

PRESENTATION TO THE 2025 HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES JOINT APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE

DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AND TRANSITIONS DIVISION

Human Services Practice

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OVERVIEW

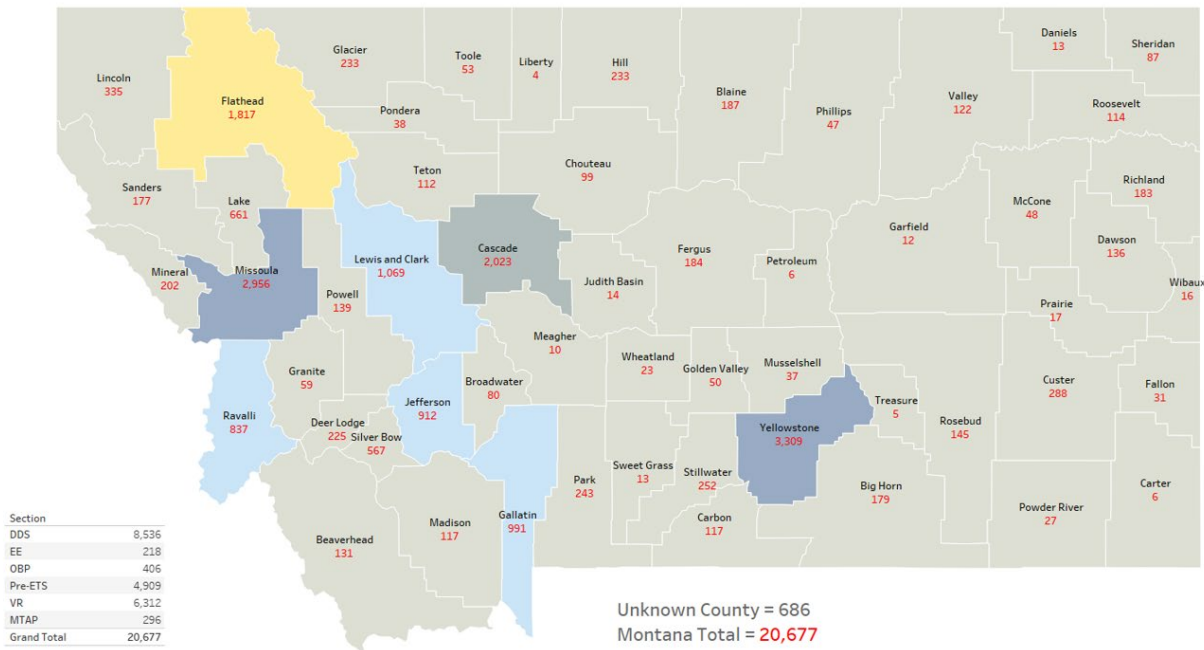
The Disability Employment and Transitions Division (DETD) supports over 20,000 Montanans with disabilities, providing them access to services that enhance their economic and social well-being. Montanans with disabilities aspire to be meaningful, integrated contributors to society, benefiting from and participating fully in mainstream life. However, they encounter barriers to employment and independence, including negative societal attitudes, discriminatory practices, limited economic opportunities, and insufficient resources and skills.

DETD is committed to promoting individual and family stability, supporting the ability to work and achieve self-sufficiency, and maximizing opportunities for independence, well-being, and health for people with disabilities. We uphold values of informed client choice, independent living, and self-advocacy, ensuring that people with disabilities are fully integrated into society.

Over the last biennium, DETD has expanded client engagement and enhanced stakeholder collaboration to deliver comprehensive programs and services. This includes transitioning from dependence to independence, a long-term investment that strengthens Montana's diverse communities beyond the individuals served. Montanans with disabilities rely on DETD and its network of partners to overcome social and economic challenges.

The division continues implementing solid controls to ensure that programs are maximized within budget, providing greater access to services for all persons with disabilities. We forge partnerships across The Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) and with the Montana Department of Labor and Industry (DLI), local school districts, Centers for Independent Living, community rehabilitation providers, and other local vendors across Montana.

