

Montana Telecommunications Access Program
Minutes: Full Committee Meeting
February 15, 2024
Helena, Montana

Committee Members Present: Lisa Cannon, chair; Tina Shorten, vice chair; Cam Tulloch, Ron Bibler, Tom Thompson (via Zoom), John Pavao, Lee Hazelbaker, Michelle Owens (via Zoom), Barbara Varnum (via Zoom), Dana Kjersem, Ashlee Logan

Committee Members Absent: Sherri Odlin, Bob Terwilliger

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

Supporting and Contributing Persons Present: Hannah Stokes (via Zoom), budget analyst; Sarah Seltzer, deputy director; Lori Sporrer and Emilie Banasiak, Hamilton Relay (via Zoom); Trisha Smith and Vicki Gregori, sign language interpreters; Shawn Tulloch, program manager for deaf services (via Zoom), Chanda Hermanson, DET administrator

Meeting called to order:

Lisa Cannon called the meeting to order.

Approval of Minutes:

Barbara Varnum made a motion to approve the November 2023 meeting minutes and Michelle Owens seconded. Motion carried.

Public Comment: No public comment.

MTAP Director's Report: Mary Taylor

Mary Taylor opened with the committee member updates. Approval has been given for the members whose terms expired July 2023 – Lisa Cannon, Cam Tulloch, and Barbara Varnum. The two vacant seats have been filled with Ashlee Logan (representative of the Disabilities Community, Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing) and Dana Kjersem (representative of the Department of Public Health and Human Services). Members whose term are expiring this July 2024 are Sheri Odlin, Michelle Owens, Tina Shorten, and Dana Kjersem. Ms. Taylor explained that though Dana was just appointed, her seat on the committee was vacant for some time prior to her appointment, and the term is tied to the seat versus the occupant. Ms. Taylor encouraged the members to complete the paperwork for reappointment.

Since July 1, 2023, there has been 84 applications submitted to MTAP. This is about the same as in the previous year but has decreased compared to 2019-2022. Discussion ensued about advertising correlating with number of applications. Ms. Taylor mentioned that TV advertising is ongoing with Montana Television Network which covers the whole state and ABC which covers the Butte/Bozeman area. She is also working with television stations to switch up the advertisements, when they run, the time slots chosen etc., to spur attention. It was also noticed that when advertising focused on the Relay Friendly Business training, versus equipment distribution, applications went down.

For outreach, there have been several events that were held in-person except for a 911 training which was conducted online with Hamilton Relay. For upcoming events, there will be two Relay Friendly Business trainings with Hamilton Relay. Ms. Taylor is working with the TV and streaming advertisers to incorporate new ways of advertising such as social mirroring, which involves taking anything that is advertised on the MTAP Facebook page and displaying the ads on other websites and apps. Ms. Taylor picks two ads on Facebook each month for the purpose of social mirroring.

The report on Facebook advertising runs from October to December. Ms. Taylor noted that traffic spiked in early October, which Ms. Taylor noticed correlates to advertising heavily for the Relay Friendly Business training, as the training occurred on October 25th. There were about four thousand visitors to the Facebook page during this time period. The bounce rate went down a little, which means a few less people navigated out of the website directly after entering, versus exploring it further. Ms. Taylor explained that it is always good when visitors explore further, versus navigating back out right after entering.

A question was posed about what it means to boost an ad and Ms. Taylor explained that this is when she lets Devaney know she wants to put more money on a specific advertisement and there is a budget for that, about a third of the monthly budget goes for paid advertising on Facebook.

The Affordable Connectivity Program is a program that is offered through the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to allow people to apply for a discount on their internet cost. The FCC announced recently that they are running out of money for the program. Unless Congress provides additional funding, it will run out in April of 2024. This is disappointing news as it will be a major impact on people who have applied and received the \$30 discount for their monthly internet costs.

