



**Maryland**

**DEPARTMENT OF DISABILITIES**

Assistive Technology Program

**ANNUAL REPORT TO  
GOVERNOR WES MOORE  
AND  
THE MARYLAND GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
on the  
ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY  
LOAN PROGRAM  
January 1, 2024**

## **Introduction**

The Assistive Technology Loan Program (ATLP) is a financing program within the Maryland Technology Assistance Program (MDTAP), a unit within the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD). The ATLP was created on October 1, 1999 and codified in Human Services Article §§7-601 through 7-616. This program is guided by an eleven-member board of directors, including eight who are appointed by the Governor and three state agency representatives. The ATLP operates separately from state funding, managing all program administrative costs through interest earnings from the ATLP Special Loan Fund located in a separate account managed by the State Treasurer with fund accounting provided by the Office of the Comptroller.

The ATLP's purpose is to provide alternative financing for the purchase of assistive technologies, adapted & non-adapted vehicles, and home modifications for accessibility. The ATLP is designed to help individuals with disabilities achieve independence and improve their quality of life by providing low interest, affordable loans to qualifying borrowers with disabilities who have encountered obstacles qualifying for financing in the traditional market. Without the ATLP, borrowers would have to either purchase the assistive technology they need using high interest credit cards, take out loans with second-tier lenders, borrow against their homes, or go without the needed equipment at all. In some instances, the ATLP is the only option for financing high-cost adapted vehicles, because the value of the vehicle adaptations exceeds the overall value of the vehicle, causing traditional lenders to decline these high-cost vehicle loans.

The program currently partners with one area lender to issue loans via loan guarantees, and interest rate subsidies where appropriate, to make loans more accessible and affordable for people with disabilities and their families. All applicants receiving guaranteed loans through the ATLP have been declined for a loan through conventional lending measures. In some cases, loans are approved without a loan guarantee when the borrower demonstrates the ability to meet the lending institution's criteria for a successful loan. In those instances, borrowers receiving "non-guaranteed" loans are still able to take advantage of discounted interest rates because of the ATLP's partnership agreement with the lender, ensuring that all non-guaranteed borrowers referred by the ATLP receive a lower-than-market interest rate. In addition, program staff provide significant application support and credit guidance to all potential borrowers throughout the application process.

## **2022-2023 Loan Activity & Program Expenditures**

For the annual period of December 1, 2022 through November 30, 2023, the ATLP:

- Received 175 loan applications totaling \$4,335,053.00 in funding requests
- Approved 75 loan requests totaling \$3,850,066.00
- Closed 36 guaranteed loans for a total of \$1,421,204.00
- Facilitated the closing of 2 non-guaranteed loans for a total of \$38,000.00
- Conducted 670 unique contacts with current and potential applicants
- During this reporting period, the ATLP managed and tracked 230 loans actively in repayment

During this same period, 55 applications totaling \$1,246,132.00 were withdrawn by applicants after submitting them to the program. Loan withdraws happen for a variety of reasons including individual financial circumstances, accessing equipment or grant funding through a different source, or determining the item is no longer a priority. We reflect withdrawn loans in this report because they have gone through some portion, if not all, of the ATLP loan processing steps including program review & data entry, applicant follow-up, bank submission, credit check, and Board review.

Additional program highlights include:

- As part of the iDrive initiative, the ATLP received 107 vehicle and vehicle modification loan requests totaling \$3,540,825.30 between December 1, 2022 and November 30, 2023.
- Closed 34 vehicle and vehicle modification loans, categorized as iDrive loans, totaling \$1,428,342.38 between December 1, 2022 and November 30, 2023.
- All of the ATLP applicants in 2023 indicated a satisfaction measure of highly satisfied/satisfied with their experience.
- From inception through November 30, 2022, the ATLP has received 3,075 loan applications and issued 1,278 loans totaling \$22.7M.
- Since inception, the total amount of repayments made by borrowers for guaranteed ATLP loans is \$13.4M.
- The overall default rate for guaranteed loans through the ATLP since inception of the program is 4%. ATLP makes every effort to reduce the overall loss to the fund through vehicle repossessions, payment plans, and financial recoveries through the State of Maryland Central Collections Unit (CCU). Since the inception of the program, the ATLP has recovered \$190,694.22 on 140 defaulted accounts.

