

# HARTFORD BUSINESS JOURNAL

## **CRIS Radio Looks To New Technologies To Deliver News Broadcasts To Blind, Disabled**

### **Nonprofit radio-reading service provides community connection**

By Diane Weaver Dunne

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Carol Gillispie, who has been blind since she was 15 months old due to a rare form of eye cancer, says the news and information that she hears on CRIS Radio offers her far more than the five-minute blurbs that are broadcast on TV news programs and commercial radio stations.

CRIS Radio (Connecticut Radio Information System) is the only radio-reading service in Connecticut for people who are blind, learning disabled or physically handicapped. The 30-year-old nonprofit broadcasts news and information featured in local, state and national newspapers and magazines 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The organization is expanding its reach by adding programming for Spanish-speakers and children, on-demand programming on its Web site — [www.crisradio.org](http://www.crisradio.org) — and distributing Internet radios to nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and individuals who live in areas where they are unable to receive CRIS Radio through a specially tuned radio or their cable TV secondary audio channel.

Also under development is a CRIS smartphone application for on-the-go listeners who want to access to programs through their cell phones.

Regardless of the method of transmission, CRIS programs offer its listeners a lifeline to their community.

Gillispie maintains it provides her with a connection to her community that she would otherwise not have.

“If I hadn’t listened to the obituaries read today on CRIS Radio, I would not have known about the deaths of two people I knew, or about their funeral arrangements,” she explained in a recent interview, adding that without CRIS, she likely would have missed the funeral services.

To Gillispie, CRIS Radio is not your ordinary radio station. It streamlines access to news and information that is important to daily living, something individuals without disabilities take for granted when they browse newspapers and store circulars.

It’s a point well-taken by Gov. M. Jodi Rell, who praised the organization at its ribbon cutting in May for including information featured in store advertisements. Rell said that knowing whether “pork chops are on sale this week” is something most of us don’t give a second thought to, but helpful to know when making up a grocery list.

Gillispie agrees, who listens to CRIS Radio’s “Market Time” before making her own grocery shopping. Knowing what is on sale makes a difference to her budget, she said.

In-depth information also makes a difference, she added.

“I used to hate sports,” Gillispie said. “But on CRIS Radio, they read the entire articles. They give you a total picture. Not just the scores of who won and lost. I want to hear what the players do.”

## **Reduces Isolation**

For some listeners, the value of CRIS Radio is more than the information it broadcasts; it helps reduce feelings of isolation.

Rosie Morlene, who lost her sight while attending college as a young adult, wanted independence. “I had lost my vision and I didn’t want to stay home with my parents,” she recalls. “I toughed it out in an apartment — by myself — in New Britain. I needed something that would tell me what’s going on out there.”

The answer was CRIS Radio, introduced to Morlene by the state Board of Education and Services for the Blind in 1979, the year it began to broadcast.

“I said, ‘This is great! CRIS was whoa! I’m going to stick with this.’ It was amazing how much CRIS Radio cheered me up,” she recalls. “It was the answer for me.”

Today, Morlene is a CRIS volunteer producer, operating the control board each week for a one-hour live afternoon broadcast in which two volunteers read news featured in two regional newspapers, the Journal Inquirer and the New Britain Herald.

In addition to producing the live news show, Morlene also reads the weather forecast prepared for her in Braille during the broadcast.

“I do it [volunteering] to help others and it is rewarding for me. I love it. I know how it feels when you lose your vision. You look for things to help you.”

Another CRIS volunteer, Diane Duhaime, convinced Morlene to sign up for training at CRIS Radio to become an on-air producer, the same role Duhaime serves.

Duhaime, who was born legally blind and lost her remaining vision at age 30, said complete vision loss for her was like mourning a death in the family. She said that volunteering and learning new skills helped her emotionally recover.

Today, she works out of her home for a commercial radio station, WCCC, operates the control board to produce a live news broadcast and regularly volunteers at the Connecticut State Library for the Blind.

“I enjoy being a part of something,” Duhaime said. “I feel [volunteering at CRIS] has helped me in a lot ways. It helped me with my shyness, not be so sensitive. It gave me confidence.”

### **Corporate, Business Underwriters**

As a number of radio-reading services throughout the nation are shuttering their operations due to a lack of funding, CRIS Radio is embarking on expansion and reaching out to corporations and other businesses for support with a new underwriting program. Corporate and business donors receive on-air underwriting credits in recognition of their support, increased community exposure, heightened communication with CRIS listeners and its nearly 400 volunteers, as well as an opportunity to make a difference by leveling the field for people unable to read or turn pages of printed material.

CRIS programs can be heard on specially tuned radios given free to eligible listeners, on most cable TVs, by telephone, or online at CRIS Radio's Web site, [www.crisradio.org](http://www.crisradio.org), where applications can be downloaded for a free CRIS Radio.

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