

Montana Accessible Communications
Minutes: Full Committee Meeting
August 21, 2025
Disability Determination Services Conference Room
2550 Prospect Ave, Helena, Montana

Committee Members Present: Lisa Cannon, chair; Tina Shorten, Ron Bibler, Ashlee Logan, Dana Kjersem, Michelle Owens (via Zoom), Tom Thompson (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; Hannah Stokes, budget analyst (via Zoom); Dana Walls and Jamee Feuling, sign language interpreters; Lisa Lesofski

Absent committee members: Christy Eichenlaub, Cam Tulloch, Barbara Varnum

Meeting called to order:

Lisa Cannon called the meeting to order.

Approval of Minutes:

Ron Bibler made a motion to approve the meeting minutes from May 2025. Tina Shorten and Michelle Owens seconded the motion.

Public Comment: none

MTAC Director's report: Mary Taylor

Mary Taylor reported on the status of the Committee, noting that five seats were up for renewal effective July 1, 2025. Three Committee members have submitted their resignations and will not be renewing – Lee Hazelbaker, Bob Terwilliger, and Tom Thompson. Ron Bibler will renew, and John Pavao has retired as of June 30th. Four positions are currently available. Lloyd Sparks is interested in the position representing the Department of Administration that John Pavao has vacated and has submitted his application. The three positions represent the interLATA interexchange carrier (long distance); person with a disability; and non-disabled in business other than telecommunications.

New applications received by the office from July 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025, totaled 164. Compared to the year previously, there was an increase of 13 more applications. For the new fiscal year beginning in July of 2025, the office received 11 new applications which is a little lower than the average of around 14.

Outreach highlights include the Family Learning Weekend which was held at the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind and the Montana Association of the Deaf Conference held in Bozeman. Mike Bouchard did a table event at the Billings Mustangs baseball game towards the end of July and Lisa Gault and Mary Taylor attended a Back-to-School bash in East Helena recently. Jeff Haley shared about MTAC at a Mont COMM event in Missoula which is an annual augmentative and alternative communications event hosted by MonTECH. There

will be a number of upcoming outreach events such as the Veterans Resource and Career Fair and others which Emilie Banasiak will mention during her report later in the meeting.

Ms. Taylor has been working on TV and radio advertising and will have ads during the Montana State University Bobcats and the University of Montana Grizzlies games as well as advertising for the upcoming Relay Friendly Business campaign. There will be a new television advertisement for the relay friendly business campaign that will feature certified relay friendly businesses. The first business to be featured was Solar Montana from Helena. Ms. Taylor mentioned that there also will be advertising in movie theaters and some statewide newspapers.

Recently five new businesses became certified and altogether there are 22 Relay Friendly businesses. The total will increase when more businesses become certified from the last Relay Friendly Business training that was held in April 2025. The next training is scheduled for October 22.

Facebook advertising has gone down a little in terms of reach and interactions. The top performing post was one that invited people to visit the MTAC table at the Billings Mustangs game. The top performing paid post was the announcement of Relay Friendly Businesses that have become certified.

In reference to the MTAC website report, Ms. Taylor noted that the website has been impacted by the agency name change and some changes that the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) have made, which have led to errors in clicking on links that are not correct. A few quarters ago there were 7,855 visitors and this time the number of visits was 731; the average is usually around 4,500.

The contract with Teltex has been executed for one final year, going through May of 2026 which will be the end of the ten-year contract. Ms. Taylor has been researching whether to do an invitation for bid rather than a RFP (request for proposal) to prepare for when the contract expires in May 2026.

The contract with Devaney and Associates for Facebook has gone out for signature and that contract will continue through the year 2030 if continued with one-year increments.

The contract with Sockeye, who manages the client and equipment records management system, is still in process. It's held up due to Sockeye merging with another company named Baker Tilly and the contract having to be revised to reflect this merger. Ms. Taylor will continue to work with the same people that work for Sockeye, but the company will have more resources and more people due to the merger. There is discussion about moving the database from the older server to the newer server and updating the software. After the database is moved to the newer server, in the future there are plans to move it to the Cloud. Ms. Taylor hopes to have all of this done within this fiscal year. It has also been ten years since the contract with Sockeye was originally created so Ms. Taylor will have to go out to bid and she is currently in talks with procurement.

