



Left: Special Advisor for International Disability Rights Judith Heumann uses voice-control software. **Right:** Erdenebold Uyanga works with assistive technology during a Foreign Service Institute class.



October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month, and it comes on the heels of issuance of an Executive Order requiring federal agencies to increase their hiring of people with disabilities by 100,000 over the next five years.

The order also calls on the federal government to be a model employer of such individuals, and the Department of State is responding, having last year established a Disability and Reasonable Accommodations Division in the Bureau of Human Resources. DRAD provides sign-language interpreters for hearing impaired people and readers for employees with vision impairments, and also offers the equipment and technologies that can enable most persons with disabilities to perform the essential duties of their positions.

DRAD Director Patricia Pittarelli said she is committed to finding and maintaining the most appropriate state-of-the-art equipment and training for any Department employee. A 12-year veteran of assisting those with disabilities, Pittarelli said her division will, at full staff, have 13 employees, including

four focused on assistive technology. In addition, she will maintain three or four contractors as readers.

Essential Aids

Whether their disability is visual-, hearing- or mobility-related, Department employees say such technology is essential in performing their jobs. Alexander Barrasso, a blind Foreign Service officer in the political cone headed to his fifth tour, said his Job Access With Speech software, which reads what's on the computer screen, and his PAC Mate Portable Braille Display, which works with desktop computers, are essential. He said that during his 11 years in the Foreign Service he has seen improvements in technology, but finds some assistive software programs are incompatible with many other programs and with classified cable systems. Nonetheless, Barrasso, who has worked at posts ranging from Colombia to Singapore and had been the desk officer for Burma, said the Department went to great lengths in 2000 to make accessible the consular applications he needed.

Carol Mills, a Civil Service employee who works as a human resources specialist in

the Office of Medical Services, also uses the JAWS software, as well as Magic software, which magnifies words on a computer screen. In addition, she uses a closed-circuit TV to enlarge printed material and a reader supplied by DRAD. Mills said she could not perform

Good Accommodations

Assistive technology enables Department employees //
By Marjorie Stern and Alicia N. Cahoon



her work without the technology because her job involves personnel actions, which must all be completed online utilizing the new Global Employment Management System software.

Assistance Applauded

Another user of assistive technology, Roberta Mather, is a marketing director for Global Publishing Services. Mather, who is deaf, said she applauds the Department's commitment to assistive technology and equal access for all, and hopes it will continue.

Erdenebold Uyanga is a locally employed alumni coordinator at the U.S. Embassy in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. She is blind and had attended the national school for the blind and deaf in her country, but had no accommodations so she relied on family members and used tape recorders. Uyanga

graduated from Louisiana State University on a Fulbright grant with a master's degree in library sciences. She received reasonable accommodations, rehabilitation services and mobility instruction while attending LSU. Uyanga, according to her post's public affairs officer Marisa Maurer, uses assistive technologies such as JAWS software, a note-taker and a Braille printer—plus her guide dog Gladys.

The Department's Special Advisor for International Disability Rights, Judith Heumann, leads the Administration's efforts to develop a comprehensive strategy to promote the rights of persons with disabilities internationally; coordinates an interagency process for the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; leads on disability human rights issues; ensures that the needs of

persons with disabilities are addressed in international situations and that foreign assistance incorporates persons with disabilities; and conducts public diplomacy, on disability issues.

Assistive technology, Heumann said, can improve employees' work by enabling them to be more effective. Heumann uses the Dragon Naturally-Speaking brand software for speech-based control of her computer and the Victor product, which reads text to her from the computer screen. ■

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