

Montana Telecommunications Access Program
Minutes: Full Committee Meeting
February 18, 2021
Via Zoom

Committee Members Present: Ron Bibler, chair; Drew Arnot, vice chair; Jim Streeter, Sherri Odlin, Barb Varnum, Cam Tulloch, Jay Preston Tina Shorten, Lisa Cannon, Chanda Hermanson,

Committee Members Absent: John Pavao, Lee Hazelbaker, Tom Thompson

MTAP Staff Present: Mary Taylor, Lisa Gault, Mike Bouchard, Ricky Ballou

Supporting and Contributing Persons Present: Shannon Mackey, budget analyst; Emilie Banasiak, Asia Johnson, Hamilton Relay; Shawn Tulloch, deaf services manager, Stella Woodrum and Trisha Smith, sign language interpreters

Meeting Called to Order:

Committee Chair, Ron Bibler, called the meeting to order and notified the Committee that Vice Chair, Drew Arnot, would be leaving the Committee. Drew shared that his position at Blackfoot Communications was recently eliminated, which essentially disqualifies him from his seat on the Committee (representative from an Independent Service Provider). He recommended a replacement from Blackfoot Communications, Michelle Owens, who is a Regulatory Specialist/Paralegal. He added that she is extremely excited and well qualified to join the Committee.

Approval of Minutes:

Barbara Varnum made the motion to approve the November 2020 minutes and Jim Streeter seconded it. The motion passed.

Public Comment:

No comments.

MTAP Director's Report: Mary Taylor

Mary Taylor opened by letting Vice Chairman Arnot know that he will be missed on the committee and thanked him for his service. She then welcomed Communication Technician, Ricky Ballou, back to the MTAP team. Ricky started back in early January, filling the position previously held by Rex Wolferman.

She then moved on to changes related to the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that the last quarter has seen more in-home visits following the guidelines with masks and social distancing with both the staff and clients.

Ms. Taylor reported that new applications for FY2021 so far was 114, and for February, there was an increase of averaging an application per day.

For outreach, in January MTAP started another six-week newspaper campaign with the Montana Newspaper Association, doing it for two weeks in January, February and March. There are 63 newspapers statewide that are part of this campaign, which markets mostly to smaller towns, though a few larger papers (such as the Bozeman Chronicle, Helena Independent Record, and the Montana Standard) are also included in this effort.

For Facebook, the numbers have gone down this past quarter, November through January. Ms. Taylor thinks this might be because there were not many outreach events during those three months. But she thinks it will pick up now that the MTAP website has been updated. The website updates were completed and active the beginning of February. One of the things added is a resources section and Ms. Taylor is hoping to add more resources as time goes on.

Ms. Taylor submitted the FCC Annual TRS data request that was due on February 22. She coordinated with Hamilton Relay on the report. She also updated the poverty levels in mid-January, which are used to determine financial eligibility for MTAP applicants.

The Hamilton Relay contract is expiring the end of February and Ms. Taylor has been working with Hamilton Relay on a contract amendment that will extend it through February 2023. Under the new contract proposal, the rate for Traditional Relay Services will increase by six cents per minute; the rate for CapTel Services will increase by five cents per minute; the rate for Visually Assisted Speech-to-Speech will increase by eleven cents per minute; and the rate for Remote Conference Captioning will increase by twenty-five cents per minute. Outreach costs will remain the same. Costs proposals are based on recent increases in the Consumer Price Index.

Ms. Taylor also mentioned that the NASRA and TEDPA conferences will not be held in person this fall, as originally planned in Indianapolis. Next year's conferences will be held in Indianapolis instead, though the timeline may be moved up to either Spring or Summer 2022, as it was determined that Fall 2022 is not a fiscally feasible option.

A few committee positions are coming up for renewal in July: Tina Shorten, Sherri Odlin, Jim Streeter, and Jay Preston.

In follow up to the New Applications Report, Barb Varnum noted that there were some that applied but were not eligible. She suggested that perhaps the program consider revising the rules to remove the "low income" requirement, allowing those over income applicants to be served. It was noted that such a change would require Legislative action and that the financial means criteria are part of the Provision of Services in the Montana Codes Annotated.

Jay Preston added that, given the long-term taxes received, over expenses spent, the kind of idea Ms. Varnum is expressing sounds like the kind of idea that would allow more of the funds to be expended for the benefit of the hearing impaired community. Unless something like this is implemented, Mr. Preston indicated that he still objects to MTAP being a "cash cow" for DPHHS, and the Legislature using the funds for other purposes every few sessions.