### **Direct Impacts for Program Borrowers**

AT Loan Program applicants have used these loans to substantially improve their lives. The Program helps Marylander's purchase technology that supports or increases access to education, employment, and the community. Borrower purchases can include technology to help them remain independent in the community, participate in higher education, support work-related tasks and activities, ensure accessibility in the home, and more.

#### **I. Education**

In 2023, the ATLP guaranteed a loan in the amount of \$3,745 for a soon-to-be graduate of Maryland School for the Blind. The applicant had no credit history as this loan request was her first chance to build credit. With income limited to SSI benefits, the applicant was applying to purchase a Brailliant BI40x, a braille notetaker, which would allow her to access her computer as she worked on skills development, job applications, and more. With a diagnosis of legal blindness and ADHD, the Brailliant would serve as her key piece of technology to connect to resources, socialization, and future work and school opportunities. The ATLP staff worked with the applicant to explain her financial responsibilities of taking out a loan and the impact positive loan payments would make on her credit report, providing her with a solid foundation to establish credit and prepare for the future.

A current Towson University student with dyslexia applied to the ATLP requesting \$850 to finance the cost of a laptop. The computer would support him with reading, spelling, writing, and include software for voice recognition and text-to-speech software. Although the applicant had a history of late pays on some of his credit accounts, and maintained a number of deferred student loans, ATLP staff worked with the applicant to identify the reasons for the late pay accounts, and was able to present the request to the ATLP Board of Directors. The loan was approved at 3% and the applicant was able to purchase a laptop with the needed software to help him with completing his degree.

## **II. Employment**

In August 2023, Ms. R applied to the AT Financial Loan Program, requesting \$25,000 for the purchase of a non-adapted vehicle. Mr. R. had a diagnosis of Chronic Arthritis, and now faced a new transportation challenge with her job, as it had recently relocated to Columbia MD, from Beltsville MD. She had previously been utilizing Metro Access to get back and forth to work but with the relocation to Columbia, Metro Access wasn't an option because it didn't service the Columbia area. Having experienced credit issues related to a job loss 4 years earlier (though now working at her current position for 3 years), she was unable to qualify for a traditional loan. Thus, she applied to the ATLP. In working with staff, the program was able to show a previous history of on time credit payments up until her job loss, and Ms. R verified her work with a credit repair company to address the remaining collections on her credit report. The ATLP Board approved her loan based on current employment income and previously strong credit history up till her job loss, and she was able to secure a 3% interest financial loan for a 2019 used Mazda, ensuring reliable transportation to work and helping her to re-establish a positive credit history.

An employee of the Worcester County Public School System with hearing loss applied to the ATLP to finance the cost of hearing aids. As part of her job requires her to be on the phone with families throughout much of the day, she was experiencing trouble understanding and deciphering various voice tones. Ms. G applied to the ATLP to finance \$3,500 for 4 years for the purchase of two hearing aids. Because insurance doesn't cover hearing aid costs, it was vital for her to acquire financing so that she could continue working at full capacity. Although she had experienced some recent late payments on her current vehicle, ATLP staff worked with the applicant to determine the reasons for the late pays and were able to reflect a recent return to on-time payments. Staff presented this information to the ATLP Board, and Ms. G was approved by the Board for the hearing aids at 3%.

## **III. Community Living**

In 2023, the M Family applied to the ATLP for a \$20,000 unsecured home modifications loan to modify their current bathroom to be fully accessible. The M family's 8-year-old daughter is completely wheelchair dependent and the family needed to update the bathroom to support her in her own independent toileting needs. Although the total cost of the bathroom remodel was over \$32,000, the family contributed \$12,000 out-of-pocket, leaving them with the remaining \$20,000 to finance. The ATLP Board approved the loan for 7-years at a 3% interest rate, ensuring that the monthly payments remained affordable and worked with the family's other monthly expenses.

