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**Connecting People,  
Practices, and Policies:  
Evaluation of the  
Outreach and Technical  
Assistance Network  
(OTAN)**

**Executive Summary**

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*Prepared for*  
Sacramento County  
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## **Executive Summary**

### **Overview of OTAN**

With its investment in the Outreach and Technical Assistance Network (OTAN) beginning in 1989, the California Department of Education (CDE) was the first state to spend substantial funds in building a technological infrastructure for the field of adult education. The developers of OTAN envisioned an online system that would:

- Foster communication among state officials, researchers, and local administrators, instructors, and staff in adult education;
- Facilitate access to library and other information about adult education policies and practices;
- Provide technical assistance in introducing the use of technology to adult educators; and
- Serve as a platform for future applications of technology in adult education.

Originally supported with monies under the Adult Education Act and most recently with funds under Title II of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, OTAN initially was administered by the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District and in 1994 became a project of the Sacramento County Office of Education. For the past decade, OTAN has functioned as an online communication network delivering services in three key areas: electronic communications, information and referral services, and instructional technology. As the state of technology has advanced, OTAN has extended its system to incorporate new tools and information that have enabled the system to move beyond its original intent.

### **Abt Associates' Evaluation**

As OTAN began its third contract period in 1997, the CDE and OTAN's director recognized the need to examine the quality of online services that were being offered through OTAN and their effect on adult education practitioners, policymakers, and programs. In order to document the history and development of OTAN as well as answer the critical questions about its implementation and use, the Sacramento County Office of Education contracted with Abt Associates in Bethesda, MD to conduct an evaluation that would examine:

- The quantity and perceived quality of the services and materials that OTAN has produced;
- The ways in which staff in local adult education agencies have utilized OTAN;
- The effects of OTAN's services on adult education program operations, staff, and policy development; and

- The ways in which OTAN's experience can inform further development of online services and products.

Abt Associates' research team chose a multi-method approach for the evaluation that included: the review of existing information about OTAN's historic development and use of services, and the collection of new data about the perceived quality and use of OTAN's services. This gathering of data involved the conduct of three surveys, telephone interviews, and face-to-face interviews, as well as the review of OTAN's online services, reports, and other documents related to its history and implementation. The data collection period for the evaluation was from May 1997 through June 1999.

## OTAN's Development

**Phases of Development.** OTAN's development has been a phased process that began in 1989. Since its inception, OTAN's activities have helped to transform the state-of-practice in adult education in the state of California from limited or no access to computers for communication and information retrieval to high access. This transformation has occurred in three phases:

***Building the Foundation: December 1989-January 1994.*** During this period, OTAN's staff established an electronic network, provided staff development to local adult education agencies to access and use the network, identified and developed information resources for retrieval from the network, and conducted outreach to promote the use of OTAN among adult educators;

***Building a Communication and Information System: February 1994-March 1997.*** As the number of subscribers and the ways in which they used OTAN increased, OTAN's staff focused on improving the quality of the technical system and the information stored on the system. A number of technical upgrades that staff made during this period resulted in a more powerful and easier-to-use online communication and information system. Some of these upgrades expanded the types of communication that subscribers could undertake, such as the installation of the software to host online Email discussions as well as software to provide online multimedia content. In addition to the provision of ongoing training and technical assistance, OTAN's staff conducted targeted staff development to expand the capacity of key system users, such as adult education agency administrators and Regional Resource Center managers. The expansion of the library of online materials continued, as did the establishment of linkages with other online systems. To enable local agencies to be more systematic in their use of technology, OTAN offered technology planning and implementation workshops to adult education providers.

***Enhancing the OTAN System: April 1997-June 1999.*** During this period, OTAN's staff made a number of changes in the system to respond to state policy shifts as well as subscribers' needs. OTAN continued to improve the communication and information system, provided additional training and technical assistance, further enhanced the information and reference services, and offered outreach and assistance to support technology planning. Shifts in state policy prompted OTAN to adjust the electronic communication system in three ways:

- To provide free email accounts to agencies receiving state adult education monies;
- To transition out of the business of providing both Internet access and Email, because of the increased number of OTAN subscribers who no longer relied on OTAN for those things; and
- To refine OTAN's Web site to include all components of service.

