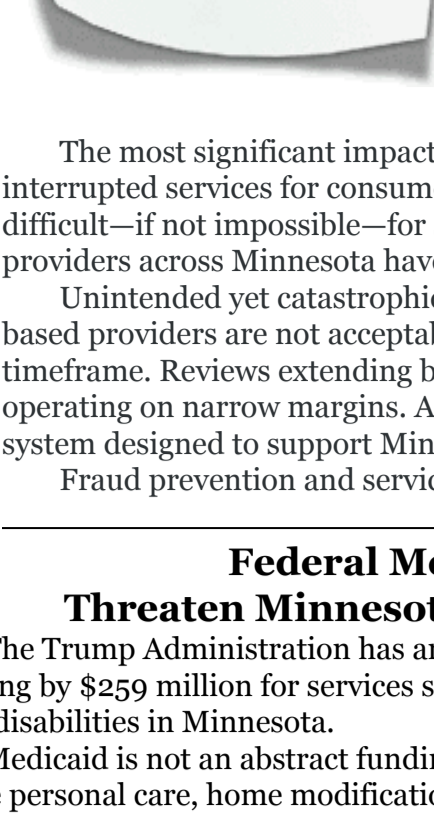


Prepayment Fraud Review Takes Center Stage



The new year began with a renewed commitment by the Minnesota Department of Human Services to eliminate fraud in publicly funded services. As part of this initiative, the state has implemented prepayment fraud reviews for 14 services delivered across Minnesota. A third-party vendor, Optum, is now conducting prepayment reviews of billing submissions from providers statewide.

Access North fully supports strong oversight and meaningful fraud prevention. Safeguarding public resources is essential to maintaining trust in the system and ensuring services remain available for those who depend on them.

However, this process has produced serious unintended consequences for consumers, Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), and service providers.

The most significant impact has been delayed payments to providers, resulting in interrupted services for consumers and job losses for DSPs. Payment delays have made it difficult—if not impossible—for some providers to meet payroll and sustain operations. Several providers across Minnesota have already been forced to close their doors.

Unintended yet catastrophic consequences for consumers, employees, and community-based providers are not acceptable. Any fraud review system must operate within a reasonable timeframe. Reviews extending beyond 30 days are simply not sustainable for providers operating on narrow margins. As we are now witnessing, prolonged delays destabilize the very system designed to support Minnesota's most vulnerable residents.

Fraud prevention and service continuity must go hand in hand.

Federal Medicaid Cuts Threaten Minnesota's Most Vulnerable

The Trump Administration has announced plans to reduce Medicaid funding by \$259 million for services supporting seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities in Minnesota.

Medicaid is not an abstract funding stream—it is a lifeline. It funds in-home personal care, home modifications, homemaking, home health services, respite care, adult day services, and many other critical supports that allow individuals to live safely and independently in their communities.

At a time when looming Federal Medicaid cuts are anticipated this fall because of the 2025 Budget Reconciliation Act, additional Federal cuts could destabilize the system. The cumulative effect could be devastating: veterans, seniors, and people with disabilities could lose access to essential services.

We must ensure accountability without dismantling the very infrastructure that allows people to live with dignity and independence. It has been said, that the true measure of any society is how it treats its most vulnerable members.



Access North Secures Grant to Support Ramp Services

Critical Funding for Home Access in St. Louis County

We are deeply grateful to receive 2026 funding through the St. Louis County Community Development Block Grant to support our Home Access Program.

These funds will allow us to purchase lumber and materials to construct home access ramps for residents throughout St. Louis County. This year, Access North will build our 2,000th ramp since the program's inception in 1990.

St. Louis County played an integral role in launching this program more than 30 years ago through its initial investment. We are proud that this long-standing partnership continues to remove barriers and create safer homes for people throughout our region.

We Need Your Support to Make a Lasting Impact

Your support truly makes a difference.

By donating to Access North, you help create opportunities for seniors to remain safely in their homes, remove barriers for people with disabilities, and ensure that individuals throughout our community have the resources they need to age in place with dignity.