A previous applicant of the ATLP who received a non-adapted vehicle loan in 2018 returned to the program with a request to finance up to \$39,000 for an adapted van. The AT user is 21-years-old with cerebral palsy and quadriplegia. The mom was having trouble lifting her daughter into the current, non-adapted vehicle and determined that it was time to get a vehicle that would allow her to more easily get her daughter in and out of the car for medical appointments and socialization. Since her previous approval with the ATLP, the applicant had secured higher-paying employment and resolved a number of collections on her credit report, increasing her

chances of Board approval. The Board approved the loan for 6-years at 3%, and the family was able to purchase the needed adapted vehicle to improve their child's quality of life.

### **Program Highlights 2023**

- Launched the iDrive Maryland initiative, with competitive grant funding from the Association for Community Living (ACL) in the amount of \$649,978. iDrive Maryland has expanded lending parameters (increased loan amounts & expanded re-payment terms) to Marylanders with disabilities, especially those living in rural areas of Maryland, seeking funding for adapted & non adapted vehicles.
- iDrive outreach & partnership highlights include: development of the online & print Maryland Adapted Vehicle Funding Guide; hosted two educational webinars on Funding Adapted vehicles; created & disseminated iDrive promotional materials in all counties of Maryland; and, in coordination with our partners, made 21 presentations to 504 consumers, participated in 19 partnership meetings reaching 231 colleagues, joined 24 outreach events connecting with 1,954 consumers, and made 64 social media posts reaching 2,932 followers across the state.
- The ATLP launched a fully accessible, online application to streamline & modernize the application process. The online application makes it easier for Marylanders with disabilities to complete, upload, submit, and track their applications easily and accessibly. Since its launch in January 2023, the ATLP has received 114 applications through this system.
- In 2023, the ATLP continued its partnership with CASH Campaign of Maryland, referring eligible consumers for free credit counseling, financial education, and credit management support. This partnership has also led to a month-long Financial Resiliency Webinar Series aimed at Marylanders with disabilities, focused on increasing financial awareness by covering topics such as financial planning through the lifespan, housing affordability for people with disabilities, maintaining benefits while working, and more. This month-long series has been offered for the past three years in October.
- Continued work with the ATLP contracted grant writer to identify public/private partnerships for expansion.

### **Program Goals for 2024**

- Establish a second lending partner to service AT loan requests, increasing consumer choice for ATLP applicants.
- Renegotiate the current lender agreement, established since 2000, to reduce the ATLP guarantee commitment from 100% to 80% and establish a portion of return on all interest charged to ATLP-guaranteed loans.
- Continue conversations with the Association of Tech Act Programs (ATAP) to explore their role in serving as a fiscal sponsor for financial loan programs nationally, particularly when applying for 501c3 limited grant opportunities.
- Identify & improve database customization for more robust reporting measures.
- Facilitate in-house loan processing changes to increase workflow, reduce paper dependency, shorten loan review time, and develop faster turnaround time for loan closing processes.
- Continue building partnerships with other Maryland state agencies, foundations, non-profits, and community development financial institutions (CDFI).
- Submit letters of intent (LOIs) and grant applications for new and innovative ATLP initiatives with a focus on expanded funding for hearing aids and home modifications.
- Host the "Funding Adapted Vehicles" webinar training and create a "Funding Home Modifications" training to feature the ATLP and other funding options throughout the state.

## **Conclusion**

Maryland's Assistive Technology Loan Program remains a smart, compassionate investment for Marylanders with disabilities seeking to achieve maximum participation in the community in the most integrated settings possible. Access to assistive technology is critical to people with disabilities, older adults, and their families who are seeking to maintain and improve aspects of daily life. By offering an alternative to traditional financing options, the ATLP helps turn the dream of living independently into a reality.