

The Corry Journal

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Local children to receive communication devices

January 24, 2020

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Two Corry children are scheduled to receive adaptive communication devices free of charge on Monday at a Variety-the Children's Charity press conference to be held at 10 a.m. at Saint Vincent Hospital, 232 W. 25 St., Erie.

According to Variety CEO Charles LaVallee, a device will be provided to Tiziano Coyle, age 3, of Corry, who is participating in early intervention programs through the Pennsylvania Department of Education's regional education service agency called Intermediate Unit 5.

LaVallee confirmed that another child from Corry is receiving a device, but the child's name and information was not released.

LaVallee explained that Coyle and a group of other children from surrounding areas will receive the devices as part of Variety's MyVoice program, which is dedicated to helping provide children who face various communication disorders with a means of expressing their needs and wants to those around them.

Variety-the Children's Charity is a nonprofit organization based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, that, according to its website, is dedicated to providing resources and equipment for children with disabilities.

LaVallee said the majority of kids provided with devices through the MyVoice program are facing disorders such as verbal apraxia, Down Syndrome and various forms of autism, among others.

According to LaVallee, one out of every two children to whom they provide devices has parents who are reported as having no disposable income, and one out of four of these families lives in poverty.

For this reason, he said effective Monday, there will be higher income guidelines allowing families at 500 percent poverty level to qualify for assistance.

This means a family of four can be making up to \$131,000 in a year and their child can be eligible to receive a device, LaVallee said.

"I also wanted us to get the middle income families," LaVallee said. He said the program is available for children ages 3 to 21.

According to LaVallee, many people do not understand the daily challenges these children and their families face.

"We have a big gap in what the typical person knows," he said.

Lawrence Coyle, Tiziano's father, echoed this sentiment.

"My son is nonverbal and gets very easily frustrated trying to communicate what he wants," Coyle said. "98 percent of his tantrums are due to his lack of communication. No one really knows unless they see it and experience it – live it every day. If he can't use his own voice, at least he will have a way [to communicate]."

LaVallee went on to explain that some of the families they serve have children who not only struggle to express frustration or affection, but cannot even tell their parents what they want to eat.

Instead, they grab their mother or father by the hand, lead them into the kitchen and point at what they want for a snack, LaVallee said.

He also mentioned difficulties in toilet training. Some of these children, he said, are unable to express to their parents that they have to go to the bathroom until they've already had an accident.

"I think that's where we are, we're back to the basics of communication," LaVallee said. "Communication is at the heart of life, we have to be able to communicate."

The communication devices, LaVallee said, are tablets purchased by the organization using grant money. With the help of speech pathologists, unique communication apps are designed for the child's particular disorder and downloaded onto the device.

Everything else on the tablet is disabled so that it is a device meant exclusively for communication. The child is then taught how to input words, phrases and even pictures to help express a thought or a need.

LaVallee commented that these devices make a big difference for children facing these difficulties.

"People who have encountered the kids who are making progress, that motivates people to want to do something," he said.

One of LaVallee's biggest hopes, besides more people becoming aware of this need, is that the devices will help improve the quality of the children's lives.

"There's no telling where this is going to take them, or how fulfilling their lives and their families' lives can be," he said.

LaVallee also said the children are recommended to the program by partnering speech language pathologists, who fill out an application with information about the child's disorder, challenges he or she has faced, and their professional opinion on why the child would benefit from such a device.

Besides LaVallee, other officials scheduled to participate in Monday's event include City of Erie Mayor Joseph Sember and Saint Vincent Hospital CEO Dr. Christopher Clark.

Variety currently has funding to provide up to 1,000 devices for children, LaVallee explained. He said Variety is working to identify children in northwestern Pennsylvania with this need.

The equipment to be distributed to the group of children on Monday is worth a total of \$41,100, according to a recent press release announcing the event, which will include a demonstration of how the devices work.