



HELP-Link Program

2016 Annual Report

Montana Department of Labor & Industry
Commissioner Pam Bucy

The 2015 Montana Legislature established HELP-Link, a new workforce training program aimed at improving the employment outcomes and wages of individuals who receive health insurance through the Montana HELP Plan and whose household incomes are under 138% of the federal poverty line. HELP-Link officially launched January 1, 2016.

This report provides background information on the program, participation levels, and outcomes of participants for the first year of the program (2016). In 2016, HELP-Link reached roughly 8,000 Montanans enrolled in Montana HELP Plan, with 5,823 individuals receiving staff-assisted services while enrolled in the plan. 1,400 Montanans have participated specifically in HELP-Link, with 608 completing the program successfully. Preliminary findings suggest improved employment and wage outcomes for clients completing the program.

Executive Summary

HELP-Link is a voluntary workforce program specifically designed to assist individuals participating in the Montana HELP Plan (also known as Medicaid Expansion) in order to improve their employment and wage outcomes. After Senate Bill 405 passed the 2015 Legislature, the Montana Department of Labor & Industry (MTDLI) quickly tackled the challenges of implementing this new workforce program. Results from the first year mirror the participation rates and participant costs of similar federal workforce programs, with positive impacts on employment and wages among those completing the program.

- Over 7,900 Montana HELP Plan enrollees connected with MTDLI through the HELP-Link survey in 2016. Survey contacts are expected to exceed the goal of 10,000 people by the end of the fiscal year.
- Over 7,426 people received Department of Labor & Industry services while enrolled in Montana HELP Plan during 2016. Many of these individuals were enrolled in federal workforce programs rather than HELP-Link in order to stretch state dollars.
- 1,398 people have participated specifically in HELP-Link in the first year of the program.
- Enrollment at the end of 2016 was 790 people, with the remaining 608 people having successfully completed the program.
- Roughly 636 Montana HELP Plan enrollees received training through MTDLI programs. The majority of these people were funded through federal workforce programs in order to stretch state dollars.
- The most common occupations pursued by HELP-Link participants in 2016 were truck drivers, nursing assistants, registered nurses, and bookkeepers.
 - Registered nurses earned a median wage of roughly \$60,000 in Montana (2015 data), which is likely enough to lift a family of five out of poverty and above the Medicaid expansion eligibility threshold.
 - The remaining occupations listed have median wages between \$32,000 and \$42,000 per year, which would be enough to lift families out of poverty, and would place individuals and small families of two people above the Medicaid expansion eligibility threshold.
- Among clients with significant retraining needs, 78% of those who finished their training found employment.
- Among clients who did not need extensive services, 72% had higher wages after completing HELP-Link. Full analysis on wage and employment outcomes was not available at the end of 2016 because of the short lifetime of the program.

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Introduction

Senate Bill 405 (2015 Session) established the Montana Health and Economic Livelihood Partnership (HELP) Plan to expand Medicaid healthcare coverage in Montana for eligible adults with incomes up to 138% of the federal poverty threshold. SB 405 was also known as Medicaid Expansion and was introduced by Senator Ed Buttrey (SD 13, Great Falls). This legislation also authorized the Montana Department of Labor & Industry (MTDLI) to administer a workforce development program in conjunction with the health coverage component.

HELP-Link was designed to improve the wage earnings of Montana HELP Plan participants through workforce and employment services training, with the goal of improving wages enough to reduce long-term dependence on Medicaid. HELP-Link officially launched on January 1, 2016. This report provides information about the HELP-Link program and provides participation levels for the first year of the program.

The creation of a new government program was a significant undertaking, including the creation of new data and reporting systems, information technology costs to coordinate data across agencies, and staff time for training and promulgation of policies. In order to minimize costs and get the program launched as quickly as possible, the Department used policies and procedures from existing workforce programs, reducing staff training time. This method also promoted clear and consistent rules across programs.

The primary benefit of participation in HELP-Link is the individualized career planning and training assistance to low-income workers, helping them move up the career ladder to more secure, stable, and higher-paying employment. All HELP-Link clients are required to complete a career assessment and plan. Some HELP-Link clients also qualify for education or work-based learning funding up to \$12,000 for in-demand jobs. Not all of the funding for training comes from HELP-Link. This initiative leverages funding from multiple federal and state workforce programs in order to maximize limited dollars.

In addition, participation in HELP-Link or other qualifying workforce programs may help HELP Plan recipients remain covered by the Montana HELP Plan if they fail to pay their premiums or copayments when due. SB405 requires that Montana HELP Plan recipients pay premiums and copays for Medicaid health coverage. Failure to pay premiums or co-pays will result in a cancellation of coverage and disenrollment from the HELP Plan program, unless the individual meets two of four criteria. The four criteria are:

7,426

HELP Plan Enrollees have received career planning assistance

107

have received educational training paid for by HELP-Link

100

Receiving training through Registered Apprenticeship Program

Program Summary:

*HELP-Link provides **individualized career planning and training assistance** to help individuals move up the career ladder to more secure and stable employment at higher wage levels. HELP-Link participation also helps participants qualify for the disenrollment exemption, allowing them to retain health coverage if payment of premiums or copays is overdue. The **individual still must pay the amount owed**, with settlement occurring on their tax return.*

- Participation in a qualifying workforce program (HELP-Link);
- Participation in a wellness program;
- Be a recently discharged veteran; or
- Enrolled in a for-credit course at an accredited college in Montana.¹

Individuals meeting two of the four criteria qualify for the disenrollment exemption, and will not lose their health coverage due to overdue premiums and copays. The disenrollment exemption does not waive their debt. Even with the exemption, the participant still must pay premiums or co-pays, with payments collected through the tax system, if not paid earlier. Stated simply, HELP-Link provides participants with career assistance and can help them maintain health coverage while delaying payment of premiums and copayments.

