

# Innovative AT Practices

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## Mobile Unit Brings Assistive Tech to Underserved Areas

### BACKGROUND

Increasing Capabilities Access Network (iCAN) is the Arkansas statewide Assistive Technology (AT) program designed to make technology available and accessible for everyone who needs it. Based out of the Department of Career Education, Division of Arkansas Rehabilitation Services (ARS), iCAN offers a number of services to help Arkansans of all ages find the AT tools they need for home, school, work, and getting around in the community. It is a centralized distribution program located in Little Rock, the state capital.

Because iCAN is located in the center of Arkansas, many individuals with disabilities from other parts of the state are unable to travel that far. Recognizing that Arkansas has several underserved areas, in 2017 iCAN initiated the establishment of an Assistive Technology Mobile Unit (ATMU) in response to this. It allows the AT program to provide services and distribute devices more easily across the state, particularly in areas that have been previously underserved.



### INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

The mobile unit has been described as a “warehouse on wheels” by iCAN’s program manager, Rick Anderson. Two program coordinators rotate monthly to drive the van to a predetermined area and set up shop for the day. Once there, they provide device loans, demonstrations of high-end AT devices (such as communication tools), and giveaways of limited reused AT devices. The ATMU also has the ability to issue and process device loans by printing agreements inside the van as they would in the central office, earning the nickname of “iCAN on Wheels.” Because device loans typically need to be returned to the program in six weeks, the van will return at the end of the loan time so people can return the items or donate ones they don’t need anymore. If a device is small enough, the AT program will typically provide a return label so customers can ship back the device.

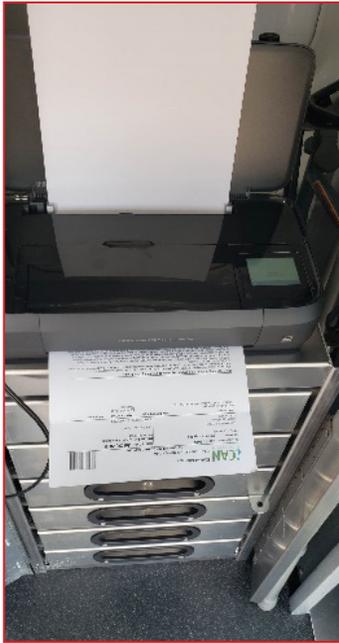


Inside the ATMU



AT Mobile Unit, also known as “iCAN on Wheels”

In September 2019, the ATMU was invited to attend the Northwest Veterans Summit. The ability to successfully create and print loans for assistive technology was shown with three clients. The ATMU loaned out a Low Vision Keyboard with JAWS (screen reader software), Lifetone Alarm Clock for those with low hearing, and a smartpen. The clients were provided instructions on how to return the items to iCAN via mail, as the route from the northwest part of Arkansas was well over three hours. The clients were all excited to be among the first to partake in the newly implemented ATMU.



Device loan paperwork being printed out inside the ATMU

A typical day for the mobile unit includes a staff person driving the van to a predetermined location and stationing the mobile unit in a parking lot of an organization. That organization arranges for customers to meet with iCAN's staff, who are given an indoor space to set up so potential customers visit them throughout the day. With the mobile unit parked just outside, staff are able to grab AT devices readily. In a typical month, the van makes 2 trips. The ATMU falls under both state-level and state leadership activities (mainly public awareness), and follows the same policies and procedures as the AT program based out of Little Rock.

iCAN identifies organizations to visit and tailors the devices they bring to that location (e.g., if it is an educational coop, the devices will be tailored for children). Examples include educational cooperatives, the Area Agency on Aging, vocational rehabilitation field offices, and other state agency regional offices.

The program is gathering data around how to target areas across Arkansas and cater their services to the needs of these locations. Traveling to these areas not only provides individuals with disabilities access to AT, but also allows for iCAN to promote public awareness of their services across the state to their target demographic. Organizations across the state started to request the van as soon as it was on the road. Anderson eventually would like to implement a way for people to request the van online, whether through a dedicated website or a Facebook page.

## IMPLEMENTATION

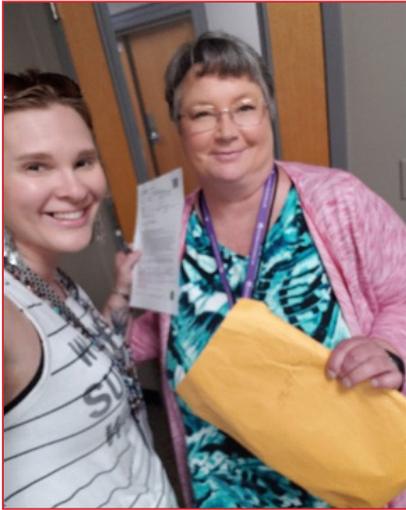
During the 2017 AT Leadership Symposium, Anderson got the idea for a mobile unit from the Indiana AT program. Indiana AT staff presented on their unit during One Big (Good) Thing, a presentation during which each State and Territory AT program briefly shares accomplishments or innovative plans. iCAN consulted with Indiana about issues they had with implementation, which helped inform the direction iCAN would go when developing their mobile unit.