If you would like to donate now or learn more about planned giving options in the future, I would be happy to speak with you personally. Please feel free to contact me at abrunette@accessnorth.net to arrange a confidential conversation. We are also glad to collaborate with you and your financial advisor to develop a giving plan that aligns with your goals and values.

Thank you for considering this meaningful way to support Access North. Together, we can ensure that our mission—and our impact—continues for decades to come.



~ Don Brunette, Executive Director

[Donate Now](#)

Board Member Spotlight: Myrna Peterson

We are pleased to welcome Myrna Peterson to the Access North Board of Directors. We look forward to her leadership and contributions as we continue advancing our mission of independent living and community inclusion. Here is an introduction to Myrna:

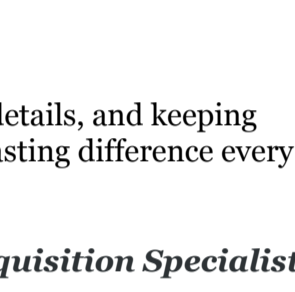


I am a female quadriplegic, proud Mother of 4 adult children, blessed Grandmother of 9 amazing Grandchildren, living in a rural northern Minnesota community, retired educator and a very proactive advocate for differently-abled persons of all ages and all abilities. Grand Rapids has worked with our non-profit organization, Mobility Mania – Accessibility For All, to implement many improvements beyond ADA compliance. My public school and college level teaching career was cut short by a devastating auto accident that caused me to become a quadriplegic with an incomplete fracture at C-3, C-4. That accident on June 21, 1995, changed my life and my focus, due to chronic pain and mobility challenges. I was a single mom with four teenagers at that time. It's been 30 years and 42 surgeries since then. My background in technology, love of life, faith and perseverance have allowed me to continue learning and teaching in my community. I'm very involved on many boards at the federal, state and local levels, plus I volunteer at my church and local service groups.

Welcome Myrna!

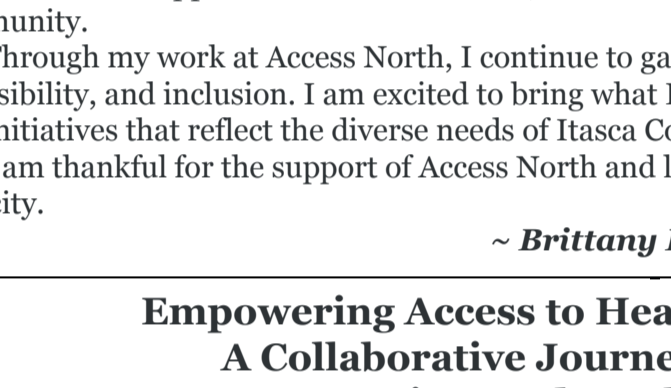
Access North Honors Former Board Members

On February 16, we hosted a luncheon honoring Judy Bonelli and Sue Sundvall, two outgoing board members who have each served Access North for more than a decade.

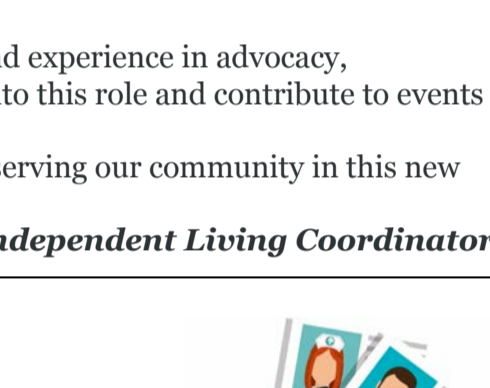


Both Judy and Sue have provided extraordinary leadership to our Center for Independent Living, serving as Board President, Vice President, and committee chairs over the years. Their steady guidance, commitment to our mission, and advocacy for people with disabilities have made a lasting impact on our organization.

We extend our deepest gratitude and wish them the very best in their future endeavors. You will be greatly missed.



