Tom Boman works on a project in the AT Lab.

The Assistive Technology (AT) Lab at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities is one of the best-kept secrets on campus.

April Larsen, director of advancement services at USU, was introduced to the AT Lab a few years ago when she was having trouble with her power wheelchair. While she had known about the AT Lab since her student days at USU, she didn’t realize how many services were available. A friend encouraged her to call.

“They had a lot of different parts available, the pricing was extremely reasonable for what I normally pay and I didn’t have to drive to Salt Lake City,” Larsen said. “How did I not know this was here?”

Since that first experience, Larsen has had problems several times with her chair, and each time has contacted AT Lab Coordinator Clay Christensen for help.

“Clay would call me back and say this is what we tried, this is what’s not working,” Larsen said. “Clay makes the AT Lab what it is. He’s so flexible and so good about working with clients.”

The AT Lab, part of the CPD’s Utah Assistive Technology Program (UATP) is located in the Janet Quinney Lawson building, in a cavernous, well-lit room reminiscent of a handyman’s workshop filled with power tools and spare parts. One recent morning, volunteer Tom Boman was working on a very special project for a boy who loved being outdoors, but had outgrown his stroller. Boman was adapting a jogging stroller, reinforcing the frame to accommodate the clients increased weight, and adding a bicycle wheel, with pedals attached, to the front. As mom pushes the stroller, Boman explained, the pedals will make the boy’s legs move. He will not actually be moving the stroller, but he will get some therapy out of it.

“We’ll try anything once,” Christensen said with a grin, inviting people to “stop by and see some of the weird stuff we’re doing.

Turning serious, he said, “Most assistive technology is really expensive. Families in need often don’t have a budget for it. They come here with a specific need in mind. It could be a specialized bike that costs $3,000. We take a regular bike and adapt it for $100 from the DI or Walmart.”

AT devices can literally be anything—whether purchased off the shelf or cobbled together with leftover parts or—that are used to increase the independence and increase the quality of life for people with disabilities. While wheelchairs and power scooters are most commonly recognized, screen readers, braille writers, picture cards and iPad apps are also assistive technology devices.

AT Lab projects are specific for each person’s needs, Christensen said. It could be as simple as an oversized switch attached to a doll to make it sing, so an infant with a disability can begin to learn cause-and-effect. But any project can be life-changing.

“It’s not uncommon to have a mother in here crying because she doesn’t know what to do,” Christensen said. He and the AT lab staff will work with the family to build or adapt a device to fit the need.

Larsen said recently her chair had a major problem and needed a lot of diagnostic work, and was eventually declared unfixable. Physical therapist Amy Hennigson worked with Larsen so a new chair could be ordered, but meanwhile, Larsen needed a chair to use, and a loaner was not an option.
Christensen took the seat portion of Larsen’s chair, which had been custom-fitted for her, and attached it to the mechanical portion of a donated unit.

“He made it work, over a two-day period, not two weeks or two months,” Larsen said.

Larsen appreciates the convenience of having the AT Lab right here in Cache Valley, and said the cost is very reasonable.

“They’re not trying to make money, but just cover their costs,” she said.

People who need financial help to purchase assistive technology have the option of applying for a low-interest loan through the Utah Assistive Technology Foundation (UATF), which partners with Zion’s Bank.

According to loan coordinator Lois Summers, people make their applications through UATF. The interest rate is prime on whatever day the application is being processed. The foundation pays half the interest on the loan, while the person receiving the loan pays the other half.

“There are no income restrictions,” she said. “You just have to be a resident of Utah and have a disability.”

The minimum loan amount is $500, up to a maximum of $50,000. Loans of under $10,000 usually have a three-year term; loans of more than $10,000 have up to five years.

“It’s a little out of our control,” Summers said. “The bank sets the parameters—the terms come from Zion’s Bank.”

People typically hear if they have been approved for a loan within a week to 10 days, she said.

“It depends on the completeness of the application and how busy the loan processor is.”

Anything that would be considered assistive technology would qualify for funding, Summers said, including home modifications, hearing aids, ramps, wheelchairs, scooters, iPads, etc.

“It’s a great program that’s been able to help a lot of people who couldn’t afford to shell out $10,000 for a Brailenote or a hearing aid,” Summers said.

Another option for people who need the use of a power chair or scooter is CReATE, or Citizens Re-utilizing Assistive Technology Equipment.

According to Alma Burgess, CReATE program coordinator, one of the federal mandates for UATP is to provide training on how to use and re-utilize assistive technology.

About four years ago, space became available at the Utah Center for Assistive Technology (UCAT) in Salt Lake City.

“UCAT approached us and said ‘let’s do something in refurbished equipment,’” Burgess said. “We though mobility was the way to go, and soon the space started filling up with donated wheelchairs and scooters.”

A certified technician assesses the donated equipment and refurbishes it, bringing it back up to manufacturer’s standards, Burgess said.

After the equipment has been refurbished, Burgess said, “We put a sticker on it and ask that they donate it back to CReATE when they’re done with it. It’s their device to keep and to do what they want with it.”

CReATE does not sell the refurbished equipment, but recipients are charged a service fee for the equipment, which covers the cost of new batteries and parts and the technician’s time for cleaning and adjustment.

While CReATE’s main location is in Salt Lake City, Burgess said, the program receives donations from all over the state, and delivers refurbished devices all over the state as well.

“As an initiative of UATP, we’re fulfilling that mandate to re-utilize assistive technology,” Burgess said.

For more information about Utah Assistive Technology Program, click here.

For more information about Utah Assistive Technology Foundation loans, click here or call 800-524-5152.

For more information about CReATE, click here.