STATE FISCAL YEAR 2024-DETD INDIVIDUALS SERVED BY COUNTY



SUMMARY OF MAJOR FUNCTIONS

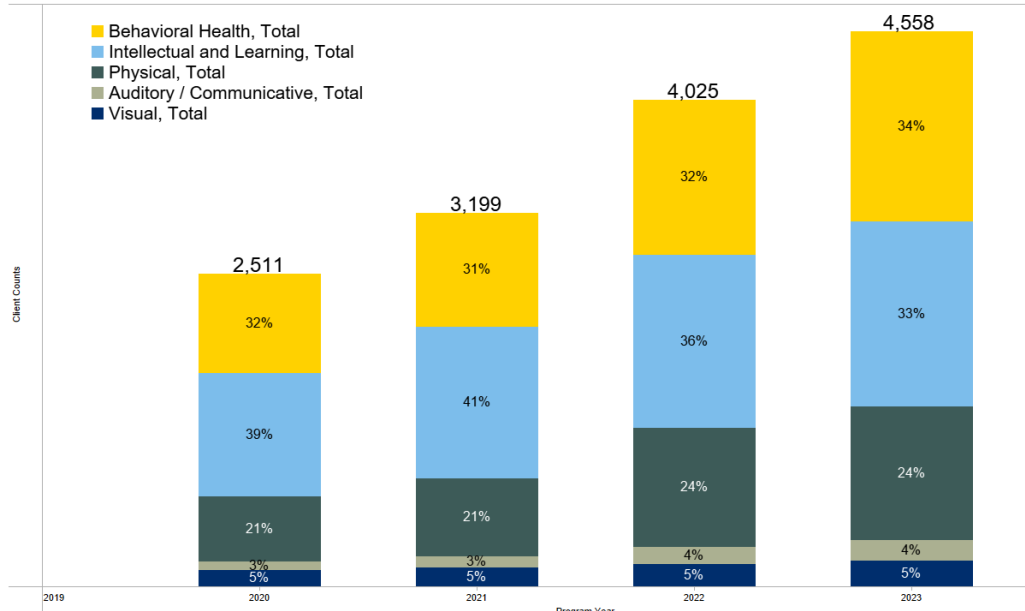
DETD encompasses five bureaus: Program Operations and Support, Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRBS), Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), Blind and Low Vision Services, and Disability Determination Services (DDS). Additionally, DETD oversees the administratively attached Montana Accessible Communication program.

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

VRBS assists individuals with disabilities in preparing for, obtaining, and advancing meaningful employment through a comprehensive range of services tailored to their unique employment goals. Vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors collaborate closely with job seekers to establish employment objectives and identify high-quality services that lead to fulfilling careers. Guided by the principle of informed choice, these services align with each individual's strengths, resources, interests, and capabilities. The VR program is a crucial component of the state's workforce system, delivering services in partnership with local job services, colleges, community rehabilitation providers, and numerous other partners.

In 2024, VRBS supported 157 Social Security Disability beneficiaries in achieving full substantial gainful activity (SGA), empowering them to become independent from public benefits.

VRBS PARTICIPANT CASELOAD DISTRIBUTION BY DISABILITY TYPE



In addition to serving individual job seekers, VRBS staff collaborate with businesses to understand their unique needs and offer customized services. We assist Montana businesses in becoming aware of key disability issues, filling open positions with qualified job seekers with disabilities, assessing workplace job descriptions and application processes to eliminate unnecessary barriers, and providing training on job accommodations.