Tammy Betters and Sue Sundvall

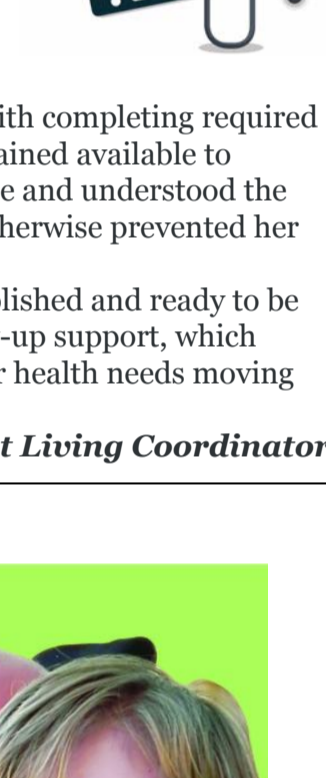


Judy Bonelli

Spotlight on the Finance Team: The Engine Behind the Organization

Behind every successful organization is a team working quietly and consistently to keep operations running smoothly – and for us, that team is Finance. While much of their work happens behind the scenes, the impact they make is felt across every department, every day.

From ensuring employees and providers are paid accurately to maintaining financial compliance and supporting organizational decision-making, the Finance Team plays a critical role in keeping everything moving forward.



What Does the Finance Team Do?

The Finance Team manages the organization's financial health through a variety of essential responsibilities, including billing, accounting, expense management, and payment processing. Their work ensures accuracy, accountability, and efficiency so staff can focus on serving clients and fulfilling our mission.

Here's a closer look at the people and expertise that make it all happen:

Meet the Team

Mary – Expense Reports & Accounts Payable

Mary T helps keep finances organized and flowing by managing expense reports and overseeing accounts payable. She ensures vendors and partners are paid accurately and on time while supporting staff with expense submissions and financial processes.

Trina – MA Billing

Trina manages Medical Assistance (MA) billing, ensuring services are billed correctly and efficiently. Her attention to detail helps maintain compliance and supports timely reimbursement, which is vital to sustaining services for those we serve.

Mary – Insurance Billing

Mary E oversees PMAP billing operations, working diligently to process claims accurately and resolve billing issues when they arise. Her work helps maintain steady revenue flow and minimizes disruptions to services.

Cheryl – Accounting

Cheryl handles accounting functions that keep the organization financially strong. From tracking financial data to ensuring accurate reporting, her work provides the foundation for informed financial decisions and organizational stability.

Why Their Work Matters

The Finance Team may not always be front and center, but their contributions touch every part of the organization. Their dedication ensures:

- Employees and providers are paid correctly
- Billing processes run smoothly
- Financial records remain accurate and compliant
- Leadership has reliable financial insight for planning and growth

A Big Thank You

Their Finance Team are true behind-the-scenes heroes – solving problems, balancing details, and keeping everything financially on track. Their commitment, accuracy, and teamwork make a lasting difference every day.

When you have the chance, take a moment to thank them for all they do!

~ Jenny Holland, Talent Acquisition Specialist

Brittany Pope-Sears Appointed to the Itasca County Human Rights Commission

I am honored to share that I have been appointed as a new commissioner on the Itasca County Human Rights Commission. I was nominated by Molly MacGregor, the City Council Representative for the Commission, and I am grateful for the opportunity to serve our community in this role.

Becoming a commissioner allows me to have a voice in guiding community events and helping ensure they are as inclusive and welcoming as possible. I look forward to learning more about what members of our community want to change, improve, or create to make Itasca County a place where everyone feels respected and valued.

The Commission works closely with the City to host events throughout the year that promote harmony and uphold the rights and dignity of all people. In the past, the Commission has organized events such as the Itasca Pride Event, the Juneteenth Freedom Walk, and a Mental Health & the Workplace event. These initiatives create opportunities for education, connection, and meaningful conversation within our community.

Through my work at Access North, I continue to gain knowledge and experience in advocacy, accessibility, and inclusion. I am excited to bring what I have learned into this role and contribute to events and initiatives that reflect the diverse needs of Itasca County.

I am thankful for the support of Access North and look forward to serving our community in this new capacity.

~ Brittany Pope-Sears, Independent Living Coordinator

Empowering Access to Healthcare: A Collaborative Journey to Overcome Barriers and Establish Care

A consumer disclosed that she did not currently have access to consistent healthcare, which was creating barriers to addressing both her preventive and ongoing medical needs. We discussed the importance of establishing care and explored local, accessible options that would best meet her circumstances.