During 2016, over 7,426 people received MTDLI services while enrolled in Montana HELP Plan enrollees. Roughly 2,200 people used MTDLI services to the extent that they met the workforce requirement for the disenrollment exemption during 2016. Among those who met the workforce requirement, 1,398 people participated specifically in HELP-Link. Two other workforce programs also qualify as satisfying the requirements needed to meet the workforce requirement.

The report is organized as follows: Section 1 describes HELP-Link processes, including how participants can enroll, receive assistance, and how the program relates to the Montana HELP Plan; Section 2 provides HELP-Link workforce outcomes, including higher employment levels and higher wages; and Section 3 describes HELP-Link participant demographics.

¹ The student exemption may not be claimed for more than four years. In addition, the college must offer a minimum of an associate's degree.

HELP-Link Processes

HELP-Link is a voluntary workforce development program available to individuals enrolled in Montana HELP Plan to provide employment and training assistance. The goal is for clients to move up the career ladder and find more stable employment, ideally reducing the likelihood of their dependence on the Montana HELP Plan for health insurance.

The HELP-Link Enrollment Process

When Montanans enroll in Montana HELP Plan, they automatically receive a survey about their employment situation, barriers to employment, and an offer to participate in MTDLI workforce programs. The completion of this survey starts the HELP-Link enrollment process. In 2016, roughly 8,000 Montanans completed the HELP-Link survey. The responses to this survey are further discussed in the “HELP-Link Participants Demographics” section.

To continue the enrollment process, the individual must make an in-person visit to a Job Service Montana office. During the visit, individuals review their assessment with a workforce consultant, gain assistance completing an Individualized Employment Plan, and receive labor market information about in-demand jobs in the area. Once an individual completes these steps and signs their Individualized Employment Plan, they become a HELP-Link participant. These steps are illustrated in Figure 1. Participants must complete a qualifying workforce planning, training, or job search activity every 90 days to remain active in HELP-Link.

HELP-Link is Building Montana’s Workforce:

HELP-Link is building Montana’s workforce by providing comprehensive and intensive one-on-one employment services and by training clients in order to improve their employment and wage outcomes, ultimately reducing their reliance on the Montana HELP Plan. Enrollees have many different reasons for using this health insurance program. Some individuals are temporarily on Montana HELP Plan after an accident or medical issue that prohibits them from fully engaging in the labor market. Others have fallen on hard times, and are working their way back up a



career ladder. Still others are persistently in poverty or close to poverty, often with low levels of education and training. Because of the wide range of employment barriers, HELP-Link program allows for flexibility and customized assistance.

HELP-Link assists participants in five ways:

- Employment services and career planning
- Workforce and educational training
- Subsidized wages in work based learning
- Supportive services
- Referrals to other service providers

These five tools are reviewed in more detail below. Because of the comprehensive level of service provided, HELP-Link clients often come into contact with representatives of different government and non-profit agencies. Cases are handled with a team approach so that Job Service Office staff can coach clients through the often-confusing array of applications and paperwork needed to enter training programs.

HELP-Link Provides Employment Services

Once enrolled in HELP-Link, Job Service Montana staff provide them with low-cost employment services to help them connect with their local labor market. These services include resume assistance, mock interview practice, and information about local job opportunities.

Using the information gathered from the HELP-Link survey, Job Service staff create an individualized employment plan with participants that specifies the trainings suggested for improved employability. Workforce consultants direct participants into a good career matching their interests; provide information on in-demand jobs, wages and benefits; or use the Montana Career Information System (MCIS).

Figure 2 summarizes the services clients received in 2016. Workforce information services and intensive services are the most common because they are required to become a HELP-Link participant. Meetings with clients to provide these employment services last at least one hour, but clients with more intensive needs often require employment guidance involving four hours or more of staff time. Case management for HELP-Link clients costs roughly \$200 per client (excluding staff time paid for by other workforce programs).

Roughly 90% of HELP-Link participants in 2016 only needed minimal, low-cost employment services to help them find better-paying employment (low-

Figure 2. Employment Services Provided	
Service Category	Count
Career Guidance	347
Career Assessment Inventory	27
Career Interest Inventory	24
Interest Profiler - Onet	22
Other - Testing and Interpretation	10
Montana Career Information System Assessment and Profile	141
PEP- Personalized Employment Plan and Career Testing	8
TABE	25
Job Search Services	1,075
Application Instructions & guidance including ATS	249
Assistance with job matching	259
Cover Letter Assistance	144
Interview Tips & Guidance	130
Job Development	54
Job Seeker Workshops	77
Resume Assistance	530
Workforce Information Services	1,398
Job Identification of high growth / high demand	213
Labor force supply and demand	570
Short and long term projections	102
Employer Wage/Benefit Trends	84
Intensive Services	1,398
Total Active Participants with a Service	1,398
<i>Notes: Data compiled on 1/04/17. Excludes services that occurred before they became an active participant.</i>	

Among low-cost clients who were employed at the time of enrollment,

72%

are now earning higher wages.

cost services include resume assistance, job search, career planning, and other staff-provided advice and training). Employment services and individualized career planning is an efficient and effective tool to help improve participant's employment and wage outcomes. Among employed participants, roughly 72% achieved higher wages after receiving only employment and career planning services.