Ms. Taylor is currently working on the Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) annual report which is an annual report on the number of relay minutes that the state has seen used and how much the state pays the relay provider. She works with Hamilton Relay on this report and ensuring the accuracy of the report. It is due by February 23, 2024.

The new 2024 Federal Poverty Level guidelines came out last month (January) so Ms. Taylor will be working on updating this information in the Administrative Rules. She is still waiting on the finalization of the 2023 guidelines going through the Administrative Rules process. Once this is finalized, she and the staff will look retroactive to January to see if there are any clients who qualified under the new rates that were not published yet when they applied and contact them.

There are several contracts that are due, including the Teltex equipment contract, the Sockeye database software agreement and the Facebook management and advertising contract which all expire on June 30th. Ms. Taylor is currently working on renewing those contracts. The Hamilton Relay contract runs through February 27, of 2026. The Teltex contract can also be renewed through 2026 at which time a new RFP will need to be completed.

Ms. Taylor participated in a virtual administrators' meeting with Hamilton Relay on January 17th. Some of the main topics discussed were access to relay in facilities like the prisons, analog to digital transition, Real Time Text, and remote conference captioning updates. She thinks there are a total of seven states that offer Remote Conference Captioning. In addition, there was an update on NASRA (National Association for State Relay Administration) and the disability advisory councils as there has been changes in leadership in those two organizations.

The next full committee meeting will be held at Blackfoot Communications location in Missoula on the 22nd of May. There will be a tour with Blackfoot after the meeting. The outreach portion will be done the next day with the Women 4 Wellness event in Pablo at the Salish Kootenai College.

There will be a NASRA and a TEDPA (Telecommunications Equipment Distribution Program Association) conference in Louisville, Kentucky in September. The TEDPA conference will run from September 4th to the 7th and the NASRA conference will run from September 9th to the 11th.

Budget Report: Hannah Stokes

Hannah Stokes opened with the state fiscal year 2024 budget totals for MTAP as of January 31, 2024.

Personal services	\$329,890
Operations	\$597,815
FCC Mandate	<u>\$775,000</u>
Total budget	<u><u>\$1,702,705</u></u>

Actual expenses through January 31, 2024

MTAP program expenditures

HB2 budget appropriation (28.57% of the \$927,705)	\$450,456
Indirect costs (non-budgeted appropriation)	\$48,454
Prior year expense	(\$217)
Total expenses for program	<u><u>\$498,783</u></u>

House Bill 2 expenditures through January 31, 2024

Personal services (48.94% of \$329,890 PS projected budget)	\$161,443
Operational expenses (48.35% of \$597,815 OP projected budget)	<u>\$289,102</u>
Total expenses (48.85% of \$927,705 total HB2 budget)	\$450,456

Revenue collected as of January 2024 - \$1,190,600

SFY 2024 actual expenses through January 31, 2024

Operating Expenses through January 31, 2024 - SFY 2024 \$148,146

- Hamilton Relay Services – total expenditures \$95,737 (total relay budget \$219,000, remaining \$123,263)
- Outreach – total expenditures \$92,251 (total outreach budget \$168,000, remaining \$75,480)
- Rent/Utilities – total expenditures \$25,842 (total rent budget \$43,000, remaining \$17,158)
- Travel – total expenditures \$5,101 (total travel budget \$16,000 remaining \$10,899)
- Supplies – total expenditures \$2,037 (total supply budget \$5,815 remaining \$3,778)
- Distribution Equipment – total expenditures \$37,219 (total equipment budget \$80,000, remaining \$42,781)
- Other Expenses/Equipment – total expenditures \$4,614 (total other expenses/equipment budget \$9,000, remaining \$4,386)
- Communications – total expenditures \$2,807 (total communication budget, \$6,000, remaining \$3,193)

- Repairs/maintenance (vehicles) – total expenditures \$4,279 (total repairs/maintenance budget \$11,000, remaining \$6,721)
- Other services – total expenditures \$18,945 (total other services budget \$40,000, remaining \$21,055)

Indirect Costs and Prior Year Expenses

- Actual costs for SFY 2024 indirect costs are \$48,454
- Projected costs for SYF 2024 indirect costs are \$85,000

FCC mandate – no expenses projected at this time.