Together, we identified Lake Superior Community Health Center as an appropriate provider and worked collaboratively to schedule an intake appointment.



I provided step-by-step support throughout the process, including assistance with completing required paperwork and navigating the intake requirements. During the appointment, I remained available to provide clarification, advocacy, and support as needed to ensure she felt comfortable and understood the process. This support helped reduce anxiety and removed barriers that may have otherwise prevented her from successfully completing the appointment.

As a result of this coordinated effort, her healthcare services are now fully established and ready to be utilized. She now has access to routine medical care, preventive services, and follow-up support, which significantly improves her overall stability, independence, and ability to manage her health needs moving forward.

~ Brittany Pope-Sears, Independent Living Coordinator

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## Accessible Space, Inc.

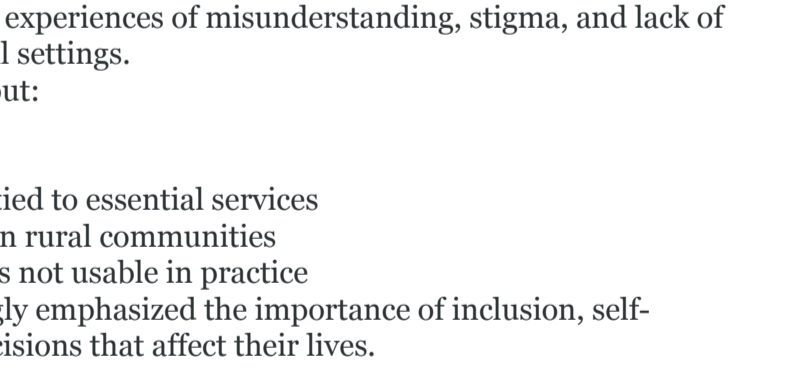
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Quality, Rent Subsidized Housing for Adults with Qualifying Disabilities and Assisted Living Services Available.

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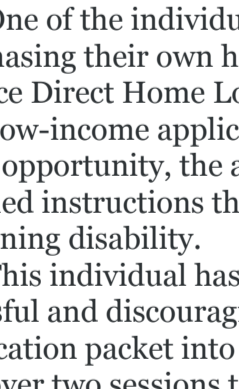
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**Short Waiting Lists on Other Residences**

1. Superior View - Duluth, Minnesota
2. Pine Grove - Duluth, Minnesota
3. Redruth Valley - Duluth, Minnesota
4. Burke Apartments - Duluth, Minnesota
5. Northern Lights Apartments - Duluth, Minnesota
6. Moses Residence - Grand Rapids, Minnesota



## What Independent Living Means in 2026

As we get settled into 2026, one thing remains clear. The foundation of Independent Living does not change, even when systems around us do.

Independent Living means choice. It means people with disabilities directing their own services. It means identifying barriers and working together to remove them. It means community inclusion, accessibility, and dignity.

So far this year, we are seeing increasing complexity in service systems, continued housing shortages, workforce challenges, and growing demand for assistive technology and individualized supports. Across the disability community, there is uncertainty about funding structures, program requirements, and access to essential services. These realities affect the people we serve every day.

At Access North, our role remains consistent. Independent Living is not just a set of programs. It is a philosophy rooted in consumer control and self-determination. It is a belief people with disabilities are the experts in their own lives. Our responsibility is to provide information, advocacy, resources, and partnership so individuals can make informed decisions and stay in control of their futures.

As 2026 continues to take shape, we encourage our community to stay connected. Ask questions. Share concerns. Reach out to support. Independent Living works best when we face challenges together and keep the focus on access, inclusion, and choice.

~ Kiri Basore, Co-Lead Independent Living Coordinator

## Welcome to our New Team Members

### Hello Everyone!

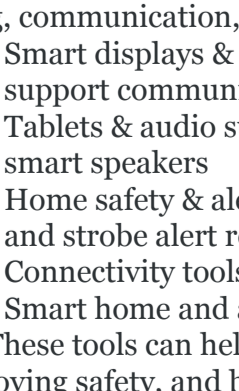
I'm Larelynn Micheau (I know, it's a bit of a mouthful!), and I'm thrilled to introduce myself as your CFSS/PCA Case Manager here in Bemidji. I live just outside the quaint town of Laporte, where my parent, siblings, kids, and grandkids all live nearby. My husband and I share our home with two dogs and two cats that keep things lively!