TOP EARNING OCCUPATIONS ACHIEVED THROUGH VRBS SERVICES IN 2024

Occupational Title	Count	Average Hourly Wage
Pharmacists	1	75.77
Occupational Therapists	2	62.50
Food Batchmakers	1	46.55
Registered Nurses	3	45.04
Electronic Equipment Installers and Repairers, Motor Vehicles	1	45.00
Physical Therapists	1	42.67
Coin, Vending, and Amusement Machine Servicers and Repairers	1	39.00
Lawyers	1	39.00
Massage Therapists	4	37.50
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	10	36.23
Construction Laborers	3	32.71
Wind Turbine Service Technicians	1	31.50
Counselors	1	31.12
First-Line Supervisors of Construction Trades and Extraction Workers	1	30.83
Operations Research Analysts	1	29.81
Accountants and Auditors	2	29.65
Engineers, All Other	1	29.55
Educational, Guidance, and Career Counselors and Advisors	1	29.16
Software Developers	1	29.05
Managers, All Other	1	28.85
Mental Health Counselors	4	28.55
Computer Occupations, All Other	2	28.39
Emergency Medical Technicians	1	28.28
First-Line Supervisors of Gambling Services Workers	1	27.00

PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES

Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA), public vocational rehabilitation programs are mandated to allocate at least 15% of their federal funds to provide Pre-ETS for students with disabilities who are eligible or potentially eligible for VR services. This legislation broadened the scope of students served and expanded the types of services available, facilitating the transition from school to postsecondary employment and education.

Pre-ETS are available to all school-enrolled students with disabilities in Montana, aged 14-21. The services include job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, counseling on post-secondary programs, workplace readiness training, and instruction in self-advocacy. These services initiate early job exploration and help students identify career interests. They provide opportunities to practice and enhance workplace readiness skills and to explore post-secondary training options that lead to industry-recognized credentials and meaningful employment. Pre-ETS are delivered in partnership with local education agencies, community rehabilitation providers, and independent living centers.

EXTENDED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

The Extended Employment Program supports clients with the most significant disabilities in maintaining employment after their VR program services conclude. To ensure no interruptions, funding for job support transitions from VR to Extended Employment. Continuous support is provided to both the individual and the employer to guarantee long-term job retention.



Angelina, a spa attendant at Studio Montage in Great Falls, educates her co-workers on Deaf etiquette and sign language

BLIND AND LOW VISION SERVICES

The Older Blind Program (OBP) empowers visually impaired or blind individuals aged 55 and older to live more independently in their homes and communities. Services provided include low vision evaluations, the purchase of adaptive aids, daily living skills training, and orientation and mobility training.

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP), established in 1936 under the Randolph-Sheppard Act, creates entrepreneurial pathways for job seekers with visual impairments. Federal and state statutes grant blind vendors priority to operate food service facilities in federal and state government buildings. The program offers VRBS clients who are legally blind opportunities to own and manage food service businesses, such as vending machines, micro markets, coffee shops, and cafes, on state and federal properties.

In 2024, Montana BEP vendors earned an average monthly income of \$2,992.

DISABILITY DETERMINATION SERVICES

In cooperation with the Social Security Administration (SSA), DDS determines medical eligibility for Montanans applying for Social Security disability benefits. Each disability claim is evaluated by a team of adjudicators and medical or psychological examiners who review the applicant's medical and work history to ensure they meet the federal criteria for disability and blindness.

The benefits provided include:

- Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI): Pays benefits to individuals and certain family members if the individual is "insured" (having worked long enough and paid Social Security taxes).
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI): Pays benefits based on financial need.

MONTANA ACCESSIBLE COMMUNICATION

The Montana Accessible Communication, previously known as the Montana Telecommunication Access Program (MTAP), ensures that Montanans who are deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing, or have speech or mobility impairments can access traditional telecommunications equipment and services. MTAP also manages the Montana Relay program, which provides assistive equipment and services to those whose disabilities make phone use challenging.

Some examples of the services provided by the program include:

- Amplified Phones: These phones feature built-in volume control to amplify incoming sounds and tone control to clarify speech.
- Captioned Phones: These phones utilize technology that allows individuals who are severely hard of hearing to converse using their voice while reading the other side of the conversation on the phone's screen display.

- Traditional Relay Service: This service enables users who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have difficulty speaking to connect using a text telephone.
- Relay Friendly Business Program: This free training helps businesses eliminate missed connections by teaching them how to identify, receive, and place relay calls.