Workforce and Educational Training for HELP-Link Enrollees

While employment and career planning services can be an efficient cost-effective way of connecting individuals with their local labor market, some HELP-Link participants elect more significant investments in their economic well-being by participating in a workforce or educational training program, such as obtaining a degree or certification. HELP-Link provides funding for individuals to pursue education and training programs in careers that fit the participant's interests and are in-demand.

Individuals interested in high-demand careers in healthcare, manufacturing, and energy can receive up to \$12,000 for tuition assistance. Other careers must still be in-demand (based on labor market projections), but are only be eligible for \$6,000 assistance. If individuals receive supportive services or subsidized wages in addition to training dollars, the total amount of all funding must be within the limit. HELP-Link funding does not supplant funding available to participants through college financial aid offices, scholarships, or other funding sources.

Over 635 HELP Plan Medicaid enrollees received workforce training paid for by the Montana Department of Labor & Industry during 2016. However, only 107 people received funding through HELP-Link, at an average cost of approximately \$3,000 per person. Other federal workforce funding was used to maximize program dollars.

Some of the most common careers pursued by participants who received funding for training were heavy tractor-trailer truck drivers, nursing assistants, registered nurses, and bookkeeping and accounting clerks. The average wage for these occupations is \$20,000 above the reported 2015 average wage of Montana HELP Plan recipients. Figure 3 lists the most common occupations pursued by HELP-Link participants and the Montana median wage for those occupations. Many of the occupations offer wages high enough to lift the individual and their family above the HELP Medicaid eligibility threshold. For example, the median wage for registered nurses of roughly \$60,000 would likely be enough to raise a family of five out of poverty and above the Montana HELP Plan eligibility threshold. Truck driver wages of \$41,360 would be sufficient to lift a small family out of poverty and above the eligibility threshold.²

Workforce training can also cover the classroom or formalized training portion of apprenticeship training. The time-honored training model of apprenticeships offer HELP-Link clients the chance to earn a paycheck while learning the skills businesses need to grow and expand their operations. Apprenticeships combine on-the-job training with classroom learning leading to an industry-recognized credential.

² MTDLI cannot determine the number of people who will be above the threshold because information on family size and other sources of income is not captured by MTDLI.

Figure 3. Most Common Occupations Pursued by Montana HELP Plan Participants

OCCUPATION PURSUED	COUNT	PERCENT	Median Wage
<i>Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers</i>	49	8.75%	\$41,360
<i>Nursing Assistants</i>	41	7.32%	\$24,360
<i>Registered Nurses</i>	36	6.43%	\$60,720
<i>Bookkeeping, Accounting, and Auditing Clerks</i>	16	2.86%	\$32,810
<i>Medical Assistants</i>	15	2.68%	\$30,580
<i>Executive Secretaries and Executive Administrative</i>	14	2.50%	\$43,340
<i>Medical Records and Health Information Technicians</i>	13	2.32%	\$31,370
<i>Hairdressers, Hairstylists, and Cosmetologists</i>	10	1.79%	\$24,990
<i>Retail Salespersons</i>	9	1.61%	\$22,460
<i>Healthcare Support Workers, All Other</i>	9	1.61%	\$31,950
<i>Personal Care Aides</i>	7	1.25%	\$21,980
<i>Landscaping and Groundskeeping Workers</i>	7	1.25%	\$24,370
<i>Receptionists and Information Clerks</i>	7	1.25%	\$27,140
<i>Office Clerks, General</i>	7	1.25%	\$27,950
<i>Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses</i>	7	1.25%	\$39,420
<i>Carpenters</i>	7	1.25%	\$40,480
<i>Substance Abuse & Behavioral Disorder Counselors</i>	6	1.07%	\$38,550
<i>Welders, Cutters, Solderers, and Brazers</i>	6	1.07%	\$36,550
<i>Elementary School Teachers, Except Special Ed.</i>	6	1.07%	\$48,550

Source: MTDLI compiled on 1/4/17. Median wages reported by May 2015 Occupational Employment Statistics (OES).

HELP-Link Enrollees Receive Funding for Training

HELP-Link clients can opt for receiving job-based training, with some clients receiving subsidized wages to compensate employers for the additional training requirements of the client. Formalized apprenticeships and work-based learning experiences help to develop soft or job-specific skills prior to obtaining a license or credential.

During 2016, over 100 HELP Plan enrollees participated in Registered Apprentice programs through the Montana Department of Labor & Industry. Only 11 of these individuals received subsidized wages through HELP-Link. Other apprentices were not receiving wage subsidies, or were funded through other federal workforce training dollars. Subsidized wages for work-based training were the most expensive component of HELP-Link supports on a per-client basis in 2016, with an average cost of roughly \$5,500 per client.

