

Montana Accessible Communications
Minutes: Full Committee Meeting
February 20, 2025
2550 Prospect Ave.
Disability Determination Services conference room
Helena, Montana

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

Committee Members Absent: Bob Terwilliger

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

Supporting and Contributing Persons Present: Sarah Seltzer, deputy administrator (via Zoom); Emilie Banasiak and Allison LaBrie, Hamilton Relay (via Zoom); Hannah Stokes, budget analyst (via Zoom); Shawn Tulloch, VR counselor; Stella Woodrum and Trisha Smith, sign language interpreters; Lisa Lesofski, Lloyd Sparks (via Zoom)

Meeting called to order:

Lisa Cannon called the meeting to order.

Approval of Minutes:

Tina Shorten made a motion to approve the November 2024 minutes as presented. Ron Bibler seconded. All were in favor and motion carried.

Public comment: No public comment.

MTAC Director's report: Mary Taylor

Mary Taylor let the committee know that there is still one opening on the committee for the PSAP position and someone has applied for that position so she is waiting on approval from the Governor's office and hopefully by the next meeting that will be finalized. Five members are up for renewal in July 2025; those members are: Ron Bibler, Lee Hazelbaker, John Pavao, Bob Terwilliger, and Tom Thompson. Instructions on how to reapply were provided and encouraged by Ms. Taylor.

The number of applications the office received last year was 150 applications. So far, this year, there have been 98 applications received. The average is around 14 applications a month. Ms. Taylor said the staff is working hard on outreach with more events in the coming months.

In January 2025, the name of the program was changed from Montana Telecommunications Access Program (MTAP) to Montana Accessible Communications (MTAC). A new commercial was made to announce this

name change and will run for the first few months of the year. Around eight hundred letters were sent out to the last six years of applicants/clients to announce the name change. One positive outcome of sending out the letters was finding clients who have passed away or moved allowing some cleans up of files in the system. MTAC has sent out a letter to colleagues and partners to let them know of the name change and has been busy updating letterheads, envelopes, and other documentation. Tablecloths, banners, and magnetic door signs have been updated with the new name. MTAC will continue to update anything that needs to be updated with the new name.

There are a lot of outreach events coming up with the health/wellness fairs and the home/garden shows that the staff will participate in. There will be another Relay Friendly Business training held during the spring. The relay budget in conjunction with the Hamilton Relay contract runs from March 1st to February 28th. It contains \$20,000 which has been used to buy doodads, craft projects for the Family Learning Weekend, the travel to TEDPA and NASRA for the staff, new clothing, candy/prizes for outreach events and boosting certain advertisements on Facebook. The next big outreach event will be in Lewistown in May 2025, the day before the full committee meeting. The event and meeting are planned to be at the Yogo Inn. Discussion ensued regarding the Yogo Inn, catering, and other options in Lewistown.

For the Facebook report – there were less events to post during the quarter, but Ms. Taylor used advertising money to boost certain posts and that helped with activity and there were more impressions (meaning the number of times that an ad was viewed). The website report which covers the time from October 1st to December 31st, showed that there were some issues and errors because of changes that occurred such as the DPHHS (Dept of Public Health and Human Services) updating their website and the new name for MTAC. There was a high bounce rate for that period, but visits to the website were way up for October mainly due to advertising for the Relay Friendly Business training during that month and people signing up for that training.

There are three contracts up for renewal on June 30th which are the Teltex equipment contract, the Sockeye database software agreement and the Facebook management and advertising contract. The contract with Hamilton Relay was renewed a few years ago for three years so it is not due. However, MTAC is in the final year of that Hamilton Relay contract so Ms. Taylor said that there is going to be a need to do the RFP process and have a new contract by this time next year. This year is the final year to amend the ten-year Teltex contract which was initially executed in May 2016 and expires in May 2026. Ms. Taylor will begin work on this process soon.

The Sockeye database houses the MTAC client and equipment data, and it resides on the server within the State ITSD and the security updates for that are ending in a few years. A decision will need to be made on whether to continue with Sockeye and move online and be hosted by Microsoft or choose another software vendor. If the decision is made to continue to stay with Sockeye, it will cost anywhere between \$25,000 and \$50,000, which would be a one-time cost to convert from on premises to online. This process would include the cost of coding and data migration. An additional \$5,000 would be added each year for hosting the database as well as paying Sockeye \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year. Ms. Taylor discovered that MTAC was one of the last agencies to still be on the server. She would personally like to continue with Sockeye, but that decision needs to be made by the end of the year. Discussion ensued about the Sockeye issue. Ms. Taylor will focus on the equipment and the relay contract with the RFP process and learn what she needs to do to get those two processes going smoothly before focusing on the database, since we have some time to decide.

