

**Montana Accessible Communications
Minutes: Full Committee Meeting
November 20, 2025
Disability Determination Services Conference Room
2550 Prospect Ave, Helena, Montana**

Committee Members Present: Dana Kjersem, Ron Bibler, Tina Shorten, Ashlee Logan, Cam Tulloch, Barbara Varnum, Michelle Owens (via Zoom)

MTAC Staff Present: Mary Taylor, Lisa Gault, Jeff Haley, Mike Bouchard

Supporting and Contributing Persons Present: Emilie Banasiak and Allison LaBrie, Hamilton Relay (via Zoom); Hannah Stokes, budget analyst (via Zoom); Lloyd Sparks, ADA coordinator, Department of Administration; Molly Verseput and Jamee Feuling, sign language interpreters; Lisa Lesofski, transcriptionist; and Shawn Tulloch, deaf services manager

Absent committee members: Lisa Cannon, Christy Eichenlaub

Meeting called to order:

Dana Kjersem, vice chair, called the meeting to order.

Approval of Minutes:

Tina Shorten made a motion to approve the minutes, and Michelle Owens seconded. Motion carried.

Public Comment: none

MTAC Director's report: Mary Taylor

Mary Taylor opened with a committee update. She noted that at the previous committee meeting, five seats were open, and four of those were vacated. The vacant seats are a member who is not a person with a disability engaged in business other than a business in the telecommunications industry; a member from the Department of Administration, and Lloyd Sparks has applied for this position; a member from an interLATA interexchange carrier, and a member with a disability. These vacancies have been posted and boosted on the MTAC Facebook page with advertising dollars.

In reference to the New Applications Report, Ms. Taylor indicated that the number of new applications received by the office has decreased this fiscal year. The average from the previous year was 14 applications per month; this fiscal year, the average is 11 new applications per month. Ms. Taylor is unsure why there is a decrease, as the staff is still doing extensive outreach and the Program has engaged in additional advertising.

Some highlights from outreach this past quarter include the Relay Friendly Business training in October, several health and wellness fairs, and several conferences, such as the Governor's Conference on Aging, the Montana Youth Transitions conference, and the Veterans Resource Fair. The staff continues to visit senior citizen centers as well. Mike Bouchard did an interview with a show in the Billings area, Living Well in Montana, where he

shared information about the program. Ms. Taylor will continue to do promotions on TV, such as during the Grizzly and Bobcat games in the Great Falls market, advertising on ESPN radio in the Billings area, and some movie theater advertising in Helena. There will be newspaper advertising, grocery store advertising, and participation in a stocking stuffer promotion in Helena. Mike Bouchard will be doing a table at the Broadband Montana show in January 2026. A report listing all outreach this past quarter is included in the attachments.

For Facebook activity, there was a higher reach this past quarter, more interactions, and more total impressions and clicks. The top unpaid post was about an event Ms. Taylor and Lisa Gault attended in East Helena – a Back to School Bash. The top-paid post was an advertisement for the Governor’s committee’s vacant seats. There was a question about how many followers MTAC has on Facebook. Ms. Taylor will look into this and request that these statistics be included in the report going forward.

The MTAC Website Analytics Report indicates that visitors are still having trouble reaching the page, as several entry errors appear in the report. This is most likely due to the updated path to accommodate the program’s name change. There have been fewer visits to the website. Ms. Taylor has been in frequent communication with the web administrator to try to resolve the errors.

Ms. Taylor discussed the two new positions added to the program during the last legislative session: an outreach specialist and a communications technician. She is currently working on hiring for the outreach position, following up on background checks and references on the candidates who were interviewed. She anticipates the new outreach specialist will begin work sometime in December. Some interviews for the communication technician position have been completed. A few more interviews are underway.

The Teltex contract has been renewed and will run through the end of May 2026, at which time a new contract will need to be procured, as the contract has reached its 10th year. The social media (Facebook) contract with Devaney and Associates was executed for one additional year. The Devaney contract continues through 2030 unless either MTAC or Devaney decides not to continue. The contract for Sockeye ends this coming year and has not been signed yet. Sockeye merged with Baker Tilly, another company, which has affected the contract documents and slowed the process, in addition to changes in state procurement policies requiring additional clauses and information technology requirements to be incorporated into the agreement.