HELP-Link Enrollees Receiving Training and Employment Services

HELP-Link participants enrolled in training or work-based learning programs are also eligible to receive supportive services from MTDLI. Supportive services refer to financial assistance provided to address specific employment barriers identified by the staff and client in the Individualized Employment Plan, including paying for textbooks, tools, or transportation needs. Supportive services often pay for gas, auto repairs, work-related tools, and other financial barriers that might prevent a client from attending educational or work-based learning. MTDLI is able to step in and provide assistance to make sure Montanans continue working or switch to better-paying, more suitable jobs. Because of a limited budget and the high cost of addressing some barriers, staff and program managers closely review supportive service payments.

Supportive services are often the difference between retaining employment and moving up the career ladder or losing a job for clients. One participant was a commercial truck driver looking for way to stay closer to home and care for his family (which includes a special needs child). He received a local job offer paying several dollars more per hour, but the job required him to bring his own tools. HELP-Link was able to purchase the needed tools, allowing the client to obtain a steady, good-paying job and care for his family.

Another enrollee was seeking to move into employment as a truck driver, but he needed a commercial driver's license for employment. Through HELP-Link, he received funding for a portion of training costs, rent assistance while in training, boots needed for work, a background check, a Department of Transportation physical test, and reimbursement of travel costs to earn a hazardous materials endorsement. After completing training, he quickly found employment. Success stories like these were heard across Montana about HELP-Link participants. In 2016, roughly 100 individuals received intensive one-on-one supportive services through HELP-Link with an average payment of \$970.

Not all supportive services were paid through HELP-Link specific funds. MTDLI leveraged funding through federal Workforce Innovations & Opportunities Act (WIOA) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding to stretch program dollars. These collaborations between MTDLI and the Montana Department of Health & Human Services (DPHHS) provide seamless support for participants working towards employment success and self-sufficiency.

Michelle Likens

HELP-Link Enrollee

HELP-Link enrollment process and developed an employment plan. Supportive services were needed to help Michelle pay her rent during the month of January, obtain a pre-paid phone card so she could make phone calls related to job interviews and day care, and purchase appropriate professional clothing for an upcoming interview. Job Service staff also assisted Michelle in picking out a wardrobe for work that included scrubs, professional clothing, and shoes. Michelle was hired at Eastern Montana Industries by the end of the year, and is currently working full-time in a group home.

Referrals to Other Service Providers

HELP-Link clients often face multiple challenges that prevent them from being able to pursue, obtain, and keep a high wage job. These barriers may include lack of transportation, lack of housing, lack of childcare, poor physical health, mental illness, and domestic violence. While many of these barriers can be addressed through HELP-Link, some are more appropriately addressed by other government agencies or nonprofits.

Figure 4 illustrates the number and type of referrals recorded for HELP-Link clients. The table only includes clients who received services and funding specifically through the HELP-Link program, not through other workforce programs. The most common referrals were to an employer for a specific job, to WIOA or other workforce program providers, or to the Office of Public Assistance (i.e. housing, subsidized childcare, food stamps, or TANF).

Figure 4. Referrals

REFERRAL	COUNT	REFERRAL	COUNT
Auxiliary aides and services for participants with disabilities	20	Placement to a Job	33
Childcare	25	Referred To WIA Services	217
Financial counseling	13	Referred to Training	38
Health care	34	Referred to WIOA	468
Housing	25	Referred to WIOA2	121
Internet Services	23	SNAP/Food Stamps	63
Job Referral	829	TANF	9
Placed in Other Employment	85	Transportation	24
Placed in Training	180	Vet Referred To WIA Training	12
Placed in WIA	246	Vocational Rehabilitation	104
Total			1,162

Notes: Data compiled on 1/04/17. Excludes referrals that occurred before they became an active participant.

Healthcare, internet service, or financial counseling referrals are often made for clients whose lack of a job has put them in a tenuous financial situation, including having difficulties paying bills, declining consumer credit, or lack of stable online access. Such secondary referral needs are included in the Individualized Employment Plan, with Job Service staff recommending local non-profit partners who can assist clients on these issues. The primary need of clients – finding a better job – is addressed immediately.

Josh Wilson HELP-Link Enrollee

Josh had previously completed training for truck driving after losing his job. He obtained his Commercial Driver's License, and was driving over-the-road. He was often unable to make it home once per month, and regrettably, his prolonged absences had been very challenging for his wife and four children, one of which had intensive special needs. Josh's wife (who had been attending nursing school) had noticed a heavy equipment mechanic position that opened locally, and encouraged him to apply. He ultimately secured the position, based in part on the fact he had some previous experience in the industry, coupled with a CDL. The job opportunity was contingent upon his ability to obtain the tools necessary to begin work on heavy equipment. Unfortunately, Josh had previously sold all of his tools after he lost his job and needed cash to move his family for another opportunity.

The new mechanic position offered Josh better wages and a better situation for his family. Josh could be home with his family each evening, and he was offered \$20.00 per hour as a starting wage as a mechanic (which was several dollars more per hour than the truck driving position). As a means to assist the struggling family, and to help Josh acquire the much-coveted position, he was enrolled into the HELP-Link and WIOA Adult programs. Josh received funding for the purchase of the roughly \$1,200 in tools needed to start the new job.

Josh is now earning an outstanding hourly rate, plus overtime wages, and loves his new job so he can be home with his family every night!

