

Making technology accessible

Lawmakers want to open state Web sites to individuals who are deaf, blind or hard-of-hearing

By Nick Busse

Rep. Torrey Westrom (R-Elbow Lake) knows how frustrating it can be trying to access government information.

Westrom, who lost his eyesight in a 1987 car incident, uses his computer to read documents via software that converts text into speech. He can often be seen around the Capitol complex wearing a pair of headphones, using his laptop to read bills, answer e-mails and perform other routine legislative tasks.

While such accessibility software is becoming increasingly commonplace, the state's information technology systems are often not compatible with it. As a result, even Westrom, an elected official who works every day in the bustling nerve center of state government, has a difficult time accessing state Web sites, documents and other electronic media.

This year, Westrom co-sponsors a bill that he hopes will fix the problem and help open government information to a whole new audience.

HF1744, sponsored by Rep. Bill Hilty (DFL-Finlayson), would ask the Office of Enterprise Technology to develop a set of technology accessibility standards for the state. The goal is to ensure that future purchases of state computer hardware, software and other products are compatible with the latest accessibility software, such as text-to-speech programs.

"This doesn't have to be a costly measure," Westrom said. "It just has to be a procedure that we start adopting on the front end rather than asking afterwards, 'Oh, well how do we make this accessible for those that need accessible speech?'"

The House State and Local Government Operations Reform, Technology and Elections Committee approved the bill April 1 and referred it to the House Finance Committee.

A companion, SF1600, sponsored by Sen. Ann Rest (DFL-New Hope), awaits action by the Senate State Government Budget Division.

The standards proposed in the bill wouldn't just be a boon to blind individuals; deaf people would benefit as well.

Sean Virnig, a school administrator and the founder of Northfield-based Rawland Cycles, said almost none of the videos available on state Web sites have been captioned. As a result, Virnig,

who is deaf, is unable to access recordings of legislative committee hearings, Supreme Court proceedings and other materials.

"Any obstacles along the way... can leave people with disabilities discouraged and unable to reap the benefits that e-government has to offer," Virnig said, speaking through a sign-language interpreter. He added that accessibility standards would have benefits for non-disabled individuals as well, including forcing state Web sites to properly organize their content.



Likewise, Chris Bell, a board member of the American Council of the Blind of Minnesota, said the state's aging population will likely benefit in coming years from the use of technology that enables people with hearing and vision problems to better access information.

Some state officials are concerned about the financial implications of any accessibility standards, however. John Lally, OET planning director, said that while his office supports the intent of the bill, they are concerned that the implementation cost could be "astronomical."

Depending on how the bill's language is interpreted, Lally said state IT staff might end up having to look "screen by screen" at every computer and software application in state government to determine whether it is in compliance with the standards — something OET doesn't have the staff to do.

"The intent is, I think, admirable. ... But creating an impossible standard for us to follow does not make sense," Lally said.

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Of particular concern is the possibility that OET would have to analyze systems the state is currently using and make them retroactively compatible with the standards. Lally said this would be impossible with many of the state's aging software applications.

Mary Hartnett, executive director of the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans, rejected that possibility. Noting that the bill provides for the standards to be set by a new advisory committee that includes the state's chief information officer, Hartnett argued OET would play a role in setting the standards, and could shape them in a way that places no undue burden on the state. 