A bit about me: I'm passionate about advocating for our community and humanity as a whole. In my free time, you'll often find me getting creative with wood turning, sewing and resin projects – anything that lets me make a bit of a mess! I'm really looking forward to connecting with all of you and helping out in any way I can.

Don't hesitate to reach out if you need anything. I'm here to make things easier for you and our community!

~ Larelynn Micheau, CFSS/PCA Case Manager



**Hi!**

My name is Alyssa Beaty, and I live in Grand Rapids with my husband and our two boys, Mason (8) and Ryker (3). We also have a spoiled and pleasantly plump springer spaniel named Ronan and a very vocal 9-year-old cat named Felix. In my free time, I enjoy fishing (especially muskie), baking, gardening, four wheeling/snowmobiling, and playing in my local dart league, and spending time on the lake with my family.

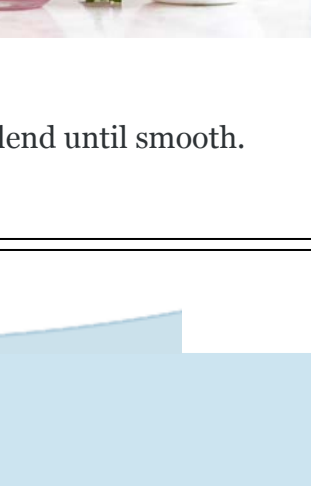
My passion for working with people with disabilities started when I was in high school and my grandfather got diagnosed with dementia; his symptoms quickly started progressing and within two years my grandmother was also diagnosed with dementia. Before they could get into an assisted living facility, I was acting as a PCA for them a few days a week when I was pregnant with my first son and would take them grocery shopping, to appointments, etc.

After my son was born in February 2018, I decided to become a nursing assistant and started working at Grand Village in the memory care unit where I developed many meaningful relationships with the residents. Around this time, we got the unfortunate news that both of my grandparents' dementia diagnoses had progressed into Alzheimer's disease. I continued to work at Grand Village until August 2019 when I decided to go back to school and become an EMT. I started a certified EMT in January 2020, and I got my first job in March when the height of the pandemic started. I was an active EMT for a little over a year before I went back to school to become an LPN, however, I found out I was pregnant with my second son and made the tough decision to switch majors and do online schooling. In May 2023, I graduated from Minnesota North College with an Associate's degree in Health Science, and a few months later I became a member of the Public Health Corps and started working with Itasca County Public Health and the Aik Community Health Board for my first service term; I had the opportunity to help create the 2025 Community Health Assessment for Aitkin/Itasca/Koochiching county, which focused on mental health and well-being. I also served a second term with St. Louis County Public Health which wrapped up in August 2025 when the Public Health Corps unfortunately came to an end. Now, I am here at Access North working as an Independent Living Coordinator, and I am very excited to be part of the team!

~ Alyssa Beaty, Independent Living Coordinator

## Celebrating Ed Roberts Day at Access North

Ed Roberts is known as the father of the Independent Living Movement. As a disabled activist, he helped shift the conversation from care and charity to rights, choice, and self-determination. His work laid the foundation for Centers for Independent Living across the country, including Access North. The belief that people with disabilities have the right to control their own lives is central to everything we do.



On January 23, we proudly celebrated Ed Roberts Day and took time to reflect on his legacy.

Throughout the week, staff updated their email signatures with a special Ed Roberts Day banner to spark conversation and raise awareness in our everyday communication. It was a small change that created meaningful visibility and reminded people why this work exists.

We also shared information about Ed Roberts and the history of the Independent Living Movement with our Board of Directors. It is grounding to pause and remember that the services and advocacy we provide today were built on the determination of people who refused to accept limits placed on their lives.

On social media, we shared information about Ed and his movement all week and posed the question: What does independent living mean to you? The responses were thoughtful and personal, and they highlighted just how powerful this philosophy continues to be in our community.

