

Montana Accessible Communications
Minutes: Full Committee Meeting
February 19, 2026
Disability Determination Services Conference Room
2550 Prospect Ave, Helena, Montana

Committee Members Present: Lisa Cannon, chair; Dana Kjersem (via Zoom), Tina Shorten, Ashlee Logan, Cam Tulloch, Christy Eichenlaub, Lloyd Sparks, Michelle Owens, Gladys Newbury (via Zoom)

MTAC Staff Present: Mary Taylor, Lisa Gault, Jeff Haley, Mike Bouchard, Brittany Boyd, Dawn Hartwell

Supporting and Contributing Persons Present: Emilie Banasiak and Allison LaBrie, Hamilton Relay (via Zoom); Hannah Stokes, budget analyst (via Zoom); Bonnie Kurien and Jamee Feuling, sign language interpreters; Lisa Lesofski, transcriptionist; Shawn Tulloch, deaf services manager (via Zoom), Sarah Seltzer (via Zoom), Melissa McMahan, Hamilton Relay (via Zoom)

Absent committee members: Ron Bibler, Barbara Varnum

Meeting called to order:

Lisa Cannon, chair, called the meeting to order.

Approval of Minutes:

Tina Shorten moved to approve the minutes with the amendment of removing Lisa Cannon, chair from the committee members present. Cam Tulloch seconded. Motion carried.

Public Comment: none

MTAC Director's report: Mary Taylor

Mary Taylor mentioned that the previous July there were five seats that were up for renewal and several committee members chose not to renew, except for Ron Bibler, who chose to remain on the committee. The position for a person without disabilities engaged in business other than telecommunications has been filled by Gladys Newbury. The position for a person from the Department of Administration has been filled by Lloyd Sparks. A member of an interexchange carrier and a member who is a person with disabilities remain vacant. These positions will continue to be advertised on the MTAC Facebook page. Ms. Taylor welcomed Gladys Newbury and Lloyd Sparks, who are newly appointed.

For FY2025, a total of 164 new applications has been received with an average of 14 applications a month. For FY2026, (from July 1, 2026, to January 31st 2026) 77 new applications have been received, which is an average of 11 applications a month. Tina Shorten inquired about the non-eligible applications, and Ms. Taylor explained that the staff encourages people to apply even if they may not be eligible, as the staff can still provide a service to these clients, such as guiding them to the phone they can purchase, and helping with installations.

During the winter and holidays – outreach tends to slow down but the staff has done some events such as the broadband conference, health and wellness fairs, a veterans’ event, and visiting senior centers. Advertising has been done with the Cinemark theater, newspaper and television campaigns during the Brawl of the Wild and Super Bowl games and with the Lee Enterprises newspapers statewide. Advertising has also been done in the supermarkets on the screens by the checkout stand, as well as at the Bighorn ice hockey games in Helena.

There will be upcoming events such as Ms. Taylor doing training with the Adult Protective Services, another Relay Friendly Business training, and she will try for some digital billboard advertising.

Facebook advertising went down a little bit, and someone had questioned at the previous committee meeting about how many followers there were on the MTAC Facebook page; there are 2,656 followers, 40 percent of those followers are 65 and older, and 69 percent are women. The top-performing post that was not boosted by advertising dollars was the announcement of the hiring of Brittany Boyd as outreach specialist. The top-paid advertisement was regarding the vacant seats on the committee.

The MTAC website has had less traffic this quarter, 23 percent decrease since the previous quarter. Ms. Taylor plans to use a QR code at future outreach events to encourage people to scan and be led to the website. She hopes this will help with increasing awareness and traffic to the website. She is enthusiastic about the two new hires, Dawn Hartwell and Brittany Boyd, and will work with them on expanding outreach.

Ms. Taylor is working on contracts with Teltex, Baker Tilly, and Hamilton Relay. The Teltex contract goes through May 2026, and when this contract expires, there will be an invitation for bid for a new contract. For the database management contract (Baker Tilly), this contract was expected to be completed but there have been delays due to changes in procurement rules requiring a different contract form including information technology terms and conditions. Baker Tilly has had questions about the contract verbiage so there has been back and forth between procurement, the legal department, and the contractor. Ms. Taylor was told that there might be a possibility to do a service-level agreement when the contract expires in September rather than doing a bid invitation. For the Hamilton Relay contract, the contract expires at the end of February 2026, and initially she started out trying to do a sole source contract then the procurement staff said she could do a service-level agreement instead, and the contract template was given to Hamilton Relay and several changes were made. This is considered an IT contract even though it doesn’t really fit the definition of an IT contract due to Hamilton being a relay provider, which has complicated the process due to all the added IT terms and conditions.