Workforce Disenrollment Exemption

The primary benefit of participating in HELP-Link is the individualized career planning help and training assistance that can help low-income workers achieve more secure and stable employment with higher wages. Participating in HELP also provides a workforce exemption, partially qualifying clients for the disenrollment exemption for the Montana HELP Plan. Under the Montana HELP Plan, individuals are dropped from Medicaid coverage if they fail to pay their premiums or copayments for 90 days. However, participants can be exempted from disenrollment for lack of premium payment if they participate in two of four possible activities:

- Participation in a qualifying workforce program (HELP-Link);
- Participation in a wellness program;
- Recently discharged veteran; or
- Enrolled in a for-credit course at an accredited college in Montana.³

Even with the exemption, participants still have to pay premiums or co-pays. The amount owed is collected through the tax system.

Because of the similarities between HELP-Link and two existing labor force programs, the Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) and WIOA, individuals are provided the workforce exemption for participation in any of the three programs. WIOA focuses on serving low income Montanans, while RESEA assists recently unemployed Montanans through partnership programs providing intensive services. These programs provide one-on-one personal attention and training opportunities designed to increase employment stability and wage progression. Almost 2,200 people participated in MTDLI workforce programs to the extent that they qualify for the workforce disenrollment exemption in 2016. MTDLI does not have information on how many of these individuals also met other criteria, or how many were behind on their payments in order for this workforce disenrollment exemption to be relevant.

HELP-Link Funding Allocation

The total amount of funding allocated for the HELP-Link program was \$1.8 million for the 2016-2017 biennium. Activities covered by the funding include start-up costs, IT programming, training, and the implementation of program policies (in addition to the costs to serve HELP-Link clients directly). MTDLI anticipates the appropriated budget for HELP-Link will be exhausted by the end of fiscal year 2017.

In addition, the executive branched designated \$1.0 million of TANF funding targeted towards participants of HELP-Link who were also eligible for TANF. The separate funding stream, called HELP-Link Plus, provides additional funding for participant payments. The funding is limited to subsidies for employment, supportive services, and training for individuals eligible for both HELP-Link and TANF. The HELP-Link Plus program complies with funding restrictions for both WIOA Adult and TANF.⁴

MTDLI requested funding in the next biennium to continue HELP-Link. The legislature has not made funding decisions at the time of this report. MTDLI expects the requested \$899,000 to support education and trainings

³ The student exemption may not be claimed for more than four years. In addition, the college must offer a minimum of an associate's degree.

⁴ Except those who are receiving TANF cash assistance. Individuals who are receiving TANF cash assistance are not eligible for HELP-Link Plus funding.

for roughly 105 clients. Given current ratios, roughly 1,000 clients will be supported per year with intensive one-on-one career planning. The per-client costs expected for HELP-Link are consistent with per client spending for other workforce programs, such as WIOA and RESEA. Figure 5 illustrates the HELP-Link funding spent in 2016 by type. During the 2016 program year, the funding was distributed as follows:

- Approximately 170 people received funding from HELP-Link or HELP-Link Plus for training and supportive services. The total amount spent on participants is \$486,303, translating to about \$2,878 per person.
- Almost 110 people have received funding for “employment-related” education through HELP-Link or HELP-Link Plus with a cost of about \$321,207, or \$3,000 per person. Tuition and fees for resident full-time students at the 2-year colleges range from \$3,000 to \$4,000 per semester; therefore, HELP-Link would cover roughly 75% to 100% of tuition for one year.
- Supportive services are the next largest participant payment type, which includes gas to get to work, boots, training materials, or tools. There were 101 people who received supportive services for a total of \$98,250, or \$973 each.
- There was \$291,169 spent on “case management,” which included staffing costs incurred to provide the individualized career plan, LMI, and other required materials. Every HELP-Link participant receives this funding, with the average per client at \$208.

Figure 5. Spending to Date

	HELP-Link	HELP-Link Plus	Obligated	Total Spent	Number of Participants	Cost Per Participant
Administration	\$565,058			\$565,058		
Case Management	\$291,169			\$291,169	1,398	\$208
Training & Support	\$358,406	\$127,897	\$322,000	\$486,303	169	\$2,878
Training	\$228,911	\$92,296		\$321,207	107	\$3,002
Supportive Services	\$78,457	\$19,793		\$98,250	101	\$973
OJT Reimbursements	\$45,014	\$15,808		\$60,822	11	\$5,529
Relocation	\$6,024			\$6,024		
Total				\$1,342,530		

Notes: Total spending includes HELP-Link and HELP-Link Plus. HELP-Link spending totals \$1.21 out of the \$1.7 million appropriated. Total includes spending from July 1, 2015 through 2016.

Program Dollars Target High-Demand Jobs

To ensure program participants receive meaningful training that improves job opportunities and increases wage potential in their local community, HELP-Link and HELP-Link Plus prioritizes program dollars to participants enrolled in training for high-demand occupations with specialized training.

The service preference is divided into two tiers. The first tier funds participants seeking a credential through Registered Apprenticeship, college enrollment, or other eligible training provider programs for occupations targeted by the HealthCARE Montana or Rev-Up Montana grants. Both programs are grant funded by the U.S. Department of Labor to train workers in high demand jobs in healthcare, manufacturing, and energy. Montanans pursuing these targeted occupations are eligible for up to \$12,000 in training, supportive services, or

subsidized employment supports. In addition, HELP-Link clients pursuing these targeted occupations are matched with a career coach (in addition to their case manager) to help them through challenges encountered during the training process.

If individuals choose to pursue an occupation outside of these specific in-demand jobs, the funding limit is dropped to \$6,000 for training, supportive services, or subsidized employment. The training must still lead to an industry-recognized credential or license.