INDEPENDENT LIVING SERVICES

Independent living programs offer Montanans with disabilities the essential services needed to achieve their desired way of life. Core services include information and referrals to relevant organizations, independent skills training, individual and systemic change advocacy, and peer mentoring. Additionally, these programs provide benefits counseling and planning, housing information, assistance with accessibility issues, and personal care support.



Jeff, a rancher in Roy, uses a Trackchair to work his land.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION COORDINATION

Regardless of age or ability, people need access to their community to spend time with family, shop, attend appointments, and live fully. Across the state, 40 public transit agencies offer accessible and reliable transportation for Montanans with disabilities. The transportation coordinator collaborates with agencies within DPHHS and statewide to enhance transportation services and provide customers with information on available transportation options.

CITIZEN COUNCILS

DETD includes three citizen councils whose members are appointed by the Governor:

- State Rehabilitation Council (SRC): This council advises VRBS to improve policies, programs, and service delivery by collaborating with other agencies.
- Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC): This council develops the State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL), which contains the policies and recommendations for the state independent living programs.
- Committee on Telecommunications Access Services by Persons with Disabilities: This council serves as an oversight board to Montana Accessible Communication and Montana Relay.

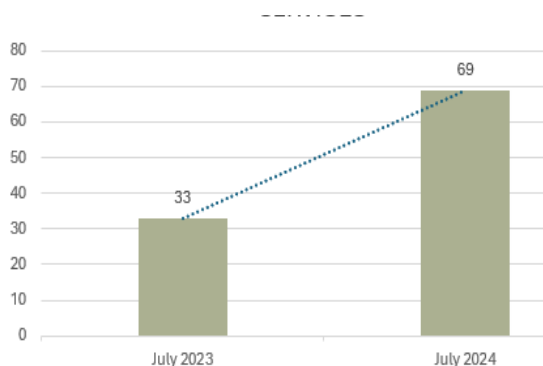
HIGHLIGHTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS DURING THE 2025 BIENNIUM

FOSTER CARE YOUTH AND VRBS ENGAGEMENT

As part of the 2024 DPHHS Annual Plan Strategic Outcome #2: Drive Independence & Accountability through Public Assistance Programs, VRBS collaborated with the Child and Family Services Division (CFSD) to work towards boosting foster care youth participation in VRBS programs by 50%. Starting with a baseline of 33 foster care youth, the number increased to 69 by the end of the State Fiscal Year, marking a 109% increase. This partnership enhances opportunities for community integration, connectivity, and self-reliance for youth in foster care. The continuous support and connection with VRBS staff ensure that foster care youth receive uninterrupted services as they prepare for and transition into the adult workforce.

To achieve this outcome, DETD and CFSD developed a streamlined referral process for foster youth and parents who may benefit from VRBS. Additionally, the teams have provided cross-training to each other, staff members attend each other's staff meetings to coordinate services, and VRBS staff conduct soft skills training for youth in group homes.

FOSTER CARE YOUTH PARTICIPATING IN VRBS



DISABILITY MENTORING WEEK

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), and the theme for 2024 was "Access to Good Jobs for All." To commemorate NDEAM, VRBS coordinated Disability Mentoring Week, designating the third Thursday of the month to arrange Work-Based Learning Experiences (WBLE) for high school students with



Clayton, a Billings student, shadows Chief Engineer Paul Holzwarth at NonStop Local News

disabilities across the state. WBLE activities include job shadows, informational interviews, worksite tours, and paid work experiences. Through these efforts, 174 students with disabilities participated in WBLE in various communities, including Big Sky, Libby, Belt, Ronan, Billings, Great Falls, and Missoula. Disability Mentoring Week provided an opportunity to collaborate with professionals and businesses, fostering new relationships that will support VRBS's work with youth and adults throughout the year. Due to its success, the agency plans to continue Disability Mentoring Week in the coming years.