Budget Report: Shannon Mackey

Shannon Mackey opened with the state fiscal year 2021 budget totals for MTAP as of January 31, 2021, seven months or 58.33% has been completed and five months remain in SFY2021.

Personal services	\$221,783
Operations	\$657,726
FCC Mandate	<u>\$775,000</u>
Total budget	<u><u>\$1,654,509</u></u>

Actual expenses through January 31, 2021

HB2 budget appropriation (48.44% of the \$879,509)	\$425,997
Indirect costs (non-budgeted appropriation)	\$38,666
Prior year expense	\$(7,304)
Fund transfer HB669	<u>\$2,000,000</u>
Total expenses for program	<u><u>\$2,457,359</u></u>

House Bill 2 expenditures through January 31, 2020

Personal services (60.96% of \$221,783 budget)	\$135,197
Operational expenses (44.21% of \$657,726 not including indirect cost)	<u>\$290,800</u>
Total expenses (48.44% of \$879,509 total HB2 budget)	\$425,997

Revenue collected as of January 31, 2021 \$1,086,527

Operating Expenses – YTD \$290,800

- Hamilton Relay: \$116,279
(total relay budget \$278,310; remaining budget \$162,031)
- Outreach: \$67,209
(total outreach budget \$158,231; remaining budget \$91,022)
- Rent/Utilities: \$26,514
(total rent budget \$45,000; remaining budget \$18,486)
- Travel: \$683
(total travel budget \$10,685; remaining budget \$10,002)
- Supplies: \$918
(total supply budget \$12,500; remaining budget \$11,582)
- Distribution equipment (including Teltex): \$57,123
(total equipment budget \$90,000; remaining budget \$32,877)
- Other expenses and equipment: \$2,904
(total other expenses budget \$10,000; remaining budget \$7,096)
- Communications: \$2,674
(total communications budget \$10,000, remaining budget \$7,326)

- Repairs/Maintenance (vehicles) \$22
(total repairs/maintenance budget \$8,000; remaining budget \$7,978)
- Other services - \$16,474
(total other services budget \$35,000; remaining budget \$18,526)

Indirect Costs: Actual costs \$38,666

- Projected costs for SFY 2021 indirect costs are \$73,000

FCC mandate – no expenses projected at this time

A question was posed to Ms. Mackey about some of the line items that appear to be underspent in the budget. She explained that at the time of budget creation, the projections were calculated based on prior year expenses. Since there is anticipation that personal services will be overspent, supplies and communication expenses have been reduced to accommodate for increased personal services expenses. These categories will be realigned with the categories that are underspent to ensure a balancing of the overall budget. Ms. Mackey also added that the new vehicle is not projected to be acquired until the spring. Therefore, the vehicle budget can be reduced down to \$5,000 instead of \$8,000. She explained that the funds can be moved within the operational expenses but not from operational to personal services and vice versa. At the next meeting, the budget alignments will be updated.

DPHHS Report – Chanda Hermanson

Chanda Hermanson opened with the legislative update regarding House Bill 2. She mentioned that when the motion was made at the last session for HB2, it was to be a one-time sweep. But when the governor's budget was published, the sweep continued. It is an error, but it looks like HB2 was not published with the one-time sweep because the motions are made orally in committee, not in writing. That is her current understanding of what might have occurred. The subcommittee has been made aware by the legislative fiscal division, that if this continues as published in the governor's budget, the cap will go negative in two years. They were given four options from the legislative fiscal division, to correct the error. The only motion made was to support the 2021 funding levels for the next biennium and one line item is for employment and transitions. Discussion will be held the next day. The legislative committee gives them appropriations authority and tells them where and from what level of appropriations they have authority over. Ms. Hermanson will learn more about which direction the committee will go on this issue. Discussion ensued among the committee members about the \$2 million coming out of the MTAP program and contacting the MTA.

Ms. Hermanson informed the committee to be aware of Senate Bill 100, which MTAP was included on, where financial means testing would have to take place quarterly and everything would have to be confirmed by commerce and unemployment and the IRS before continuing to serve everyone in the program and an identity test at the time of application. The bill was amended to get MTAP line itemed out, but it still affects recipients who receive SNAP, CHIP, and other supporting programs. Another Senate Bill (186) has to do with procurement, and right now there is an exception in the state procurement rules where human services do not have to go through an RFP process. That impacts all the MTAP contracts. This bill would eliminate the exception. These are the two bills to watch, that could impact the day to day work.