Ongoing Improvements to HELP-Link

The HELP Act legislation also created an oversight committee to monitor program implementation. The oversight committee requested program improvements to the HELP-Link program for the upcoming biennium. Goals for the HELP-Link program for the upcoming year include:

- Complete 10,000 surveys, with 4,000 employment plans completed.
- Achieve a rate of 85% entered employment rate for program completers.
- Achieve an earnings gain of 33% for program completers.
- Conduct workshops to train employers on overcoming potential employee barriers.
- Increase outreach calls to potential HELP-Link that have not yet completed enrollment.
- Identify individuals who have child care as a barrier and have DPHHS reach out to these individuals with child care resources.
- Engage more private sector partners and community service providers to address barriers outside those which MTDLI can address.
- Continue to partner with private sector employers to design and implement other quick training-to-hire programs, such as the Benefits Certified Nursing Assistant training program.
- Survey program graduates to understand their experience.
- Develop a better web presence for the survey and program information.
- Revisit allowable support services and TANF eligibility requirements with DPHHS and Governor's staff to improve and streamline the usage of TANF training funds.
- Share outcomes to show the relevance of HELP-Link with interested parties.

Jim Krumvieda

HELP-Link Enrollee

Jim is a single dad with two young children aged 6 and 10. As a full-time student in the Respiratory Therapist Program at Great Falls College MSU, he was unable to work full-time and was taking out a high amount of student loans, plus applying for additional scholarship funds to cover tuition, books, supplies, testing fees, and other education expenses. Great Falls Job service was able to help out with a share of tuition dollars, plus make payments on his vehicle insurance so he could continue to drive his kids and himself to school. In May 2016, Jim graduated and was offered a full-time position as a Respiratory Therapist in Billings. Respiratory Therapists earn an average wage of \$52,600 in Montana, putting Jim on the right path to financial success.

Section 2. Program Participation

Participation in HELP-Link and other workforce programs increased steadily since the initiative launched January 1, 2016. During 2016, over 7,400 individuals enrolled in the Montana HELP Plan participated in workforce programs through MTDLI. Not all of these individuals received HELP-Link funding. When possible, Job Service Montana staff served clients using other federal workforce programs to stretch HELP-Link dollars.

There were 1,398 individuals served by HELP-Link in the first year of the program, with roughly 120 new participants each month. Enrollment at the end of 2016 was 790 people, meaning that 608 clients have successfully completed the program. More information on the outcomes of these clients are in the Program Success section.

The demand for the HELP-Link program has been higher than expected, and efficiencies have allowed the program to serve more clients than expected with the allocated funding.

Current HELP-Link participation remains consistent with the goals established for the program based on funding levels. The assessment will exceed the goal of 10,000 completions by the end of the fiscal year. The 2016 program participation of 1,398 exceeded the 1,000 enrollees expected by MTDLI. At current funding levels, the program expects to train 100 individuals per year – there were 106 people trained through HELP-Link in 2016. MTDLI continues to be successful finding efficiencies to serve more clients than expected.

While participation in the HELP-Link program continues to exceed expectations, more work can happen to build more participation. Montana HELP Plan recipients are often tenuously employed in a series of temporary, medium to low wage jobs, making it difficult to manage schedules or to find time off work for program requirements and training.

HELP-Link Success Story- Dairen Driskell

Dairen Driskell had worked in the construction field for years, filling jobs from laborer to carpenter. He had endured economic ups and downs, inconsistent hiring trends, and layoffs. He wanted steadier work and settled on commercial driving. To make his plans a reality, Dairen started with Great Falls College - MSU, who referred him to the Great Falls Job Service. He knew he wanted to obtain his CDL, but didn't have the financial resources to transition from one career to another. Dairen met with Job Service staff, obtaining a career plan and other resources to identify the necessary steps to overcoming these barriers. Dairen was offered funding to provide a portion of training costs, rent assistance, boots needed for work, costs of utilities, a background check, a DOT physical test, and food, gas and hotel costs incurred when he had to travel out-of-town for his Hazardous Materials endorsement.

Dairen has hit the ground running. He performed exceptionally well in his trainings and passed all the requirements of the program. After getting his CDL, he aggressively sought employment by seeking meetings with potential employers. His plan worked! Dairen was offered and accepted employment with Neil Oil Company as a Truck Driver just one week after being issued his commercial driver's license.