TRANSITION READINESS TOOLKIT

Montana is one of six states that is beginning to assess the effectiveness of Pre-ETS to students with disabilities through the Rehabilitation Services Administration's grant-funded Human Services Transition Readiness Toolkit. The project supports accessible pre and post-test surveys to students to help DPHHS gather and analyze results to measure contracted service delivery.

The implementation of these assessments brings several key benefits. It leads to increased accuracy in recording Pre-ETS services, allowing for more precise and reliable data. This, in turn, supports data-driven decision making, which can improve overall outcomes. Additionally, it fosters individual growth as a result of the services provided, while also offering valuable program evaluation data that measures the effectiveness of these services. Furthermore, the implementation promotes greater collaboration between transition agencies by establishing shared outcomes and measures, enhancing the overall coordination and success of the programs involved.

DDS INTELLIGENT MEDICAL LANGUAGE ANALYSIS GENERATION (IMAGEN) IMPLEMENTATION

Montana DDS has been at the forefront, among the first to adopt and implement IMAGEN. IMAGEN is an Artificial Intelligence (AI) machine learning technology that analyzes clinical text from disability applicants' health records and converts it into data and other valuable forms. This enables disability examiners to more easily find and identify clinical content relevant to the disability determination process.

The solution was implemented during the beta stages in early 2023 and quickly became instrumental for all examiners through ongoing training. Today, 100% of Montana DDS examiners use this system, leading the nation in implementation and enthusiasm. This adoption has resulted in more efficient analysis of medical evidence, enhanced protection of personally identifiable information (PII), and, ultimately, more timely and accurate determination of disability cases.

INDIVIDUALIZED PLACEMENT AND SUPPORT COLLABORATION

VRBS has partnered with the Treatment Bureau and Prevention Bureau in the Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities Division (BHDD) to braid resources and enhance provider capacity around the Individualized Placement and Support (IPS) Supported Employment model. IPS is an evidence-based approach that helps individuals with behavioral health conditions secure and maintain competitive integrated employment. Delivered through mental health agencies, IPS adheres to eight guiding principles:

- Goal: Competitive Integrated Employment is the primary objective.
- Eligibility: Every person with severe mental illness who wants to work is eligible for IPS.
- Integration: Employment services are integrated with mental health treatment teams.
- Informed Choice: Services are based on each job seeker's preferences and choices.
- Benefits Counseling: Personalized, understandable, and accurate information is provided about Social Security, Medicaid, and other government benefits.
- Timely Job Search: The job search begins soon after an individual expresses interest in working, with the first contact with a business occurring within 30 days.
- Business Relationships: Employment specialists systematically develop relationships with businesses based on client preferences.
- Continuous Support: Job supports are ongoing.

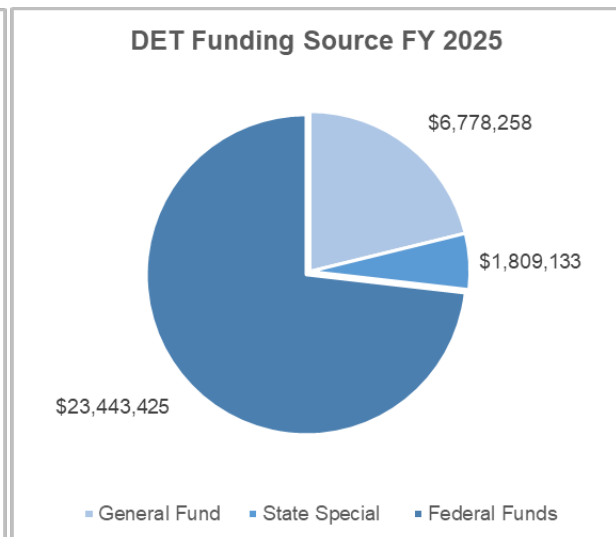
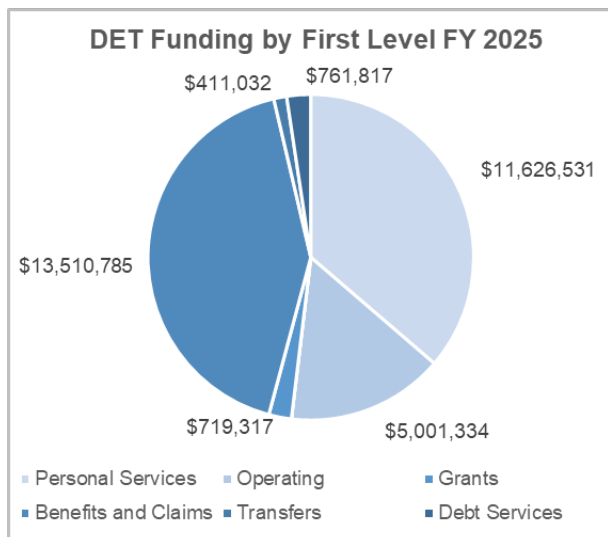
VRBS, the Treatment Bureau, and the Prevention Bureau built this initiative on the belief that employment enhances overall health and well-being and serves as a vital mental health intervention. The agencies have established a formal memorandum of understanding outlining financial obligations, roles, and responsibilities. They have developed a collaborative framework for coordinated, cost-efficient employment services, ensuring the non-duplication of resources to support the provision of IPS services and shared clients. The team has also worked to coordinate training efforts and increase provider capacity.