On Ed Roberts Day itself, a couple of our independent living Coordinators joined Wake the Lakes radio to talk about Ed's legacy and the work happening right here in Northeastern Minnesota. It was a great opportunity to bring the conversation beyond our offices and into the broader community.

Ed Roberts once said, "The most basic right of any individual is to control their own destiny." That message continues to guide our work every day.

Thank you for helping us lift up the voices of our community and celebrate the power of independent living.

~ Kiri Basore, Co-Lead Independent Living Coordinator

## Civil Rights Survey Highlights: Voices from the Disability Community

As part of ongoing efforts led by the MN Statewide Independent Living Council, a Civil Rights Survey was conducted to better understand the lived experiences of people with disabilities across Minnesota. The purpose of this survey was to gather information on civil rights issues related to education, employment, housing, healthcare, transportation, accessibility, and participation in public life.

We received 70 responses, each offering thoughtful, honest, and often deeply personal insight. We are incredibly grateful to everyone who took the time to share their experiences, concerns, and ideas. Your voices matter and they are shaping advocacy, policy discussions, and future accessibility efforts.

**What We Heard**

Across the responses, several themes emerged clearly and consistently. Participants identified ongoing barriers to accessibility in physical spaces, transportation systems, housing, digital platforms, and healthcare settings. Employment discrimination, particularly around accommodations, pay equity, job security, and fear of losing benefits was frequently cited as a major civil rights issue.

Many respondents described the emotional and systemic impact of ableism, including being dismissed, disbelieved, or treated as less capable or less human. People with invisible disabilities, mental health conditions, and neurodivergent identities shared experiences of misunderstanding, stigma, and lack of support, especially in workplaces and educational settings.

Participants also raised serious concerns about:

- Weak enforcement of disability rights laws
- Inaccessible and unaffordable healthcare
- Poverty caused by income and asset limits tied to essential services
- Limited transportation options, especially in rural communities
- Housing that claims to be "accessible" but is not usable in practice

Despite these challenges, respondents strongly emphasized the importance of inclusion, self-determination, and being directly involved in decisions that affect their lives.

**Looking Ahead**

This survey reinforces what the disability community has long said: accessibility is a civil right, and meaningful change requires enforcement, education, and representation. The input gathered through this survey will help guide advocacy efforts, inform policymakers, and strengthen the push for equitable systems that allow people with disabilities not just to survive but to fully live and participate in their communities.

Once again, thank you to everyone who participated. Your experiences and perspectives are essential, and they are helping move this work forward.

~ Jacob Knaflya, Co-Lead Independent Living Coordinator

## Breaking Barriers in the Homeownership Application Process

One of the individuals I recently worked with had a long-term goal of purchasing their own home. They qualified for the USDA Rural Housing Service Direct Home Loan Program, which provides loans to eligible low and very low-income applicants in rural communities. While the program is a great opportunity, the application process involves multiple forms and detailed instructions that can feel overwhelming, especially for someone with a learning disability.



This individual has dyslexia and shared that paperwork of this size feels stressful and discouraging. For support, we worked together to break the application packet into small, manageable sections rather than trying to complete everything at once. We met over two sessions to move through the required portions step by step, focusing only on what was needed at each stage.

Using USDA Rural Development guidance, we completed the required forms for the Direct Home Loan Program. By slowing the process down, explaining each section in plain language, and allowing her to verbalize information while I assisted with typing and organization, the application became far less intimidating for them.

Once the process was broken down into clear steps, they felt much more confident and less overwhelmed. Completing the packet over multiple sessions helped the work feel achievable rather than stressful, and by the end, they felt proud of what we had accomplished.

This experience was a great reminder that accessibility isn't about doing things for people; it's about breaking barriers so people can move forward toward their own goals with confidence.

~ Amber Pittman, Independent Living Coordinator



## Did You Know? You Can Get Free Help With Your Taxes

Tax season is here. If you need help filing your taxes, you may be able to get it done for free.

The Minnesota Department of Revenue works with trusted community partners to offer free tax preparation through Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) and AARP Tax-Aide. Trained volunteers can help you file your federal and Minnesota state tax returns at no cost.