The Hamilton Relay contract expires on February 27, 2026, and Ms. Taylor is researching on doing a sole source contract. She has reached out to other state programs regarding sole source contracting with Hamilton Relay. She mentioned that there are only two relay providers and that is Hamilton Relay and T-Mobile. T-Mobile only offers traditional relay; they do not offer captioning telephone services. Ms. Taylor would like to continue with Hamilton Relay as they provide both the traditional relay and captioning phone services. She has received the sole source documents to fill out and will continue this process. The committee agreed that it was in the best interest to stay with Hamilton Relay under one contract for both services.

Ms. Taylor started the process of requesting another update to the income guidelines, which are based on 250 percent of the 2024 poverty level. It is a lengthy process that goes through DPHHS and the Secretary of State's

office to get signatures. She spoke with the legal department and let them know that the 2025 guidelines came out in January, putting us two years behind. The legal department gave Mary the go ahead to incorporate this change and update the MTAC income guidelines to 2025 instead of 2024 which will be helpful in speeding up and keeping the guidelines current for the Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM). There will be a public hearing on October 31. If there are no comments about the change, everything will be updated to 2025. The difficulty with being behind is that income guidelines cannot be updated in the MTAC database until they are officially adopted through the ARM process, which means some newer applicants who may otherwise be eligible under the 2025 income guidelines may not be served until the official change takes place.

The other change to the MTAC Administrative Rules, which involves numerous updates, including most notably changes to the appeals process and the definition of the income, Ms. Taylor indicated this change is still in process. Ms. Taylor raised a question that MTAC often receives from potential clients, and that is whether “gross income” or “net income” is needed on the application. Since this was not addressed when the revised definition of income was discussed, she asked the Committee if this is something they could define, so it could be included in the current revision that is underway. Tina Shorten made a motion that when working on the red lined version, the word “gross” be inserted in front of “earned income” when speaking of income guidelines. Ron Bibler seconded this. All are in favor.

ASL Now is a service where a widget is placed on the participating businesses website enabling Deaf and hard of Hearing individuals to connect with a Direct Video Calling representative via internet browser to facilitate better communication. This is intended to eliminate a third person relaying the message, which is especially important when it comes to financial matters or health information and give the person more privacy. Ms. Taylor worked with Lloyd Sparks and John Pavao to conduct a survey and sent it to all the State agencies to research if the agencies receive relay calls or from consumers who might need additional assistance. Those responses are currently being collected, and Ms. Taylor will revisit this issue sometime in September. One option is to include all of DPHHS division and see which agencies use the service during the three-month test pilot. It would be about \$1,520 per month for 35 hours of support/week and close to \$18,240 dollars a year. If 24-hour service is added, it would be \$40 an hour for each additional hour per day.

In reference to distribution of smart devices, Ms. Taylor reminded the committee that smart devices are only distributed to Deaf clients who use ASL as their primary mode of communication, or in situations where speech or mobility challenges inhibit communication. She suggested MTAC expand this to include those with profound hearing loss, requiring captions to read. Discussion ensued in situations where people self-certify their hearing loss to get a free CapTel phone and how to determine who gets iOS devices based on hearing loss or not. It can be complex depending on the client’s situation and oftentimes the client is given more than one phone. The general consensus is for staff to use their discretion on who gets what kind of phone based on their individual situation including and recommendations from their audiologist or SLP.

Ms. Taylor mentioned that the program has been approved for more funding – \$480,537 for the fiscal year of 2026 and \$523,537 for the fiscal year of 2027. Plans are to increase equipment cost through a new contract, changing the income definition and offering some additional devices as well and moving the database to the cloud and possible future outreach costs as well as ordering more doodads with the new agency name. She foresees that more interpreter services will be needed for training on the cell phones and the iPads, added travel costs, new staff being hired, offering another committee member to attend the conferences and additional office space for the new employees.

Budget Report: Hannah Stokes

Hannah Stokes reported on the state fiscal year 2025 budget totals for MTAC as of June 30, 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 June 30, 2025

MTAC program expenditures

HB2 budget appropriation (94% of the \$951,004)	\$896,822
Indirect costs (non-budgeted appropriation)	\$94,532
Prior year expense	(\$6)
Total expenses for program	<u><u>\$991,349</u></u>

House Bill 2 expenditures through June 30, 2025

Personal services (90% of \$351,557 PS projected budget)	\$313,284
Operational expenses (97% of \$599,447 OP projected budget)	<u>\$583,538</u>
Total expenses (94% of \$951,004 total HB2 budget)	<u>\$896,822</u>