DPHHS Director Brereton and Helena student Layla Riggs pose for a photo with Governor Gianforte during a job shadow opportunity hosted by the state leaders as part of Disability Mentoring Week.

FUNDING AND POSITIONS BUDGETED (PB) INFORMATION

DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT & TRANSITIONS	FY 2025 BUDGET	FY 2026 REQUEST	FY 2027 REQUEST
PB	139.07	147.07	147.07
Personal Services	\$11,626,531	\$11,505,626	\$11,531,894
Operating	\$5,001,334	\$5,366,895	\$5,394,031
Equipment	\$0	\$0	\$0
Local Assistance	\$0	\$0	\$0
Grants	\$719,317	\$218,287	\$218,287
Benefits and Claims	\$13,510,785	\$13,510,785	\$13,510,785
Transfers	\$411,032	\$411,032	\$411,032
Debt Services	\$761,817	\$761,817	\$761,817
TOTAL COSTS	\$32,030,816	\$31,774,442	\$31,827,846
	FY 2025 BUDGET	FY 2026 REQUEST	FY 2027 REQUEST
General Fund	\$6,778,258	\$6,761,817	\$6,760,576
State Special Fund	\$1,809,133	\$2,230,477	\$2,275,628
Federal Fund	\$23,443,425	\$22,782,148	\$22,791,642
TOTAL FUNDS	\$32,030,816	\$31,774,442	\$31,827,846



CHANGE PACKAGES

PRESENT LAW ADJUSTMENTS

SWPL 1 – PERSONAL SERVICES

The budget includes reductions of \$750,586 in FY 2026 and \$724,838 in FY 2027 to annualize various personal services costs including FY 2025 statewide pay plan, benefit rate adjustments, longevity adjustments related to incumbents in each position at the time of the snapshot, and vacancy savings.

	General Fund	State Special	Federal Funds	Total Request
FY 2026	(\$185,469)	(\$59,093)	(\$506,024)	(\$750,586)
FY 2027	(\$181,219)	(\$57,042)	(\$486,577)	(\$724,838)
Biennium Total	(\$366,688)	(\$116,135)	(\$992,601)	(\$1,475,424)

SWPL 3 – INFLATION DEFLATION

This change package includes reductions of \$1,036 in FY 2026 and \$700 in FY 2027 to reflect budgetary changes generated from the application of deflation to state motor pool accounts.