Ms. Taylor worked with Hamilton Relay on gathering data needed for the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) report and submitted the report on January 31st. For the administrative rules, Ms. Taylor put in a request in October to update the income guidelines as the office is behind a year and she is wanting to update them to the 2024 levels. There is a new online process and Sarah Seltzer worked with Ms. Taylor to figure out how to move the process forward. The hope is that this request will be approved by the director shortly. The last change for the administrative rules is the appeals process and once that process is agreed upon by the Committee, she will begin the process of submitting the forms needed to begin that change.

The staff did several trainings during the quarter such as attending the tribal relations training, the security training, one staff took a winter driving safety course and Ms. Taylor took some supervisor trainings on time management and labor relations.

Budget Report: Hannah Stokes

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

Personal services	\$351,557
Operations	\$599,447
FCC Mandate	<u>\$775,000</u>
Total budget	<u><u>\$1,726,004</u></u>

Actual expenses through January 31, 2025

MTAC program expenditures

HB2 budget appropriation (49% of the \$951,004)	\$470,378
Indirect costs (non-budgeted appropriation)	\$52,512
Prior year expense	(\$51)
Total expenses for program	<u><u>\$522,839</u></u>

House Bill 2 expenditures through January 31, 2025

Personal services (48% of \$351,557 PS projected budget)	\$169,774
Operational expenses (50% of \$599,447 OP projected budget)	<u>\$300,604</u>
Total expenses (49% of \$951,004 total HB2 budget)	\$470,378

Revenue collected as of January 31, 2025 - \$1,239,258

SFY 2025 actual expenses through January 31, 2025

Operating Expenses through January 31, 2025 - SFY 2025 - \$470,378

- Hamilton Relay Services – total expenditures \$19,180
- Outreach – total expenditures \$92,562

- Rent/Utilities – total expenditures \$26,848
- Travel – total expenditures \$6,239
- Supplies – total expenditures \$1,876
- Distribution Equipment – total expenditures \$47,978
- Other Expenses/Equipment – total expenditures \$4,461
- Communications – total expenditures \$4,195
- Repairs/maintenance (vehicles) – total expenditures \$6,102
- Other services – total expenditures \$21,408

Indirect Costs and Prior Year Expenses

- Actual costs for SFY 2025 indirect costs are \$52,512
- FCC mandate – no expenses projected at this time.

Hannah Stokes also discussed the budget for the Sockeye software database with the committee in response to a question as to why the additional costs to move the database to the cloud could not be absorbed by the State Information Technology Services through indirect costs. Mr. Bibler pointed out a technology support charge from the Department of Administration for \$11,000 for six months and questioned what that covered. She let the committee know that it's not just Sockeye that is supported by the IT department, they also do software updates that are pushed to state computers and resolve issues that arise with the state computers.

DPHHS report –Sarah Seltzer

The legislative session is ongoing and keeping people busy. Currently the joint subcommittee on Health and Human Services are working through their executive action. The public is welcome to listen to this process and Ms. Seltzer said she has not heard anything yet regarding any new proposals that affect the MTAC program but that it should come up eventually.

Ms. Seltzer gave some updates on other DET division programs, such as the Disability Determination Services – an agency that makes medical determinations for Social Security, disability and supplemental security income through the Social Security Administration (SSA). The chief for that bureau resigned in January and there is a federal hiring freeze within the SSA so hiring for a new chief will be on hold. The duties for that position have been diffused amongst a few of them, such as Chanda Hermanson and herself and other internal staff. There is a budget analyst position that is vacant now that Shannon Mackey has left from DET (Dept of Employment Transitions) and interviews are ongoing for that position.

A question was posed to Ms. Seltzer about the possibility of the Department of Education being eliminated and how this will affect the vocational rehabilitation agencies in Montana. Ms. Seltzer said there are discussions being had about moving the Vocational Rehabilitation Program to under the Labor Department or to Health and Human Services if the Department of Education is eliminated. She said it is just speculation at this point, but noted that the Vocational Rehabilitation program is in federal statute, so the program itself is not going anywhere.

MTAC Equipment Report – Mike Bouchard and Jeff Haley

Jeff Haley mentioned that he had several outreach events such as the Resource Access Day in Missoula. He said this event was a little different as it focused on unhoused individuals and healthcare. He has also visited a few

senior centers such as Frenchtown and Columbia Falls. His next big event will be the Missoula Home and Garden show in March, and he will attend the annual Blackfoot Communications meeting in April. Mr. Haley mentioned that he has been hearing about landlines going away and letting the committee know that CapTel offers VoIP lines for people. A client doesn't always need a landline, just internet or access to quality internet and they can call CapTel and be given a new phone number. He has noticed an increase in doing this for clients lately.