Other new developments during this period included the piloting of online staff development in conjunction with the state's staff development provider, the development of multimedia programs, and the expansion of partnership with entities such as CNN to provide online adult learner instruction. In January 1999, OTAN's released the redesigned Web site. In addition to the no-cost registration feature, it has an online User Guide to assist inexperienced visitors, a Java-based pull-down menu system, a new home page, a redesigned Round Table area, and an expanded area called "OTAN For Teachers."

**Summary.** Since its inception, OTAN's staff have used state-of-the-art technology to create an electronic communications and information infrastructure for serving adult educators. OTAN's development has been both methodical and iterative, initially building a foundation for the infrastructure, then expanding the types of services and products available in its system, and most recently expanding the capacity and linkages of the system. What began as a special project to serve adult educators in California developed into a national resource for linking people and information electronically.

Four features have characterized OTAN's evolution:

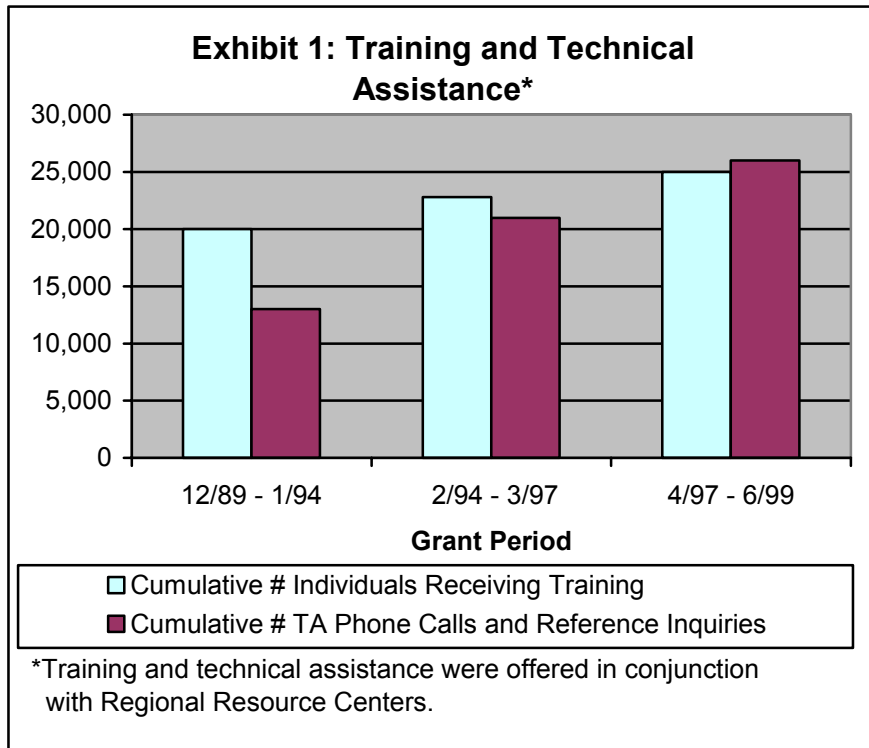
- Use of state-of-the-art technology to create and refine the communication system and provide services, including ongoing updates to the hardware and software that have allowed for expansion and efficiency;
- Provision of technical assistance and training using a variety of modalities to support all levels of adult education program staff, state policymakers, and others in accessing and using OTAN;
- Development of different communication vehicles for fostering information sharing, building collegial relationships, and improving adult education practices; and
- Creation of an information base that includes the development of new materials, gathering of existing information, and the linking with other databases to provide resources for adult education program management, instruction, training, and policy development.

In undertaking these activities, OTAN's staff have worked to provide quality services in a timely manner that have enabled adult educators to access OTAN and have increased the capacity of these individuals to use computers. The data that Abt Associates' research team collected indicated strong customer satisfaction with the assistance that OTAN has provided, as well as

with OTAN's gradual expansion of materials and assistance to support the system. This satisfaction may be attributed both to the methodical approach that OTAN's staff used in developing the system, as well as to the staff's attention to the need for ongoing system refinement, materials creation, and customer support. This approach has resulted in a system with a wealth of resources that can be used in a myriad of ways to improve adult education services.