Hamilton Relay Report: Emilie Banasiak and Asia Johnson

Asia Johnson provided a brief update regarding answer performance between January 2020 and January 2021, which has increased by 28%. There has been some fluctuation and usage within the year. Hamilton Relay will be continuing suspension of travel until April 2021. The FCC answer performance waiver helped as numbers were down some months in terms of answering 85% within 10 seconds. For the RCC minutes there has been some fluctuation within the year as well. There was an increase in April of 2020 which was after the pandemic started, as people began switching to virtual meetings. It was noted that minutes went down around the holidays as people were having less meetings.

For outreach, Emilie Banasiak did six webinars coordinating between Hamilton Relay and MTAP where at least two MTAP staff attended all the webinars and helped present. She received a huge response from the community, mainly Gallatin County and Helena. Halfway through this project, surveys were given to rate the presenters, and all got a great response. The first webinar included presenters from the vocational rehabilitation division and the independent living council, and 33 attendees registered for the first webinar; 28 attended, which is an 85% attendance record.

MTAP Equipment Report – Mike Bouchard and Ricky Ballou

Ricky Ballou reported that he and Mike Bouchard have been busy serving more current clients rather than new clients lately, due to some big windstorms that swept through in mid-January that led to power surges and outages that damaged the clients' phone equipment. Approximately seventy percent (70%) of the services that were provided have been mostly over the phone or via email and Mr. Ballou has been surprised at the complexities of problems that he and Mr. Bouchard have been able to solve over the phone. For example, a client had a Panasonic base and two satellite phones in other rooms. The base unit had to be replaced but the satellite phones were operating ok. Mr. Ballou explained that with the base unit, one has to pair up the base unit with the satellite phones, which can be challenging trying to work through with a client over the phone. In this particular case, the call took about 30-40 minutes, first diagnosing what the problem was and then walking through the steps on how to solve that problem. Occasionally Mr. Ballou and Mr. Bouchard do face-to-face visits, generally with clients who have mobility challenges with getting down on their hands and knees. Safety protocols are followed for these in-person client visits and the quality of the services remain high even through providing them in a different way (email and phone).

For outreach, there have been several 911 trainings and the Missoula Office of Emergency Management reached out about doing a training with Montana Relay to ensure access regarding COVID-19 information. That training is self-guided and there is a post training assessment. As of today, 29 out of 32 who took the training passed. Mr. Ballou reached out to those who did not pass and provided more clarity and information. Most everyone at the call center should complete this training by the end of the following week. Mr. Ballou has also done outreach with other agencies, updating them on what current services look like now and answering questions about equipment that MTAP provides. There was some interest in the speech devices for those who are not able to use their voice.

Mike Bouchard will be manning an MTAP booth at the home show in Billings the first weekend in March. He also has been doing test 911 calls if requested and will be co-hosting a training at the MLEA with Mr. Ballou later in March. He has done some training webinars with the Alzheimer's association which he feels helps interaction with MTAP clients who have dementia or Alzheimer's. Mr. Bouchard is still attending the monthly senior coalition via Zoom which consists of senior centers and assisted living places.

Unfinished Business

Jay Preston reminded the Committee that the “FCC Mandate” remains, in essence, the profit of the program. He noted that after 3 years, he has consistently encouraged the Committee to expand their ideas as to how this money could be put to use for the benefit of the “hearing impaired” community. He said that if this could have been done, it should have been addressed in time for the Legislature to consider the ideas. Since this has not occurred, he indicated that he has renewed his thought that if the program is only going to spend a nickel, MTAP should charge a nickel rather than a dime.

New Business –

Hamilton Relay, Inc. Contract Renewal – Mary Taylor explained that since the November meeting she received a “Notice of Desire to Extend Current Contract” letter from Hamilton Relay (in December), which she forwarded onto the Committee via e-mail shortly thereafter. The letter included the proposed rates for the next two years, as Ms. Taylor shared earlier in her Director’s Report. Before proceeding with signatures on the contract renewal with the new rates, Ms. Taylor asked the Committee if they had any questions or concerns regarding the contract amendment. There were no comments or concerns brought forth by the Committee, so the contract will be signed and executed.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:15 p.m.