

Testimony for Appropriations Committee

Thursday, January 13, 2005

Mr. Chairman:

Thank you very much for the opportunity to address the appropriations committee today. With my history of involvement with the Montana Telecommunications Access Program (MTAP), I enjoy the opportunity to provide information on its role and how that role is being filled.

I am a former legislator and I helped lobby the original bill along with Ben Havdahl and others that authorized this program. I was on the original board of directors for ten years, chairman for one year. The goal was to provide equal access to Montanans with disabilities that affect their ability to use the telephone. I'm happy to say that today

that goal is being met. The relay service, which enables calls between those who use a traditional phone and those who must use a TTY keyboard-based telephone, saw usage between 25,000 and 30,000 minutes every month.

Federal law requires that citizens with disabilities must be provided with equal access to the telephone system. Since the Americans with Disabilities Act, ADA, passed in 1990, it is a civil right. In Montana, it is MTAP and the relay which keeps us in compliance with the law.

With a staff of only five people (and they spent half the year with three positions vacant) MTAP served 839 consumers who needed assistive telephone equipment last year. This is a program that carries out its mission without growing into a bloated bureaucracy. The new director, Connie Phelps, has made a tremendous effort to create an

atmosphere of dedicated public service, and the result is an office that has improved tremendously in ease of access, response time to consumer requests, and compliance with state and federal policy.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you and the members of the committee for your attention, and I'll be happy to answer any questions you might have. And if I don't know the answer, I will get it for you.

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