



USAID
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BULGARIA

CASE STUDY

Helping Bulgarians with Disabilities Access Information Technology

Bulgarian Organization Displays Commitment to Disabled IT Users as it Goes from Trainee to Trainer



Photo: PC3 Telecenter Association

People with disabilities and organizations that support them learned about remote control devices for computers and other resources that increase access to information technology.

“The initial seminar introduced us to relevant technologies and some excellent practitioners, whose advice and partnership we continue to seek years later in many aspects of our work.”

--Nelly Petrova, Executive Director of the PC3 Telecenter Association

Challenge

USAID helped establish Bulgaria's first 10 Telecenters in 2001 in response to a need for information technology (IT) resources in economically disadvantaged locations. Each Telecenter is equipped with computers and other office equipment so that users can search the Internet, send faxes, scan documents and perform other IT tasks. The Telecenters provided services for various stakeholders in their communities, but people with special physical needs presented unique challenges.

Initiative

The USAID Participant Training Program organized a workshop in March 2003 entitled “Information and Communication Technology for Disadvantaged Groups.” The Center for Independent Living, a Bulgarian NGO, and a group of Bulgarian experts provided a thorough introduction to issues and resources related to information technology for people with disabilities. The participants gained awareness of the needs of people with disabilities and learned about suitable approaches to addressing them. They also acquired knowledge of tools available to facilitate disabled access to the Telecenters and their computer resources.

Result

Inspired and empowered by the initial USAID workshop, the Telecenters continued to study and apply useful tools and approaches. Many went on to implement IT solutions for people with disabilities in their communities. This included increasing physical access to facilities, conducting targeted outreach programs, advising local authorities about ways to provide employment for people with disabilities, and organizing IT-related courses and camps. In 2005, the Telecenter in the town of Pravets in western Bulgaria was nominated for a Best Practices Award at the world's largest IT trade show, CeBIT, in Hannover, Germany, for its work in providing increased Internet access to local users.

Drawing upon skills developed over several years, the PC3 Telecenter in Pravets and the PC3 Telecenter Association conducted a workshop in July 2007 to share their expertise on working with disabled IT users. The workshop introduced information and resources to approximately 30 people with disabilities and organizations that work with them. Participants included 23 blind people from several towns, three people with motor disabilities, and several representatives of state social services agencies. One of the highlights of the workshop was the demonstration of a relatively inexpensive remote control device that facilitates computer operation for users with mobility challenges. Several of the participants expect to purchase and begin using this device right away. The workshop marked the Telecenter Association as a clear leader in Bulgaria IT service provision and education for disabled people. The Association is already planning a follow-up event.