	General Fund	State Special	Federal Funds	Total Request
FY 2026	(\$221)	\$0	(\$815)	(\$1,036)
FY 2027	(\$149)	\$0	(\$551)	(\$700)
Biennium Total	(\$370)	\$0	(\$1,366)	(\$1,736)

PL 1003 - DECREASING APPROP FOR MONTECH PROGRAM - DETD

This present law adjustment removes the appropriation for the MonTECH Program in DETD. Historically, funding for the program passed through DETD, with the University of Montana as the ultimate recipient. The funding stream has changed, and the University of Montana receives funding directly from its federal partner, leaving excess federal appropriation in the DPHHS budget. This package requests a reduction of \$501,030 in federal funds in each year of the biennium.

	General Fund	State Special	Federal Funds	Total Request
FY 2026	\$0	\$0	(\$501,030)	(\$501,030)
FY 2027	\$0	\$0	(\$501,030)	(\$501,030)
Biennium Total	\$0	\$0	(\$1,002,060)	(\$1,002,060)

NEW PROPOSALS

NP 1001 - MTAP APPROPRIATION INCREASE FOR EXPANDED SERVICES – DETD

This new proposal is necessary to increase appropriation and expand services for the MTAP in the DETD. This service will provide equal access to communication for all Montanans with communication challenges in an evolving world of technology advancement, increased population in Montana, and rises in equipment and contractor fees. This service is funded with state special revenue through assessment of a 10-cent fee collected monthly from users of landlines and cell phones. This package requests \$1,003,974 in state special revenue funds for the biennium.

	General Fund	State Special	Federal Funds	Total Request
FY 2026	\$0	\$480,437	\$0	\$480,437
FY 2027	\$0	\$523,537	\$0	\$523,537
Biennium Total	\$0	\$1,003,974	\$0	\$1,003,974

NP 1004 - VOCATIONAL REHAB FOR CLIENTS WITH SDMI OR CO-OCCURRING ILLNESSES - DET

This new proposal is necessary to add four PB for rehabilitation counselors to the budget for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program in the DETD. The increase is needed to provide and coordinate Individualized Placement and Support (IPS) services for clients who live with a Serious and Disabling Mental Illness (SDMI) or co-occurring diagnosis. The funding source for this position is 78.7% federal funds and 21.3% general fund. This package requests \$694,249 in total funds for the biennium, including \$147,874 in general fund and \$546,375 of federal funds.

	General Fund	State Special	Federal Funds	Total Request
FY 2026	\$75,042	\$0	\$277,274	\$352,316
FY 2027	\$72,832	\$0	\$269,101	\$341,933
Biennium Total	\$147,874	\$0	\$546,375	\$694,249

NP 1005 - VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION COUNSELOR AT MT STATE HOSPITAL - DETD

This new proposal adds 1.00 PB for a rehabilitation counselor to the budget for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program in the DETD. The increase is necessary to provide employment and training services to patients who are residing at or discharging from the Montana State Hospital to increase their self-sufficiency and independence. The funding source for this position is 78.7% federal funds and 21.3% general fund. This package requests \$173,561 in total funds for the biennium, including \$36,969 in the general fund and \$136,592 of federal funds.

	General Fund	State Special	Federal Funds	Total Request
FY 2026	\$18,761	\$0	\$69,318	\$88,079
FY 2027	\$18,208	\$0	\$67,274	\$85,482
Biennium Total	\$36,969	\$0	\$136,592	\$173,561

NP 1007 - INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS PROGRAM FOR BLIND/LOW VISION – HOMEMAKER

This new proposal adds 1.0 PB for the DETD. The PB will distribute, and provide training on usage of, equipment assistive technology for individuals adjusting to blindness and vision loss that are not seeking employment. Due to eligibility requirements, these services are currently only available to individuals wishing to maintain, retain, or advance in employment, or those aged 55 and older. This new proposal would provide services to individuals managing the onset of blindness or low vision who do not fit into the other categories. This package requests \$148,092 in general funds for the biennium. This change package is contingent on passage and approval of LCXXX.

	General Fund	State Special	Federal Funds	Total Request
FY 2026	\$75,446	\$0	\$0	\$75,446
FY 2027	\$72,646	\$0	\$0	\$72,646
Biennium Total	\$148,092	\$0	\$0	\$148,092