DPHHS report – Chanda Hermanson

Chanda Hermanson reported that the branch executive director position is still vacant. This is a level of management that is between herself and the director of Public Health and Human Services. This position has been vacant since October 2023. The department hopes to fill this position before the next legislative session. The executive planning process for the 2025 session has begun. Division management is working with stakeholder groups such as MTAP and brainstorming internally to think of budget and policy proposals to bring to the session. Sometime in March, these proposals will become official and edited through the year until November when the executive branch (the Governor’s office) publishes the proposed executive budget. The legislative branch works on these proposals between January and April. If there is something that needs to be changed in statute such as removing a financial means test that is within the statute, that would be a policy proposal in advance.

Ms. Hermanson mentioned that there is available a full-time equivalency (FTE) – a full-time employee for the state fiscal year. They analyzed the needs in the division and will use that FTE to hire a part-time trainer for the vocational rehabilitation program and a part-time public relations person for the entire division. They are working with the HR department to post these positions for hire.

Shawn Tulloch is now working part-time as a vocational rehabilitation counselor and acquiring her qualifications there. Ms. Hermanson says that someone who has experience with deafness is the right person to be serving those clients across the state. For the pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS) that serves high school students with disabilities from age 14 on, there are new activities happening. There has been a long-standing partnership with the Montana Youth Leadership Forum and a new partnership/contract with the Department of Military Affairs. They are hosting STEM career camps for the high school students through the STARBASE program. A contract also has been made with Bloom Consulting, who is a pre-ETS provider. Between Bloom Consulting and pre-ETS, they are hosting a camp at the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind (MSDB) in June. This camp will be called On the Right Track and there will be college and career exploration, jobsite tours, teaching job skills, and mock interviews. This camp will be open to anyone with a visual or a hearing impairment age 14 and up enrolled in a school program.

Ms. Hermanson mentioned that through the EPP, she could propose to eliminate the MTAP financial means test as discussed by the committee during their strategic planning session. She needs to know if the committee wants to go this route. The Administrative Rules can be changed and still work on this issue. As it is written right now, the Montana Code Annotated (MCA) indicates that the eligible applicant’s income must be below 250 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. Discussion ensued on this topic. It was noted that one cannot eliminate the 250 percent as it is defined in statute without seeking legislative approval, but MTAP could possibly participate in cost sharing of equipment for those over 250 percent of the Federal Poverty Level if

written into the Administrative Rules. She also mentioned that unlike MTAP, the vocational rehabilitation financial means testing is not in code, only in the ARM (Administrative Rules of Montana). They wrote a decision brief, and it was approved to repeal the means testing for vocational rehabilitation. The selling point was the amount of effort that goes into doing those financial means tests and the forms and the financial savings that would be afforded by eliminating the work that is involved. This process did not have to go through the legislature or the Governor, just the director of the program.

The committee decided against seeking elimination of the financial means test. Ms. Cannon asked Ms. Hermanson to verify with legal whether cost sharing of equipment might be an option to assist applicants whose income is above the MTAP income limit, so that further alternatives may be explored.

Hamilton Relay Report: Lori Sporrer and Emilie Banasiak

Lori Sporrer reported on the period between October and December – the final calendar year quarter. Overall, the compliance in percentage of calls answered has remained between 99 and 100 percent for traditional relay services. It is required that calls are to be answered within ten seconds 85 percent of the time. For the captioned telephone relay, the percentage remains at 100 percent. For the relay minutes there has been a downward trend for traditional relay but in the last two quarters of 2023 there was a mild increase. For the captioned telephone minutes, there was a slight increase as well. The quality average is at 98 and 99 percent company wide. The requirement for typing words per minute is 60 per minute; the average was 74.4 which is good. For the typing accuracy, the requirement is 95 percent or higher and the company is in good shape at 99 percent on average. This is for traditional relay. For the captioned telephone relay – the accuracy rate is required to be 85 percent and the company is at 99.7 on average. The average words per minute was at 165 to 172. Everything is staying above where it needs to be in quality and accuracy.