Always looking to find ways to better serve Arkansans coupled with the need to reach people in all four corners of the state, the mobile unit seemed like a great solution for iCAN. Other factors also provided the opportunity for realizing this idea, such as iCAN's ability to finance it and having buy-in from leadership. With a change in governor came an appointed new management team at ARS that was open to new ideas.

Purchasing a van to create this mobile unit did not come without its challenges. While Indiana's AT program is a nonprofit, allowing them to easily buy their vehicle, iCAN is housed within the state government. When Anderson first approached leadership about purchasing a van, the state wanted to include it as part of its vehicle fleet and retain it under the state's management. Since the van was being purchased with federal dollars, it would be considered misappropriation of federal funds if it became part of the fleet. Because of this, state leadership had to be educated on the purpose of the vehicle and that it could not be added to the state fleet.

**iCAN was invited to present at the 2019 College Bound camp, where parents and students with disabilities attended a seminar led by the transition team helping to prepare them for the challenges that higher education entails. iCAN showcased all of the AT that is available in the Little Rock Lab and the services that iCAN provides, hopefully setting a precedent for a new generation of college students to be more informed about what is available to help them reach their goals.**

**The parents of the students were perhaps the most engaged with this presenter, and asked many questions about what tools were accessible. Various kinds of AT were demonstrated to parents and students. The ATMU made its first two successful loans of Echo Smartpens out of this location.**



iCAN staff member (left) with a parent of transitioning college-bound student

## IMPACT

Thousands of Arkansans with disabilities are unable to travel to Little Rock to gain access to AT services and products offered by iCAN. Depending on one's location, it can take 2-3 hours to travel to Little Rock. Furthermore, delivering equipment to individuals' homes is not feasible financially or logistically for iCAN. The ATMU focuses on these underserved geographic areas, allowing for hundreds of individuals to be reached.

To date, about 10-15 loans have been made through the ATMU. iCAN collects customer zip codes and enters them into the day-to-day data entry system in National Assistive Technology Act Data System (NATADS). iCAN plans to track how many people are served through the ATMU compared to customers who obtain services through the main office in Little Rock. iCAN wants to broaden the horizon with regards to where the ATMU goes and allow for more opportunities to assist individuals through loans and demonstrations.

Since the inception of the mobile unit, several hundred individuals have been reached through public awareness since the van acts as a "billboard" with iCAN's logo on the side.

## HUMAN AND FISCAL RESOURCES

For an AT program with a modest federal allocation, getting a mobile unit staffed and running required some creativity and hard work. The van was purchased out of AT appropriation funds. It had to be customized by adding shelves and flooring and by making the roof of the van higher so that an individual could stand up inside. The cost for van and customization was approximately \$50,000. Insurance for the vehicle is provided under the state fleet insurance umbrella and maintaining it comes

out of operating expenses within the state. Leveraged funds allocated from the state were not used in purchasing or maintaining the vehicle due to state regulations, thus allowing iCAN to assume full ownership of the ATMU.

In setting up the mobile unit, Anderson estimates it took about 100 hours of his time. An important aspect of implementing this project was getting buy-in from the staff who would adopt new roles. Luckily, staff were excited about the mobile unit.

Currently, two staff members drive the van and rotate monthly. Their job descriptions were amended to include this new responsibility. Since the staff have to drive 2-3 hours to the designated location, they typically stay in a hotel overnight. Helping make matters easier is that driving the van does not require a special license.

Although Arkansas is a small state and iCAN is able to do this with 2 staff members, there are limitations with Arkansas being so rural while ensuring that iCAN's services are evenly distributed across the state. The 2 staff members running the unit are also fulfilling other aspects of the job as coordinators.

## REPLICATION RECOMMENDATIONS

If contemplating replicating this service in another state or territory, there are some critical issues that should be considered and addressed. One is to take into account the bureaucratic environment you are working in (nonprofit, state government, or university) and what funds can be allocated to such a service. Consider whether the service will require buy-in from management or at the state level. Think about whether purchasing a vehicle is a seamless process, or whether there are hurdles that need to be overcome.

In terms of staffing, figure out whether you can ask current staff to drive it or if you would need to hire someone new. Consider the size of your state and the number of staff that would be required to travel the distances. For some programs, it may work better to have a designated person to focus on a mobile unit within their state.

If you decide to purchase and customize a mobile unit, consider whether you will support it long term. If direct customer access to the mobile unit is important, consider making it accessible. Weigh the options and goals you are hoping to achieve with the mobile unit to decide whether accessibility is a factor. Lastly, a minor lesson that iCAN learned when customizing the van was that upholstering the ceiling would have eliminated a lot of noise for the staff people driving long distances.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THIS TOPIC

About iCAN and the ATMU:

[www.facebook.com/ICANArkansas/](https://www.facebook.com/ICANArkansas/)

Company that customized the ATMU—U.S. Upfitters:

[www.inlad.com](http://www.inlad.com)

Contact Rick Anderson at iCAN for questions:

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The Innovative AT Practices Series are topical case studies that describe innovative or high-impact activities conducted by state AT programs that result in increased access to and acquisition of AT.



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