

Read-aloud radio service to stream into St. Francis patients' rooms

By Kym Soper
Journal Inquirer

Lying in a hospital bed all day is never fun. It's even worse for avid readers whose condition prevents them from turning a page.

CRIS Radio, a nonprofit service for the blind, and St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center in Hartford hope to fix that with the launch of a new program that will stream live narrated broadcasts of newspapers and magazines — in both English and Spanish — to each of the hospital's 617 beds through two television channels.

For CRIS Radio executive director Diane Weaver Dunne, the project set to roll out Tuesday is a professional and personal milestone.

Her father in 2010 spent 13 months as a "frequent flyer" at St. Francis, being treated for the cancer that eventually took his life, she said.

Dunne said her father, although a prolific reader, was so ill at the time he couldn't lift a book. Nor was he one to watch TV, and the technology wasn't yet available to allow her own radio station to transmit its programs in his room.

Ever since it's been a goal to bring CRIS programming to area hospitals' beds, she added.

Originally created as a radio

station for the blind, CRIS can now be streamed online through cellphone apps, where shows can be played on-demand.

For nearly 40 years the Windsor-based nonprofit has been a "talking newsstand," using volunteer readers to read aloud the pages of newspapers and magazines for both adults and children.

CRIS began in 1978 with just a few hours of programming a day, providing everything from the world of news, features, and even shopping ads through a subscription service to sight- or physically impaired residents. It's grown into a 24-hour-a-day operation with more than 300 volunteers and five studios. It also has expanded its mission to help students who have learning disabilities or for whom English is a second language.

The organization has also branched out and produced special projects, such as a World War I series, where subscribers can listen to archived articles from newspapers — some now defunct — recounting tales of heroism and tragedy on the battlefield and at home.

Bringing CRIS' live broadcasts to bedridden hospital patients is a natural evolution, Dunne says.

"The emerging technology has been a great partner," she adds. "While there's text-to-



CRIS Radio

CRIS Radio volunteer and listener Diane Duhaime produces a live afternoon program with readers Sue Casey, left, and Ruth Boxman. With Duhaime is her guide dog, Iroc.

speech programs, people still like human narration better because of the emotion and proper syntax and because it's engaging."

Listeners and students find its human narrations much more compelling than a robotic voice, she adds.

St. Francis spokesman Joseph Connolly says the partnership with CRIS was "just another way to create a great experience for our patients."

"For us, it was very immediate and evident that it's a great

service they provide," Connolly said, adding that the hospital's parent corporation, Trinity Health New England, hopes to expand the program at its other facilities, like Johnson Memorial in Stafford or St. Mary's in Waterbury.

CRIS provides a similar service at Connecticut Children's Medical Center, where its broadcasts of narrated youth magazines began airing in 2013.

But St. Francis will be the first hospital in the state to broadcast readings from general

publications, such as the New York Times, the Hartford Courant, and the Journal Inquirer — and likely the first in the country to offer a Spanish component, Dunne said.

Funding is always an issue, as it can cost about \$10,000 to install the hardware and interface the radio station's streaming broadcasts with a hospital's equipment, she said.

Dunne says that CRIS hopes to expand the service to two or three more hospitals using the remainder of the latest round of grants from key sponsors: the John G. Martin Foundation and Maximilian E. & Marion O. Hoffman Foundation, as well as the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving which supports the radio station's Spanish-language programming, CRIS en Español.

Carl Schiessl, the Connecticut Hospital Association's director of regulatory advocacy, and Amy Porter, commissioner of the state Department of Rehabilitation Services, both applaud the CRIS-St. Francis partnership and hope to see it replicated throughout the state.

"This unique direct streaming service allows patients with print disabilities to keep up with current information from both English and Spanish publications while receiving medical care away from home," Porter says.

House speaker estimates that increasing sales tax would yield \$460 million a year

■ TAX

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

largely fixed by contract, the largest single pot of money that could be cut — more than \$3 billion in operating grants to cities and towns — is arguably the most politically sensitive.

All outstanding budget proposals include cuts both to previously approved increases in town grants and to existing aid programs.

Malloy also wants towns to cover nearly one-third of the state's annual contribution to the teachers' pension fund in each of the next two fiscal years, \$400 million annually.

Aresimowicz said boosting the 6.35 percent sales tax rate to 6.99 percent would yield about \$460 million in annual revenue.

This could be used to avoid the teacher pension bills the governor suggests, or to mitigate other proposed cuts to town grants.

Ritter said if any sales-tax increase is planned to bolster cities and towns, House Democrats believe those communities effectively should have to endorse the tax increase to get the funds.

"You've got to bring your votes," he said. "If you don't authorize it locally, if you don't ratify it — whatever that word is — you get nothing. If we're all going to share, we're all going to share."

Democrats hold a slim 79-72 edge in the House, while the Senate is split 18-18.

House Democratic leaders have said on several occasions

that their members fear Republicans won't vote for any budget, given the difficult choices needed to close the projected deficits.

But the legislature, and not local governments, has sole authority to order a sales tax hike. So local boards effectively would be voting simply to accept a check from the state.

If Republican legislators won't vote for tax increases, would Democrats gain any political cover in the 2018 state elections if town councils and boards of finance have to vote to accept the revenues from a state sales tax hike?

"The reason you see almost a tie in this chamber and a tie in the Senate is because people are paying very close attention to

who is doing what, who's affecting their lives in such a detrimental way," House Minority Leader Themis Klarides, R-Derby, said.

"This state is just too taxed," she said. "We spend too much money. We borrow too much money, and there is no structural change."

House Democratic leaders were meeting Friday with their Senate counterparts Friday to discuss budget proposals. A meeting of top lawmakers from both parties is scheduled for Monday morning, to be followed by a second meeting between that group and the governor.

Aresimowicz said he expects House members will be at the Capitol next Thursday, the day before the

current fiscal year ends.

If a new budget is ready for consideration, it could be adopted then. Legislators also could consider a temporary budget plan if they want to employ that option rather than ask the governor to run the state's finances by executive order, the speaker said.

Aresimowicz also conceded Thursday that proposals to authorize tolls are unlikely to make it into any final budget adopted for the next two fiscal years.

"That process is going to be a little slowed down," he said. "Clearly we are going to have to come back next year ... to get the tolls moving."

KPhaneuf@CTMirror.org.
©2017, The Connecticut Mirror.