

**Testimony of Gayle Shirley, Public Information Officer, DPHHS  
in support of Senate Bill 428  
Senate Finance & Claims Committee  
March 10, 2005**

Good morning Chairman Cooney 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.

As you've already heard, this bill begins 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 social service resources. That includes the many programs in our Department—programs that you as lawmakers have determined to be crucial to the well-being of our citizens. 2-1-1 can also help to alleviate inappropriate, non-emergency calls to 9-1-1. That frees emergency personnel to respond more efficiently to life-and-death situations.

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 the United Way of America and the Alliance of Information & Referral Systems, has been advocating for a nationwide 2-1-1 system for more than five years. And Congress is currently considering a bipartisan bill—sponsored by Senators Dole and Clinton—to create one. It includes an appropriation of \$150 million a year and will require states to do exactly what this bill does: designate a lead state agency to receive federal funding.

This bill was not the Department's idea. Nor was it the sponsor's idea. It's the result of a grass-roots effort by individuals from across the state who saw a need for a one-stop

information and referral system for health and social service information. Several of them are here today and will speak to this bill. They've already been meeting for about a year and a half, exploring implementation and funding alternatives for 2-1-1. They've successfully negotiated grants from the National Library of Medicine, the United Way Foundation of America and others, and they're actively pursuing additional revenue sources. They're determined to make this happen. They're asking for state involvement because they want to be sure that:

1. 2-1-1 is available to all Montanans in every corner of the state,
2. the system meets the same high standards of service statewide, and
3. the state can get a share of any federal funding that becomes available for 2-1-1.

As the state agency primarily responsible for administering health and human service programs, we at DPHHS also 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 out-of-work constituent, you know there's an ever-expanding maze of nonprofit and government programs out there. They all seem to have different eligibility requirements and offer different benefits at different costs. Even we at DPHHS have trouble navigating this maze.

2-1-1 will make a simple but critical connection between needy individuals and families and the appropriate community-based organizations and government programs that may be able to help them. And this one-stop service will be offered around the clock, 24/7. Help will be available exactly when Montanans need it.

In addition to creating day-to-day access to health and human service programs, 2-1-1 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 allow us to meet this requirement easily and at little additional cost. More importantly, 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 while in the middle of a crisis.

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—and an efficient method for supplying them—when disaster strikes.

Finally, a 2-1-1 system will provide DPHHS with valuable feedback that will 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 that we at DPHHS are not able to help.

As we interpret this bill, it does not require the Department to operate a 2-1-1 system. It simply asks us to oversee its study, design, implementation, and support. That's why the fiscal note reflects only the costs of hiring one additional FTE to administer the 2-1-1 program and the costs of facilitating the work of an advisory coalition, primarily travel costs. The 2-1-1 Community Coalition will be responsible for drafting an implementation plan and identifying ongoing sources of funding to start up and maintain the 2-1-1 system.

I want to commend and thank the 2-1-1 supporters here today for their hard work and for thinking outside the box in exploring funding options. I also want to thank Senator Stapleton for taking the lead in spreading this valuable service across 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.