The MTAC database has been moved to a newer server, and an updated version of the software has been installed. The next step is to move the database from on-premises to cloud database migration. Ms. Taylor is continuing to work with all the entities involved: the Department of Administration State Information Technology Division, DPHHS procurement, and the contractor. The cost of moving to the cloud would be about \$50,000.

The relay services contract with Hamilton Relay expires February 27, 2026. Ms. Taylor hopes to do sole-source contracting for that contract, as Hamilton Relay is the only relay provider that does the traditional relay service and CapTel service. Ms. Taylor has done all the paperwork for sole-sourcing, so she will be doing a lot of contract work in the next few months to ensure all the contracts coming due are executed under new contracts.

Ms. Taylor has been working on updating the MTAC Income Guidelines and has submitted changes based on new Federal Poverty Levels to update the Administrative Rules of Montana. She was able to work with the legal department to request an update to the Administrative Rules based on 2025 Federal Poverty Levels, instead of going through 2024 then 2025, to bring them up to date. There will be a hearing on this change, and if

there is no opposition, she will be able to move forward with updating the MTAC Income Guidelines based on 2025 Federal Poverty Levels. She is also waiting to hear back on the decision brief she submitted regarding the MTAC Administrative Rules change to overhaul the entire section, including changes to the definition of income and the appeals process, as well as other minor items.

ASL Now is offering a three-month free pilot to gather data and determine which agencies would benefit from this service. It removes the relay part of relay calls by using a widget on a website that gives a person the opportunity to communicate with someone in American Sign Language. The ASL now person who shows up on the widget is a representative of the organization, so this eliminates the third-party issue that occurs with relay calls. Ms. Taylor is working on the contracting aspect.

There has been some interest in glasses that caption, such as the Hearview glasses that were demonstrated to the Committee about a year ago. Some of these glasses require a connection to a cell phone to work. There are circumstances where the purchase of captioning glasses would be justified, such as in a classroom. Ms. Taylor asked the Committee for feedback on the possibility of distributing these. She mentioned that Jeff Haley would discuss the captioning glasses in more detail later in the meeting.

There is also a new phone, called the BlindShell smartphone, geared towards vision-challenged clients and has a high volume for hearing-challenged clients as well. The BlindShell phones also address dexterity issues, as many commands can be spoken, so people with mobility challenges could benefit from them. Ms. Taylor feels this phone might be a good option to replace the Jitterbug, as clients have had difficulty with it because the volume is not loud enough. Mike Bouchard will discuss the BlindShell phone later in the meeting.

Budget Report: Hannah Stokes

Hannah Stokes reported on the state fiscal year 2026 budget totals for MTAC as of October 31, 2025.

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 October 31, 2025

MTAC program expenditures

HB2 budget appropriation (19% of the \$1,395,224)	\$267,965
Indirect costs (non-budgeted appropriation)	\$23,875
Prior year expense	(\$3,941)
Total expenses for program	<u><u>\$287,899</u></u>

House Bill 2 expenditures through October 31, 2025

Personal services (19% of \$511,821 PS projected budget)	\$99,246
Operational expenses (19% of \$883,403 OP projected budget)	<u>\$168,719</u>
Total expenses (19% of \$1,395,224 total HB2 budget)	\$267,965

Revenue collected as of October 31, 2025 - \$822,388

SFY 2026 actual expenses through October 31, 2025

Operating Expenses through October 31, 2025 - SFY 2026 - \$267,965

- Hamilton Relay Services – total expenditures \$41,972
- Outreach – total expenditures \$64,711
- Rent/Utilities – total expenditures \$15,751
- Travel – total expenditures \$1,583
- Supplies – total expenditures \$132
- Distribution Equipment – total expenditures \$22,896
- Other Expenses/Equipment – total expenditures \$2,033
- Communications – total expenditures \$1,548
- Repairs/maintenance (vehicles) – total expenditures \$3,095
- Other services – total expenditures \$14,988

Indirect Costs and Prior Year Expenses

- Actual costs for SFY 2026 indirect costs are \$23,875

- FCC mandate – no expenses projected at this time.

DPHHS report – Sarah Seltzer

No report

MTAC Equipment Report – Mike Bouchard and Jeff Haley

Jeff Haley mentioned some outreach he had participated in, such as a wellness fair, a senior event in Superior, and a fair in Missoula. Another notable thing he did recently was a Zoom meeting with the Anaconda School District. He did this with two speech pathologists and an occupational therapist, and provided information on the MTAC program and how the program can help people in the school system with iPads, etc.