The Federal Poverty Levels for 2025 will be adopted and updated on the website and on January 15, 2026, the 2026 Federal Poverty Levels were published so once the rules for 2025 are adopted, she will start working on updating for the 2026 levels. Ms. Taylor will continue to work on the proposed changes for the Administrative Rules, and the decision brief was sent out and approved sometime between July and December of 2025.

Ms. Taylor has been working on the three-month pilot program using ASL Now in conjunction with Communications Services for the Deaf (CSD) and asking state agencies if they are interested in participating in this service. She hopes to – in the future – offer this service to the businesses that participate in the Relay Friendly business training, but she needs to ensure that this is permitted by the State of Montana government.

Ms. Taylor has completed the FCC report that reports the minutes that were used for the calendar year which runs from January 2025 to December 2025 and has submitted it to Hamilton to review and ensure that the numbers are correct. She encouraged the committee to look at the FCC report in the packet that was sent out to

them regarding proposed rules that the FCC has created such as broadband availability, real-time texting and 911 access via video call or real-time texting.

Budget Report: Hannah Stokes

Hannah Stokes reported on the state fiscal year 2026 budget totals for MTAC as of January 31, 2026.

Personal services	\$511,821
Operations	\$883,403
FCC Mandate	<u>\$775,000</u>
Total budget	<u><u>\$2,170,224</u></u>

Actual expenses through January 31, 2026

MTAC program expenditures

HB2 budget appropriation (37% of the \$1,395,224)	\$525,707
Indirect costs (non-budgeted appropriation)	\$50,481
Prior year expense	(\$3,941)
Total expenses for program	<u><u>\$572,247</u></u>

House Bill 2 expenditures through January 31, 2026

Personal services (36% of \$511,821 PS projected budget)	\$182,014
Operational expenses (39% of \$883,403 OP projected budget)	<u>\$343,693</u>
Total expenses (38% of \$1,395,224 total HB2 budget)	\$525,707

Revenue collected as of January 31, 2026 - \$1,232,308

SFY 2026 actual expenses through January 31, 2026

Operating Expenses through January 31, 2026 - SFY 2026 - \$525,707

- Hamilton Relay Services – total expenditures \$86,221
- Outreach – total expenditures \$136,844
- Rent/Utilities – total expenditures \$27,745
- Travel – total expenditures \$6,034
- Supplies – total expenditures \$551
- Distribution Equipment – total expenditures \$41,032
- Other Expenses/Equipment – total expenditures \$4,590
- Communications – total expenditures \$2,758
- Repairs/maintenance (vehicles) – total expenditures \$7,904
- Other services – total expenditures \$30,014

Indirect Costs and Prior Year Expenses

- Actual costs for SFY 2026 indirect costs are \$50,481
- FCC mandate – no expenses projected at this time.

DPHHS report – Sarah Seltzer

There have been updates within the department such as the position of Blind and Low Vision bureau chief which was vacated due to Darrel Hanum accepting a new position in North Dakota and implementation of 6% vacancy savings was done and the position was vacant for six weeks before the job was advertised. Connor Frakes has been hired to fill this position, and he is currently the Helena Vocational Rehabilitation supervisor. He will begin the new job next week.

An update relating to the Voc-Rehab program is the Order of Selection which means that eligible individuals who are assigned to either category 2 or 3 level will be put on a waiting list. The VR program is expecting a closure of category 1 soon as well. This is due to resource limitations in funding or staff to serve these clients. The VR program will be working with federal partners to implement an Order of Selection waiting list for category 1, and that will likely happen within the next month or two.

A couple initiatives that are occurring department wide are the Rural Health Transformation Program which has been awarded funding via the DPHHS and 406 JOBS. The Rural Health Transformation Program is a program where focus will be on delivering high quality, sustainable, affordable health care in Montana and this program was begun in December 2025. The 406 JOBS initiative is a collaboration with different departments across the state, such as the Department of Labor, Department of Commerce, the Office of Public Instruction, and the Commissioner of Higher Education office. 406 JOBS is focused on modernizing the workforce in Montana and the office of Disability and Employment Transitions (DET) will be working on this initiative along with the Voc-Rehab programs. The VR programs will focus on increasing the amount of people participating in apprenticeships and on-the-job training and there are four different career fields that this initiative will focus on that are high demand.

On the federal funding update – the funding amounts for programs are being awarded as anticipated, no cuts expected, which is good news.