**Who Can Get Free Help?**

You can usually get free help at a VITA site if:

- Your annual income is \$69,000 or less
- You are age 60 or older
- You have a disability
- You speak limited or no English

AARP Tax-Aide focuses on adults age 50 and older and prioritizes low to moderate income households. If you are unsure whether you qualify, you can contact a local site and ask.

**How Do I Find a Free Tax Site?**

Search by ZIP code or county here: <https://www.revenue.state.mn.us/free-tax-preparation-sites>

Appointments may be in person, drop off, or virtual depending on the location. What Should I Bring?

**Be sure to bring:**

- A photo ID
- Social Security cards or ITIN documentation for everyone on your return
- W-2s or other income forms
- Last year's tax return, if available
- Bank account information if you would like direct deposit

Filing your taxes may also help you receive important credits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and Minnesota tax credits that could increase your refund.

**If you need help finding a site or understanding your options, the team at Access North Center for Independent Living is here to support you.**

~ Kiri Basore, Co-Lead Independent Living Coordinator

## Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) Electronics Group

Over the past year, we were excited to hire a Peer Support Specialist who has been actively co-hosting our Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) Electronics Group. This weekly, hands-on group creates a supportive and welcoming space for participants. Our small group consists of seniors, persons with disabilities and caregivers but all are welcome to work toward their personal technology goals.



Participants have received help with everyday tech challenges such as device management, online banking questions, stock cash-outs, Facebook Marketplace, and one-on-one internet safety. The feedback has been positive, with many sharing how thankful they are for the general internet support and the opportunity to build confidence using their devices. Even if you are comfortable with your devices, maybe your unique perspective could assist others. If socialization is more your thing we often talk about community events, have a snack available and like to chat!

The BYOD group meets weekly on Tuesdays at the Access North Hibbing office on Tuesdays from 10am-12pm. Please consider joining us!

**Interest in Duluth:**

We currently have at least one interested participant in the Duluth area and would love to start a local group if there's enough interest. If you, or someone you know would like to participate, please reach out to Jake at 218-262-6675.

~ Jacob Knaflya, Co-Lead Independent Living Coordinator

## Try Assistive Technology on Your Terms!

Did you know we offer Assistive Technology (AT) items for long-term loan at our Duluth office? Whether you're on a limited income or simply want to try before you buy, our AT lending library is here to support independence, safety, and connection, for as long as you need it. Please note income qualifications may apply to long term loans.

**What's Available?**

Our current AT collection includes a variety of tools to support daily living, communication, home safety, and smart home access, such as:

- Smart displays & voice assistants (Amazon Echo devices, Google Nest Hub Max, Facebook Portals) to support communication, reminders, and hands-free access
- Tablets & audio supports including Fire tablets, wireless earbuds, noise-canceling headphones, and smart speakers
- Home safety & alerting technology, such as wireless alarm systems, smart plugs, smart light bulbs, and strobe alert receivers
- Connectivity tools like Wi-Fi routers and adapters
- Smart home and accessibility systems, including a whole-house wireless control system

These tools can help with staying connected to loved ones, managing your home environment, improving safety, and building confidence with technology.

**Interested?**

Anyone interested in loaning out or borrowing AT equipment is encouraged to contact any of our offices and ask to speak with an Independent Living Coordinator. We're happy to help you explore options that fit your needs and goals. Items are limited in quantity so make sure to reach out soon.

~ Jacob Knaflya, Co-Lead Independent Living Coordinator

## Featured Recipe: Berry Banana Smoothie

This is a great Winter pick-me up to help you get through to Spring! You can also add some protein powder if you are trying to get more protein in your diet!



- 1 banana
- 1 cup mixed berries (fresh or frozen)
- 1 cup milk or a dairy-free alternative
- 1 tablespoon honey or maple syrup (optional)
- 1/2 cup yogurt (optional for creaminess)

Peel the banana and place it in a blender. Add the mixed berries, milk, and yogurt. Blend until smooth. Taste and add honey or maple syrup if desired for sweetness.

*Pour into a glass and enjoy!*