### Technical Assistance and Training

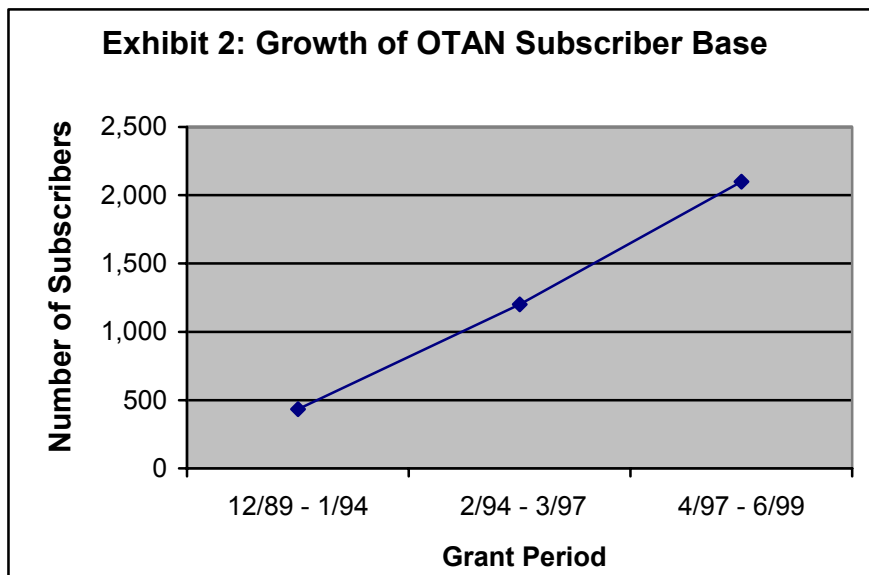
A critical element in the development of OTAN has been the training and technical assistance that staff offered to support the dissemination of the system and encourage its use. The assistance that OTAN provided not only enabled local adult education program staff to become familiar with the online system and its capabilities, but also played a critical role in building the capacity of these staff to use computers. OTAN's staff leveraged their training and technical assistance expertise by working with the Regional Resource Centers to deliver assistance to the adult education programs in their regions. OTAN's staff also collaborated with these programs in hosting training sessions that OTAN delivered. As a result of this systematic approach to capacity building, the staff from OTAN and the Regional Resource Centers delivered training to approximately 20,000 individuals over the three OTAN grant periods, as is shown in Exhibit 1. As more adult educators became familiar with OTAN, the staff continued to provide technical assistance so that by the third contract period, OTAN's staff had responded to more than 25,000 calls and reference inquiries since the beginning of OTAN.



Through its technical assistance activities, OTAN's staff also have facilitated the work of special projects supported by the California Department of Education's Education Support System Division. These special projects have linked members of service provider groups, such as the library system, and have facilitated the work of curricular development projects. Thus OTAN has helped individuals as well as groups of individuals involved in development and assistance projects.