MTAC Equipment Report – Mike Bouchard and Jeff Haley

Jeff Haley discussed some outreach that he has done, such as the Bitterroot Valley Health and Wellness Fair and visiting a senior center in Charlo. He will be doing some future events with the new staff members, Brittany Boyd and Dawn Hartwell, to interact with some of the client base they will be serving, such as the Home and Garden Show in Bozeman, the Home and Garden Show in Missoula, and the Women's Fair in Missoula. Mr. Haley will also attend the upcoming annual Blackfoot meeting. A question was posed about people who do not qualify for the program, and Mr. Haley explained that they can still assist these clients through guidance and recommendation on which phone to get that will fit their individual needs. The staff can still provide service, show the non-qualifying client how to use the phone, set up and train on the phone for them but the phone unit is not provided by MTAC. Another question was posed about the proposed changes to the Administrative Rules of Montana, whether this will impact on the non-qualifying population such as expanding the definition of income. Ms. Taylor answered this question by stating that the majority of the population the program serves are elderly and the majority of the elderly population live off of pensions and retirement, and if they do not qualify

due to the income they receive, the change would be in that they put down “earned income” for the new income definition. Discussion ensued regarding the income definition.

Mike Bouchard added to the discussion regarding non-qualifying clients stating that it depends on where they live, whether they have Internet access or fiber capability or cellular access. He will recommend Caption Call as they have a device for people who do not have internet access akin to a hotspot that they can connect to their phone. He has assisted a few clients this way.

Mr. Bouchard attended the Broadband Montana event in January, which is primarily for telephone service providers, and he was able to interact with some technicians who are out in the field and provide information about MTAC. Mr. Bouchard attended a community event with the Billings Veteran Navigation Network at the Billings Convention Center, and it was a huge event, around 70 vendors. He has also visited the senior center in Cascade County and attempted to talk with the director of the facility about setting up a table during lunch hour in the future, but was unable to and dropped off brochures and applications there. For future dates, he potentially will do a table in White Sulphur Springs and will be doing presentations at the Law Enforcement Academy with their new dispatchers.

Michelle Owens suggested an upcoming event as she is a board member for the Bitterroot Children’s Museum, and the event will be in the fall. It’s a community event called “Meet the Experts”, and she let the president of the museum know that it would be a good idea to invite MTAC staff to attend.

Hamilton Relay Report – Allison LaBrie and Emilie Banasiak

Allison LaBrie reported as follows:

Traditional Relay Service (TRS) percentage answered in ten seconds – mostly 99 percent - above the requirement of 85 percent.

CapTel percentage answered in ten seconds – 100 percent.

Session and conversation minutes – there has been a downward trend in TRS minutes for the last three-month quarter – possibly due to changes in technology, and CapTel minutes are staying consistently low – technology is changing as lines are being transitioned from copper to fiber.

Quality scores remain high above average company-wide at 99 percent for TRS, with a 75.1 typing words per minute average (requirement is 60 words per minute). For the CapTel quality scores, the calculation has changed since all of the captions use automatic speech recognition (ASR) and are assisted by the communication assistant (CA). The word error rate (WER) is being used for calculation as it is the total number of errors that are detected divided by the total word count, and the requirement is to be under 2 percent. The WER for the most recent month was .62%.

Customer care contacts for TRS from October to December 2025 consisted of one wrong number/hang-up in October and one wrong number/hang-up in December.

Customer care contacts for CapTel – there were none for October-December 2025.

Remote conference captioning minutes tend to trend higher when the committee meets quarterly and remain low in the other months.

Emilie Banasiak discussed outreach events that she has done such as the Relay Friendly Business webinar. She will have a list of certified organizations (those who have taken the training and become certified) to give to Mary Taylor in a few weeks. She did a table with Lisa Gault of MTAC at the Fort Harrison Veterans' Fair and attended the Montana Youth Transitions Conference with Lisa Gault. Due to ongoing contract negotiations between Hamilton Relay and MTAC, no upcoming events have been scheduled yet.

Unfinished business –

Michelle Owens mentioned she had some thoughts about one of the committee positions, suggesting that it might be good to change the position from interexchange to a wireless company or a broadband company since there is difficulty in finding someone to fill that position. So much is changing in the telecommunications industry with technology and long distance is not viewed as a service anymore. Ms. Taylor recalled when one of the positions was changed to a PSAP position as prior to the position connected with PSAP, it was a wireless provider. The person who had filled that wireless provider position was from Verizon and never came to the meetings. Ms. Taylor is concerned that if the interexchange position is changed to a wireless provider, that the same issue will occur, not finding anyone to apply for the position but she is open to discussion and ideas regarding that position.

New business –

Contract renewals – Devaney/Facebook contract – Ms. Taylor stated that this contract has been renewed in one-year increments every year and her proposal is to move forward with renewing and start the process for renewing the contract for FY 2027 which will be July 1st of this year through June 30th, 2027. Ms. Owens made a motion to renew the contract and Tina Shorten seconded the motion. Motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:25 p.m.