For customer care contacts with traditional relay, there was a total of five contacts in the last quarter. For customer care contacts with captioned relay, no calls were received. The remote captioning minutes go up and down in number and typically peaks when MTAP has their meetings.

Emilie Banasiak reported on outreach this past quarter. She shared that they hosted a 911 webinar for Montana's 911 dispatchers recently and there were some technical difficulties, so research is being done on possibly using a different platform for a future webinar. Ms. Banasiak was happy with the number of attendees for the last two Relay Friendly Business webinars. In follow up to a question regarding why not all attendees of the trainings become certified, Emilie explained that though we may have 25 attendees, often many members of the same company attend, versus 25 different businesses. So, we may end up with, for example 8 versus 25 newly certified Relay Friendly Businesses. She mentioned that there are a few organizations that said they wanted testing but when she reached out to them using multiple contact information, email, and phone numbers she received no response from these particular organizations. It was questioned how long the participants have to respond before being required to retake the entire training. Ms. Banasiak responded that she will need to discuss this Ms. Taylor, to determine a timeline, as one has not been set at this time. Ms. Banasiak has contact information for the next Relay Friendly Business webinar from people who wanted to attend the last one but were unable. She will be attending the Montana State Human Resources Management Conference in Kalispell in early May as part of her outreach efforts, on behalf of MTAP. She will also be participating in the Family Learning Weekend event at the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind in early June.

MTAP Equipment Report – Mike Bouchard and Jeff Haley

Jeff Haley reported participating in a few table events and visiting a few senior centers. At the Hamilton Senior Center, he had a table where he put out the equipment and let people try them and encouraged them to sign up and fill out an application. Mr. Haley also went to the Charlo Senior Center, and he noticed that he has been getting applications a few weeks later from that event. Mr. Haley enjoyed going to the North Valley Senior Center in Columbia Falls which is a vibrant community. He has seen between 70 to 72 people at these centers. He has a number of events coming up during the spring such as the Women's Fair in Missoula and the Missoula Home and Garden Show in March. Mr. Haley will also attend the Blackfoot Communications annual meeting in April.

Mike Bouchard is doing the Billings Spring Home Improvement Show and will attend the Great Falls Home and Garden Show as well as attending the Three Rivers annual meeting. He shared about the Broadband Montana showcase that took place in January that he was invited to which is a trade show for all the telco co-ops and some of the other broadband vendors around the state. He gave a presentation at this showcase and did a Montana Law Enforcement Academy (MLEA) training recently. There are only four counties at present that do not have text to 911 in Montana which are Flathead, Lake, Musselshell, and Daniels. Someone from Nemont approached Mr. Bouchard during the Broadband Montana showcase and informed him that they are moving forward with upgrading the PSAP equipment in Daniels County. Mr. Bouchard added that during the MLEA training, a dispatcher from Lake County said they do have text to 911 available. Mr. Bouchard let the dispatcher know they need to update the Excel file that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) manages, showing where text to 911 is available. Mr. Bouchard hopes Daniels and Lake will update with the FCC in the coming months.

Mr. Bouchard contacted the Povah Center which is a community/senior center in West Yellowstone to do a table for them sometime this summer.

He demonstrated a CX600 phone with an XLink which is a niche device that captions calls and one can switch the transcription of the call, either outgoing or ingoing.

Unfinished business – no unfinished business.

New business

Contract renewals – The committee agreed to move forward on annual renewals for the following contracts.

- Teltex – equipment supplier
- Sockeye – database management
- Devaney – Facebook contractor

The meeting was adjourned at 12:30 p.m.