These donations are sanitized and refurnished to prepare for resale at reduced prices making them immediately available, accessible and affordable. The Lawrenceville-based store offers savings on products of up to 50%. Sales help fund Goodwill’s job training programs that prepare those living with disabilities get competitive employment.

Whether you are able to donate items or are in need of items, do yourself a favor and take a trip to see the store in Lawrenceville. Or you can visit their website at www.goodwillhomemedical.org to shop online or call the store at 609-396-1513.
The New Oxford American Dictionary defines the noun “network” as a group or system of interconnected people or things; a group of people who exchange information, contacts, and experience for professional or social purposes. For those 60 and over there is a network across America right down to your local municipality with your best interests at heart. It is the Aging Network. As described by the Administration of Community Living, https://www.acl.gov/about-community-living, the Aging Network is “a well-established system of federal, state and local agencies and organizations that help older American live with dignity and independence in their homes and communities for as long as possible.” It is further explained that … “all people, regardless of age or disability, should be able to live independently and participate fully in their communities. Every person should have the right to make choices and to control the decisions in and about their lives. This right to self-determination includes decisions about their homes and work, as well as all the other daily choices most adults make without a second thought.”

The Aging Network is over 40 years old! With the leadership of the Administration on Aging, the established network includes 56 State Units on Aging, 622 Area Agencies on Aging, more than 250 Title IV Native American aging programs and thousands of service providers. This network currently delivers assistance to more than 10 million older adults, who may or may not live with disabilities, and their caregivers every year. Services from health and wellness programs to in-home services for those needing help with their activities of daily living are available to anyone over the age of 60. Services include transportation options, in-home personal care assistance, nutrition services such as home-delivered meals, chronic disease self-management programs, caregiver supports, legal services, elder abuse prevention programs and more.

Typically, funding that is issued at the federal level for these programs is accessed and distributed to the State Units on Aging who in

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UNDERSTANDING YOUR AGING NETWORK

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turn respond to local county and community assessments to support the greatest needs of those 60 and older. In 2014, the State Unit on Aging in New Jersey embraced the national initiative to incorporate the Aging and Disability Resource Connection (ADRC) that includes the ability to offer support to those living with disabilities and their caregivers. New Jersey’s local Offices on Aging/ADRC are county specific. In Mercer County, the Office on Aging/ADRC is located in the County Administration building at 640 South Broad Street. The Office on Aging/ADRC funds agencies in Mercer County to be able to deliver the aforementioned programs and services.

One of the functions of the Office on Aging/ADRC is to offer network opportunities for providers of services. On a quarterly basis, Mercer County providers gather to exchange information about how they operate. The outcome has successfully established collaborations in delivery of services. (To be further explored in a future issue of FORWARD.) Additionally, agencies that receive federal funding must establish Advisory Councils to keep current on the needs of the local communities. The Advisory Council on Aging, Transportation Advisory Council and Nutrition Advisory Council meet monthly along with a quarterly meeting of The Disability Advisory Council. Mercer County holds Joint Council Meetings three times a year that includes membership from the Advisory Council membership to discuss the overlap of issues that affect each of us. This unique arrangement is the true spirit of “network!”

For more information about the Aging Network or Advisory Councils, email adrc@mercercounty.org or call the Office on Aging/ADRC at 609-989-6661.

ADVOCACY

A poem by Ewing High School Students

A person who
Dedicate yourself by helping
being Vocal about what they need
people use their own Opinion
Converse their need or want
stAnd up for family
people need Courage
You can jump into it
Join Care2Share and you can help earn money for your organization. At no cost to you.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!
Exciting recreation events on the horizon!

JAN 24 - Game Night at The Community Center of Project Freedom, Lawrenceville

MARCH 3 - The Original Harlem Globetrotters at CURE Insurance Areana (formerly Sun Bank Arena)

We are working on a number of exciting things for 2018 including the Home Run Derby at Arm and Hammer Park, and more!

Don’t forget to renew your PCIL membership for event discounts.

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