Mr. Haley presented the capabilities of smart glasses, the brands he researched (including four), and whether they require a subscription or a one-time payment. All smart glasses work in conjunction with an app (via smartphone). Cost varies depending on the brand of smart glasses and what they include, such as microphones or a webcam. Some glasses have a dual display, some have one. Prescription lenses can be installed in these glasses as well or used as a clip-on like sunglasses. The committee's main concern is that these smart glasses do not meet the program's definition of telephone communication. It was agreed that the agency (MTAC) can refer people to these devices if they are interested in learning more about smart glasses. Discussion among the committee members ensued about the multiple uses of these smart glasses.

Mike Bouchard spoke about some outreach he has done, such as the Great Falls Women's Expo, noting it was the first time he has attended that event. He stopped by the Siyeh Communications location during his travels

and left some updated brochures with the new MTAC name. He has done four Montana Law Enforcement Academy (MLEA) trainings; the most recent one was the smallest in attendance. This last training group discussed artificial intelligence (AI) and the possible impacts on law enforcement dispatchers.

Mr. Bouchard discussed a new BlindShell phone that a company in Europe has created for people with vision impairment, but can be utilized for people who have hearing issues. The phone has different functions, such as a camera app, and the AI will tell the user what the object is. The buttons are more tactile, it has significant volume capabilities, and it is open to third-party apps. The phone also has a messaging app, called Tandem, which is secure and allows a caregiver or another family member to access the phone. It also includes normal texting, contacts, and voice calls, similar to other phones. The BlindShell phone also has a replaceable battery, which is an asset, and an SOS button that can be assigned to whomever the user wants. The committee agreed that the phone would be a good option to give to clients who might benefit from it.

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 with 98 percent in September 2025 – 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% for TRS, with a 74.3 typing words per minute average (requirement is 60 words per minute). For the CapTel quality scores, the same applies: the average accuracy is 99%, and the average words per minute is 171 (the requirement is 135).

Customer care contacts for TRS from July to September 2025 consisted mostly of general information inquiries, wrong-number hang-ups, one inquiry about a customer profile, and one call made by error.

Customer care contacts for CapTel – there were none for July-September 2025.

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

Emilie Banasiak discussed past outreach she has attended, such as the Montana Governor's Conference on Aging with Lisa Gault (MTAC assistant) in Helena in September 2025, and hosted a Relay Friendly Business (RFB) webinar the previous month (October 2025). Ms. Banasiak mentioned that a good portion of the attendees for the RFB webinar worked for already-certified organizations, but were new hires who also wanted to take the training.

Ms. Banasiak also attended the Veterans' Fair and the Montana Youth Transitions conference – one in Helena and one in Butte – with Ms. Gault recently this month. The Veterans' Fair was not as busy due to the federal

government shutting down, so the attendance was much less. Mary Taylor gave Ms. Banasiak and Ms. Gault a stack of flyers for the new job opening at MTAC, and they had conversations with people interested in applying. The Montana Youth Transitions conference had a good number of students in attendance, along with their family members.

In follow-up to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) recent meeting regarding the Modernization of Telecommunications Relay Services, Ms. Taylor asked Ms. LaBrie what Hamilton Relay thinks of this change and how it might affect relay services in the future. Ms. LaBrie said that relay is not going anywhere, as she understands, since it is a service required by the FCC.

Unfinished business –

Ms. Varnum asked if Ms. Taylor could share some data on how many Native Americans have been served by MTAC over the past five years. Ms. Taylor said she would look into it and, if needed, get assistance from Sockeye to gather the information. Ms. Shorten added that it would be helpful to get a picture of where MTAC clients are located across the state, to ensure we are reaching everyone.

New business –

- FCC – Modernizing Telecommunications Relay Services – Mr. Bibler mentioned that maybe it was a good idea to modernize the name of the program (from “Telecommunications” to “Communications”) and to continue finding new ways to give out more equipment. He advised seeking changes to the Program’s Montana Code Annotated (MCA) during the next legislative session to incorporate the same changes. Ms. Taylor added that the equipment contract expires in May 2026, and a new contract will be in place by the next fiscal year, so it is a good idea to begin discussions before the legislature meets again. Mr. Sparks agreed that if legislation is needed, this is a good time to begin the conversation.
- May Meeting location – Dillon is the first choice; Red Lodge is the second choice.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:35 p.m.