Barriers to HELP-Link Participation

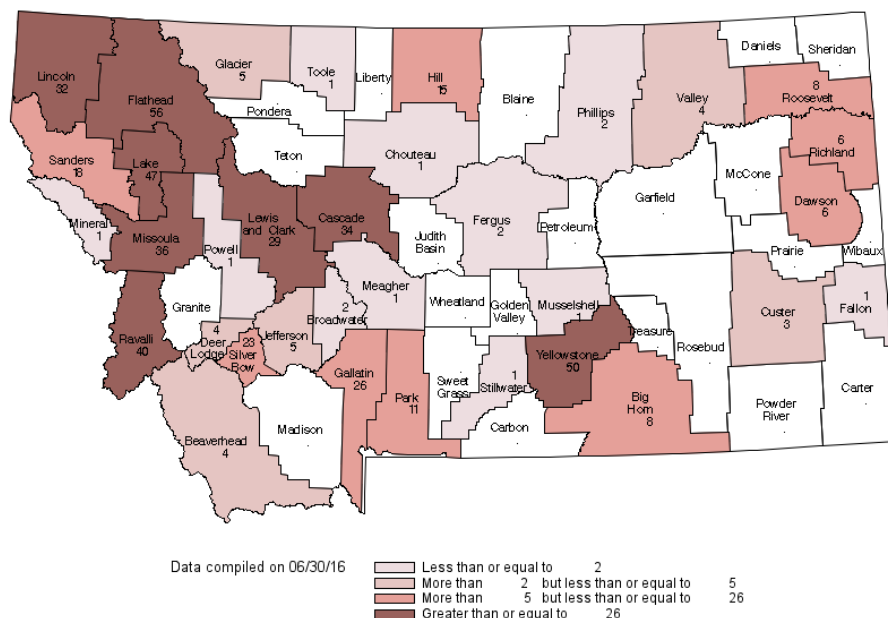
HELP-Link enrollment continues steady growth with more Montanans participating in the program each month. However, program data suggests that there may be some barriers to participating in the program. For example, participation may be higher with greater access to a Job Service Montana office. The in-person appointment required for HELP-Link lasts between one and four hours, not including travel time. HELP-Link participation may require clients to take a full day off work, organizing childcare, and arranging transportation. Further, many Montana HELP Plan recipients report issues with transportation, child care, and health, making the scheduling seem quite insurmountable.

HELP-Link participants in 2016 lived in 34 different counties, with the largest concentrations in Flathead, Yellowstone, and Lake Counties, as illustrated in Figure 6. All of the counties with higher participation levels have a Job Service Montana office. Each county without participants does not have a Job Service Montana office.

Another barrier to participation appears to be a lack of resources, like childcare and transportation. Lack of childcare was identified as a barrier to employment by 7.5% of survey completers, yet only 2.4% of HELP-Link participants identified childcare as a barrier. This disparity suggests that a lack of childcare is a barrier to becoming a participant. Lack of housing, transportation, telephone, mental illness, and poor physical health may also be barriers to HELP-Link participation. MTDLI continues to identify methods to assist HELP-Link individuals in meeting the in-person visit requirement, including flexible office hours and allowing children to attend the visit with their parents.

Another barrier to participation is time constraints. Data suggests Montana HELP Plan recipients work in a series of temporary, medium-to-low-wage jobs. The average number of jobs worked among HELP-Link survey completers was 4.6 jobs per year, and 57.4% have held two or more jobs since 2010. Such temporary and seasonal jobs may not offer time off or accommodating schedules to allow clients to spend hours traveling to the closest Job Service Montana office.

Figure 6. Location Active HELP-Link Participants by County



Finally, the programmatic financial incentive to participate in HELP-Link is to maintain healthcare coverage while delaying payment of health care premiums until taxes are filed. This incentive may not be enough to spur program participation. If the individual is facing unpaid time off work or a day of childcare, the cost of lost wages may exceed the benefits of maintaining healthcare coverage. Program data suggests that HELP-Link participation is primarily driven by a goal of self-improvement, not delaying payments.

Take-up Rates

The 17% take-up rate for HELP-Link in 2016 compares favorably with other workforce development programs administered by MTDLI (average take-up of roughly 10%). However, take-up rate comparisons can be challenging because there is no accurate measure of all potentially eligible populations across every program.

MTDLI does not consider all 70,000 Montana HELP Plan recipients to be the target population for HELP-Link due to frequent changes in health coverage among some participants. MTDLI has chosen to focus enrollment efforts towards the roughly 8,000 Montanans who have expressed interest in HELP-Link by completing the survey. Given limited staff time and training dollars, having individuals self-select out of the HELP-Link program is more efficient than having staff assess their situational needs.

Marketing Efforts

MTDLI also launched a robust digital and print media education campaign in select markets, including Great Falls, Kalispell, and Billings. HELP-Link participation data indicates the education campaign was successful, with slightly higher enrollment rates during the outreach. However, most program education occurs through local Job Service Montana offices, who promote HELP-Link to community members through face-to-face contact. Further, when time allows, staff are contacting individuals who have completed a survey, but have not come into the Job Service Montana office to complete enrollment.

Roughly 8,000 people have completed a survey, but have not completed the in-person visit to the Job Service Montana office. MTDLI has made contacting these individuals a priority because they expressed interest in the program, and is working on identifying several program changes that would stretch existing dollars to put this full population through HELP-Link.

Section 3. Outcomes of Program Participation

HELP-Link aims to provide long-term improvement in the economic security of participants and reduce participants' reliance on Medicaid for health insurance. The economic outcomes of participants were measured using data collected through the Unemployment Insurance system, allowing researchers to identify whether participants held a job with a Montana employer and whether wages increased after program participation. However, wage information from employers lags behind actual employment by at least two quarters. At the time of this report, only data from the first two quarters of 2016 were available to evaluate the wage outcomes of participants.

Many individuals participating in HELP-Link do not require significant training to move up the career ladder. These individuals are currently on track for better employment with minimal assistance from Job Service Montana staff. In fact, 90% of HELP-Link participants used employment services only (including resume assistance, job search, career planning, etc.). Roughly 72% of employed participants achieved higher wages after receiving employment and career planning services only. The average wage increase was \$1,680.

