

Testimony of Gayle Shirley, Public Information Officer, DPHHS

in support of Senate Bill 428

Senate Energy & Telecommunications Committee

Feb. 15, 2005

Good afternoon Chairman Toole and members of the committee.

My name is Gayle Shirley, and I'm the public information officer for the Department of Public Health and Human Services. I'm here today on behalf of the department to support Senate Bill 428.

This bill will initiate the process of developing a statewide 2-1-1 telephone service similar in concept to 9-1-1.

2-1-1 will help connect Montanans quickly and easily to disaster, emergency, safety, health, and human service programs—programs that you and your local and federal counterparts recognize as crucial to the well-being of our citizens. It will also help alleviate inappropriate, non-emergency calls to 9-1-1. That will free law enforcement officials to respond more efficiently to life-and-death emergencies.

The idea behind this bill is not new. There are already seven states operating statewide 2-1-1 centers, including Idaho and North Dakota. A national coalition, created by United Way of America and the Alliance of Information & Referral Systems, has been advocating for a national 2-1-1 system for more than five years. And Congress is currently considering a bill to create one. The federal legislation includes an appropriation of \$200 million a year and would require states to do exactly what this bill does: designate a lead agency to receive federal funding.

As the state agency primarily responsible for administering health and human service programs, we at DPHHS see many advantages to a 2-1-1 system. If any of you have tried to find long-term nursing care for an elderly parent, day care for your children, or housing assistance for an unemployed constituent, you know that there is a myriad of nonprofit and government programs out there. They all have different eligibility requirements and offer different benefits at different costs. Even we at DPHHS have trouble sometimes navigating the complicated web of health and human service programs in Montana. 2-1-1 will help connect each citizen with the program that most appropriately serves his or her needs.

By dialing 2-1-1, citizens will be assured of getting referrals to reputable, stable programs that can meet their individual needs. And this one-stop service will be offered around the clock, 24/7. Help will be available precisely when Montanans need it.

In addition to creating day-to-day access to health and human service programs, a 2-1-1 system will be invaluable during a disaster or emergency. It will offer a means of sharing accurate and credible information with the public. DPHHS is required by the state's emergency operations plan to provide a public hotline in the event of a disaster. 2-1-1 would enable us to meet this requirement easily and at no additional cost. And citizens would already be accustomed to using 2-1-1 to get information. We wouldn't have to establish a brand-new hotline and then educate citizens about its existence.

In Florida, after Hurricane Charley, 2-1-1 fielded 5,000 calls a day from people needing essential information on how to respond to and recover from the disaster. I think that speaks to the public's need for answers when disaster strikes.

Finally, a 2-1-1 system would provide DPHHS with valuable feedback that would help us anticipate demands for services and mobilize resources to meet changing needs. And it will free our staff from answering phone calls from people they're not able to help through the programs we manage.

As we interpret this bill, it does not require the department to operate a 2-1-1 system. It asks us to oversee its study, design, implementation, and support. Nonetheless, we do not believe the department can absorb the costs of administering 2-1-1 without hiring an additional FTE. Those costs are outlined in the fiscal note. Some of the other costs associated with this bill stem from the travel and per diem for as many as 25 members. You may want to consider reducing the size of the coalition as a way to reduce costs.

A state coalition created by executive order of the governor has been working voluntarily for the past several months to get 2-1-1 off the ground. Some of them are here today and will testify in favor of SB 428. They have worked hard to identify alternative funding sources for 2-1-1, including grants from the Department of Homeland Security and the National Library of Medicine.

I want to commend and thank the coalition for its hard work and for thinking outside the box in exploring funding options. I also want to thank Senator Stapleton for taking the lead in creating this valuable service in Montana. Finally, I want to thank all of you for your thoughtful consideration and for the opportunity to speak to you today. I would be happy to try to answer any questions you might have.