Mike Bouchard related to the increase of VoIP lines by saying that he sees people having internet or a landline but not often having both. In some cases, some people are unable to afford internet access but need captioning access and he will advise them to try CaptionCall as they will supply a hotspot for them to use. Mr. Bouchard called CaptionCall as he was wondering if they would provide both a hotspot and a VoIP line but they will not do that, only one or the other. Mr. Bouchard shared some stories of client visits that were out of the ordinary for him. He did a Law Enforcement Academy training recently which had a smaller attendance than normal, and the group was more interactive during this presentation which he enjoyed. There will be several outreach events in the spring that he plans to attend such as the home show in Billings, the Three Rivers annual co-op meeting, and the Great Falls Home show all in March. He will be doing a presentation to the Three Rivers staff in April and doing another Law Enforcement Academy training that month as well.

Hamilton Relay Report – Allison LaBrie and Emilie Banasiak

Allison LaBrie was requested by Mary Taylor to share information about the FCC waiver. Recently in November 2024, the FCC issued an order granting a temporary waiver of ASCII requirements for TTY-based relay. This order is effective for two years or until the resolve a related rulemaking. They did look at the number of ASCII users in Montana and there were none according to the call detail records for the last year. They requested to remove that requirement from the current contract and Ms. Taylor approved. The next step will be to send an official notification to the EDP and post an official public notice in an accessible format outlining the discontinuation date, alternative services for those that do have ASCII, and contact information for further assistance. Hamilton Relay confirmed there has not been anyone in Montana that has used the ASCII code for the last five years.

Ms. LaBrie reported that during the time period between October and December of 2024, the traditional relay service (TRS) is to be answered within 10 seconds at 85 percent and that percentage has stayed about 98 percent for October, 97 percent for November and 98 percent for December. For CapTel calls, they are to be answered within 10 seconds at 85 percent and that percentage stayed at 100 percent for those three months.

For the TRS session and conversation minutes – that has fluctuated but has stayed within the average range of minutes. For the quarter, the average was 2,243 session minutes per month and the conversation minutes averaged at 1,100.

For the CapTel service session and conversation minutes – there has been a declining trend nationwide due to the analog-to-digital transition. The quality scores are 173.1 words per minute, 99.59 percent accuracy and a .41 percent rate of error. The standard is 135 words per minute with a 98 percent accuracy and a 2 percent error rate.

The customer care reports for CapTel consisted of wrong number hangups, general information, and equipment request calls and for TRS, there were none for the quarter.

The remote conference captioning minutes fluctuate and tend to spike during the committee meetings.

Emilie Banasiak reported that there have not been any outreach events done during the winter and there were a few she did during the fall. Some events she will be doing in the spring and summer are the Family Learning Weekend and the Relay Friendly Business webinar. She will send Mary Taylor a list of names of businesses that have been certified.

Unfinished business –

MTAC Administrative Rules Status Update – Mary Taylor relayed that the committee had left off from the last committee meeting going through the entire list of changes and all agreed except for the appeals process. Lisa Cannon had contacted the Lieutenant Governor to get some clarification on the open/closed meeting, how many people had to be there, and whether a quorum is needed. The Lieutenant Governor responded that “three members on a subcommittee is not a quorum, nor should the subcommittee be authorized to take any final actions on behalf of the board but only to make recommendations for a full board vote.” “There is a very important exception to the open meetings law that respects the constitutional rights of privacy under Montana Constitution Article 2, section 10 that reads, ‘The presiding officer of any meeting may close the meeting during the time the discussion relates to a matter of individual privacy and if the presiding officer determines that the demands of an individual’s privacy clearly exceed the merits of public disclosure. The right may be waived by the individual about whom the discussion pertains and in that event the meeting must be open.’” “HIPAA matters would fall under this exception.”

Discussion ensued regarding this issue of having a subcommittee listen to appeals. It was agreed that a three-member subcommittee would suffice, and that a hearing before the subcommittee shall be held within 90 days. It was determined that we will leave out clarification on “open” or “closed” meeting, as that is part of the general statute. The subcommittee will make a recommendation to the committee. If the vote is via email, there must be 100 percent participation.

Lee Hazelbaker proposed to accept the changes to the rules. Barbara Varnum seconded it. All in favor and motion carried.

New business –

Contract renewals will be worked on by Mary Taylor to go for another year.

- o Teltex – equipment supplier
- o Sockeye – Database management
- o Devaney – Facebook contractor

Discussion was held on whether to use the service, ASL Now, and whether there is enough interest in pursuing this service.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:03 p.m.