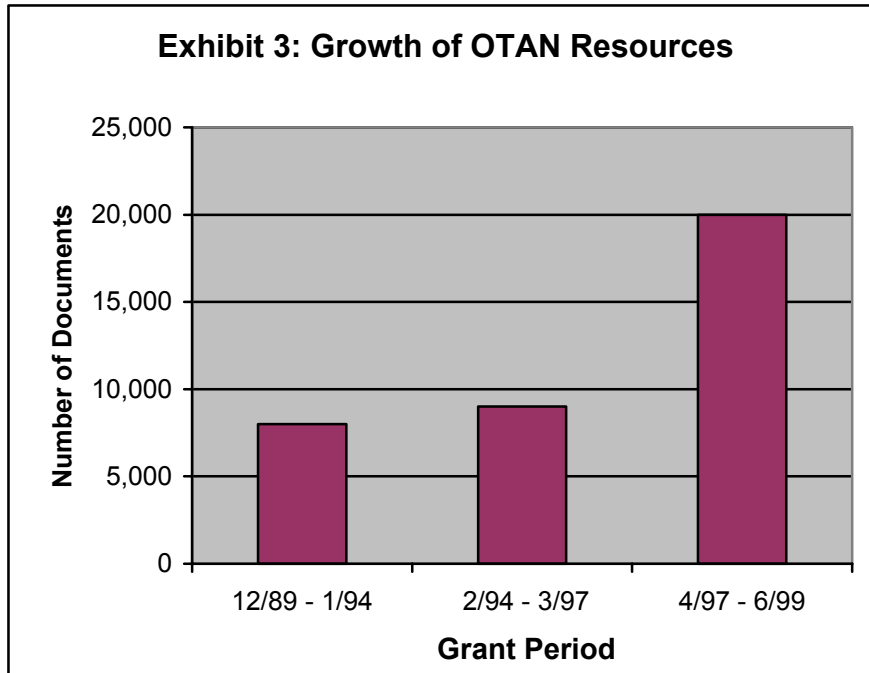
## The Utilization of OTAN

As a result of OTAN's training and technical assistance activities, its subscriber base grew substantially over the three grant periods. As shown in Exhibit 2, OTAN had over 2,000 subscribers by 1999. A variety of factors influenced this growth, including the California Department of Education's requirement that each grantee receiving state Section 321 funding obtain an OTAN account, as well as the numerous dissemination activities that OTAN's staff conducted. In this evaluation, the OTAN subscribers whom we surveyed and interviewed expressed high satisfaction with the training and technical assistance they received as well as with the resources they were able to access. The key barriers to use were the quality of the local technology and subscribers' time to use the system.



OTAN's primary goal was to establish a communication system that would link all stakeholders in the state's adult education system. Our evaluation data substantiate OTAN's achievement of this goal, particularly with regard to subscribers' exchange of information concerning administrative and compliance issues. The California Department of Education has facilitated this exchange by increasingly using OTAN to communicate with its grantees and to process materials, such as the approval of courses and the applications for state funding. OTAN has become the platform for information on key issues affecting the operation of state-funded adult education agencies.

As OTAN expanded its services, its role in promoting program improvement developed. In addition to posting course outlines and lesson plans created by California adult educators as well as research and library documents, OTAN became the gateway to instructional information available on the Internet. With the redesign of OTAN's Web site in 1999, general resources as well as those targeted to teachers were better organized and more accessible to subscribers. By 1999, OTAN's collection contained approximately 20,000 resource documents, as is illustrated in Exhibit 3. To promote subscribers' use of these resources, OTAN's staff have highlighted on the Web site key resources and activities both within state and nationally that can assist program staff in developing and delivering quality instruction.



While OTAN has great potential as a vehicle to support program improvement, this potential is still developing. In our interviews with program administrators, we found that many were involved in improvement activities and had accessed OTAN's resources to assist them. These activities included revising curriculum, implementing assessments, investigating new instructional strategies, and making changes to program policies and procedures. The administrators revised curriculum by accessing OTAN's resources such as Course Outlines, Lesson Plans, or the Round Table. Rather than creating new products, the information available through OTAN enabled administrators to build upon the work of others in developing their materials. They also accessed the Exchange or the Round Table areas to pose specific questions to other subscribers about their incorporation of different instructional materials and methods.

OTAN's capacity as a communication vehicle also facilitated administrators' program improvement activities. A common issue of interest was how technology can be used to facilitate student learning. OTAN's Exchange and Round Table areas were resources that administrators accessed to communicate with their colleagues about strategies for implementing technological tools. The Adult Ed and Technology Vendor Databases also provided helpful information about products and services related to the use of technology.

Staff development is a critical component of program improvement, and OTAN's announcements of workshops, conferences, and teleconferences provided timely information to administrators and their staff about opportunities to learn new practices. OTAN's materials also served as a source of information that staff could use in creating training events on topics such as strategies for using the Internet and developing lesson plans.

Another activity related to improvement in which OTAN aided administrators was program management. As adult education programs sought to expand their service capacity and incorporate the use of technology, staff needed access to the latest information about funding sources, legislative initiatives, and technology product development. Through OTAN, administrators were able to keep abreast of pending and new legislation, as well as a variety of public and private funding sources. OTAN was a virtual one-stop resource that was efficient to use and easy to access.