Revenue collected as of June 30, 2025 - \$1,655,115

SFY 2025 actual expenses through June 30, 2025

Operating Expenses through June 30, 2025 - SFY 2025 - \$583,538

- Hamilton Relay Services – total expenditures \$35,147
- Outreach – total expenditures \$184,800
- Rent/Utilities – total expenditures \$45,818
- Travel – total expenditures \$15,975
- Supplies – total expenditures \$3,933
- Distribution Equipment – total expenditures \$75,762
- Other Expenses/Equipment – total expenditures \$9,211
- Communications – total expenditures \$8,916
- Repairs/maintenance (vehicles) – total expenditures \$11,388
- Other services – total expenditures \$36,690

Indirect Costs and Prior Year Expenses

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

DPHHS report – Sarah Seltzer

Lisa Cannon read an update from Sarah Seltzer as follows: Job descriptions have been written and submitted to human resources for two vocational rehabilitation counselors specializing in working with people with significant behavioral health needs, one Vision Rehab Therapist to support the Blind Adjustment Program and two new MTAC positions which are an additional Communications Technician and an Outreach Specialist. Once the position numbers have been assigned, recruitment can begin.

The Vocational Rehabilitation program went into order of selection on July 28th, meaning people applying for services who were determined to be priority categories 2 or 3 are first on the wait list and there are about 215 people on that list as of this note.

The Division received approval from Social Security Administration to hire internally for the Disability Determination Services Bureau Chief. Interviews were held last week and there is someone to fill the position in the coming weeks.

MTAC Equipment Report – Mike Bouchard and Jeff Haley

Mike Bouchard shared about events he has done such as attending the Billings Clinic Cancer Center Celebration of Life and the Billings Mustangs game. He had more interaction with people at this game compared to past events. He did a training presentation at the Law Enforcement Academy recently and discovered that Musselshell County has Text-to-911 capabilities. This new information hopefully will be added to the FCC website citing counties that have Text-to-911. There has been no change yet with Flathead or Daniels County. Mr. Bouchard said he was informed that Daniels County would begin getting the equipment to enable this but as of this date, he has not met with dispatchers from that county to see if that has been updated. For upcoming outreach, Mr. Bouchard will attend the Montana Health Care Association event and a new one in Great Falls, the Women's Expo. He will have another presentation for the Montana Law Enforcement Academy in November. He has done another television commercial for the agency. Mr. Bouchard shared copies of instructions on how to use the Live Captions feature on the iOS and the Android phones. The apps caption any audio on the phones, such as FaceTime, podcasts, or anything else.

Jeff Haley discussed his outreach to senior centers in western Montana and an event he attended, MontCOMM which is sponsored by MonTECH. MonTECH invited Mr. Haley to do a table and most of the vendors in attendance were Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) app providers and others that serve speech and language pathologists (SLPs) around the state. The event had two main areas, one for families and one for educators and the SLPs. Mr. Haley spoke to both groups and had the table in between the two areas. He felt this event was a benefit in reaching out to school districts and children who are in special education to make them aware of what MTAC provides.

Hamilton Relay Report – Allison LaBrie and Emilie Banasiak

Allison LaBrie went over the quarterly update through June 2025 with the traditional relay service (TRS) percentage of calls answered in ten seconds, being at 99 percent, which is still well above the 85 percent requirement. For the CapTel service percentage of calls answered in ten seconds, it's 100 percent and above the requirement. The TRS session and conversation minutes remain in the average range and the CapTel session and conversation minutes are declining. The quality scores for the most recent month of June for TRS are above

60 words per minute with a 95 percent accuracy rate requirement. The quality scores for the CapTel relay are above the required 135 words per minute and a 98 percent accuracy rate.

Customer care contacts for TRS that cover April, May, and June mainly consisted of wrong number hangups and two compliments for the Communication Assistants (CAs) and one general information call relating to Real Time Text (RTT). For CapTel customer care contacts, one was for information about setting up one line and the other was a compliment for a CA.

The remote conference captioning minutes tend to increase during the committee meetings and remain low otherwise.

Emilie Banasiak reported on events that she has done for outreach such as the Relay Friendly Business webinar in April and the Family Learning Weekend in Great Falls, where she helped with the craft activity hosted by the MTAC staff and moderated a support group for moms, in addition to presenting. For upcoming outreach, she will be attending the Governor's Conference on Aging, another Relay Friendly Business webinar and the Montana Youth Transitions conference.

Unfinished business – No unfinished business to discuss.

New business – Review MTAC Strategic Plan – documents were handed out.

Action Item – Approve FY2026 budget – Ron Bibler made a motion to approve the FY2026 budget and Michelle Owens seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:54 PM.