While administrators accessed OTAN in undertaking various improvement activities, teachers' use of OTAN for improvement purposes was less prominent. Many teachers are self-motivated and have incorporated OTAN's resources as a matter of practice, while others may need external direction to prompt their use. A strategy used by some state adult education programs to promote teachers' improvement activities has been to sponsor a statewide improvement initiative in which the transformation of teachers' practices has been the focal point. OTAN could play a vital role in such an initiative, both in providing information about new practices and in enabling teachers to share their experiences with each other.

As a communication and information platform, OTAN has provided both resources and mechanisms for exchange among adult educators. The staff also have linked California's adult educators to resources nationally to encourage the implementation of the best possible adult education services in the state. While OTAN can play a critical role in facilitating quality practice among adult educators, staff from the State Department of Education and local adult schools also need to be instrumental in fostering program improvement and OTAN's use in this process.

## **Future Directions**

The California Department of Education broke new ground in funding OTAN, and it has been a unique service in the field of adult education. OTAN also served as a model for the National Institute of Literacy's development of LINC'S--the Literacy Information aNd Communication System. At this stage of adult education policy and practice in California and nationally, OTAN has potential in serving two key roles: as a platform to furthering the use of technology and as a gateway to adult education resources worldwide.

**Platform for Furthering the Use of Technology.** OTAN has functioned as an information dissemination and communication base in addressing the needs of the California Department of Education and state-funded adult education programs. As these needs expand and as new developments in technology come online, OTAN has a key role in the following:

- Expanding its services in facilitating the California Department of Education's accountability and grants administration activities. As state-funded adult education programs submit their accountability data online, OTAN could promote the local use of these data for program management and improvement. By expanding its online training activities, OTAN could provide simulation exercises in using data that local program staff could access. OTAN also could stimulate subscribers' exchange of information concerning the ways in which student data and other program information could be analyzed and used for program purposes. As the California Department of Education revises and enhances its grants management processes, OTAN has a key role in disseminating this information and serving as a mechanism for data collection; and
- Disseminating new technology products funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED). OTAN has been a collaborating partner in the development of the U.S. Department of Education-supported Cyberstep project. This project is one of three cutting-edge developments in online instruction, staff development, and assessment that ED has funded and which will be ready for national dissemination this year. As these products become available, there is a need to orient the field of adult education to the ways in which these products could be incorporated into ongoing program services. OTAN is well suited to serve as a platform for orienting adult education practitioners to the use of these products, as well as to linking practitioners to other resources that could support their implementation.

**Gateway to Adult Education Resources.** OTAN has a unique role to play in directing subscribers to the myriad of resources that can be accessed through its system. One critical use of these resources is in facilitating the delivery of quality adult education services. Two recommendations for OTAN's role in program improvement are:

- Revise the format for the submission of lesson plans to include sections regarding the teacher's theory or guiding principles and related instructional materials. The inclusion of information about the theory or principles will help others to understand the developer's instructional perspective in creating the lesson and how it might be applied. Information about related materials will guide others in selecting appropriate resources and applications that match the intent of the lesson; and
- Use a problem-based method to stimulate adult education practitioners' improvement of practice. Abt Associates' work with the statewide program improvement initiative in Pennsylvania--Project EQuAL--demonstrated that adult education teachers and program administrators are motivated to address the operational problems that impede their delivery of quality program services. Using the problem identification process as a stimulant, staff are able to analyze information and use resources to try new practices. OTAN could adapt the problem-based technique by posting common problems that adult education practitioners face in managing and teaching as a way of engaging practitioners in program improvement. OTAN subscribers could be directed to the appropriate online resources and documents that relate to the problems that are posted. While many documents are not written to provide direct solutions to program issues, the information in the documents could stimulate ideas and new directions. Through OTAN's Exchange

and Chats functions, subscribers could share their solutions and suggest new practices. This process could serve as a starting point for adult education programs to use in addressing their operational issues.

These recommendations are illustrative of the potential that OTAN has for enhancing its activities in facilitating communication and program improvement. OTAN has a critical function in disseminating information from the California Department of Education and in facilitating the state's grants management process. Its role in obtaining documents and library resources also is expanding from a retrieval and storage function to a linking function. As a platform for technology, OTAN can direct subscribers to effective use and application of existing and new technological tools. As a gateway to information, it can guide subscribers in making informed choices regarding the variety of resources that are available to adult educators worldwide.