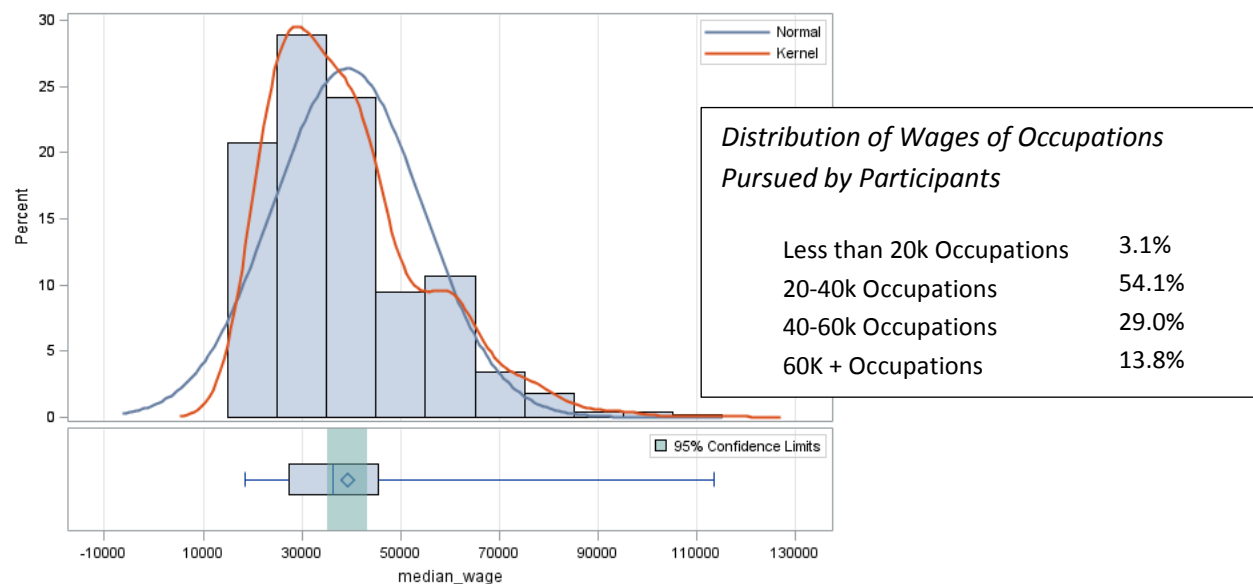
Among individuals who required more intensive employment services, 78% of those who finished their training found employment. Only 5% who completed training were still unemployed. The remainder left the labor force for other reasons, most commonly because of health issues. Figure 7 illustrates the outcomes for individuals enrolled in training programs.

Figure 7. Enrollment Outcomes for High-Impact Participants

Enrollment Outcome	Number	Percent
Still Enrolled	359	56.4%
Chose not to Participate	93	14.6%
Completed	12	1.9%
Enrolled in Post-Secondary	3	0.5%
Family Care	4	0.6%
Health-Medical	12	1.9%
Institutionalized	1	0.2%
Obtained Employment	152	23.9%
Total	636	100%

Source: MTDLI compiled on 1/4/17.

Figure 8. Distribution of the Median Wage for Occupations Pursued by Montana HELP Plan Participants



Note: Only includes HELP-Link participants who are receiving training for funding through the Department of Labor & Industry.

Source: May 2015 Occupational Employment Statistics (OES)

Most participants are still working to complete their training. While these workers have not yet completed their training, the median wage of occupations pursued by high-impact participants was around \$36,380, or roughly \$20,000 more than their reported average wage in 2015. The wage distribution of the occupations pursued is shown in Figure 8. Based on the expected wages after training, clients are on the right track to more successful employment and income independence.

Reducing Medicaid Eligibility

Available wage records indicate HELP-Link successfully helps workers find employment and progress up the career ladder, but this information cannot be used to determine if the increase in wages lifts the individual above the Montana HELP Plan eligibility threshold. Eligibility determinations are based on income (not wages) and household size. Wage data collected by the Unemployment Insurance program only includes wages, not other sources of income. Further, MTDLI does not have information on household size.

However, assumptions can be drawn about the impact on Medicaid eligibility based on expected wages. For example, 36 HELP-Link participants are currently pursuing education allowing them to become registered nurses. The median wage for registered nurses of roughly \$60,000 is sufficient to lift a family of five out of poverty and above the Medicaid expansion eligibility threshold. Truck driver wages of \$41,360 would also be sufficient to lift a family out of poverty and above the eligibility threshold. Figure 9 illustrates the 2016 poverty threshold for selected households, and the 138% of the poverty line threshold.

Select Poverty Thresholds for 2016		
Household Size	Poverty Threshold	138% of Poverty Threshold
One Person Household, under 65	12,486	17,231
Two People Household under 65, no kids	16,072	22,179
Two People Household, under 65, with one child	16,543	22,829
Three People, one child	19,318	26,659
Three People, two children	19,337	26,685
Five People, three children	28,643	39,527
Source: U.S. Census Bureau		

Provision of Health Care by Private Employers

Administrative wage data cannot be used to determine if a worker has health insurance through their new employer. MTDLI does not collect information on the provision of health insurance by employers, except by special surveys. Unless MTDLI obtains additional data on health insurance from a separate government agency or through a survey of participants, it is not known if HELP-Link causes more workers to receive employer-based health insurance.

Section 4: Demographics and Employment Barriers of HELP-Link Participants

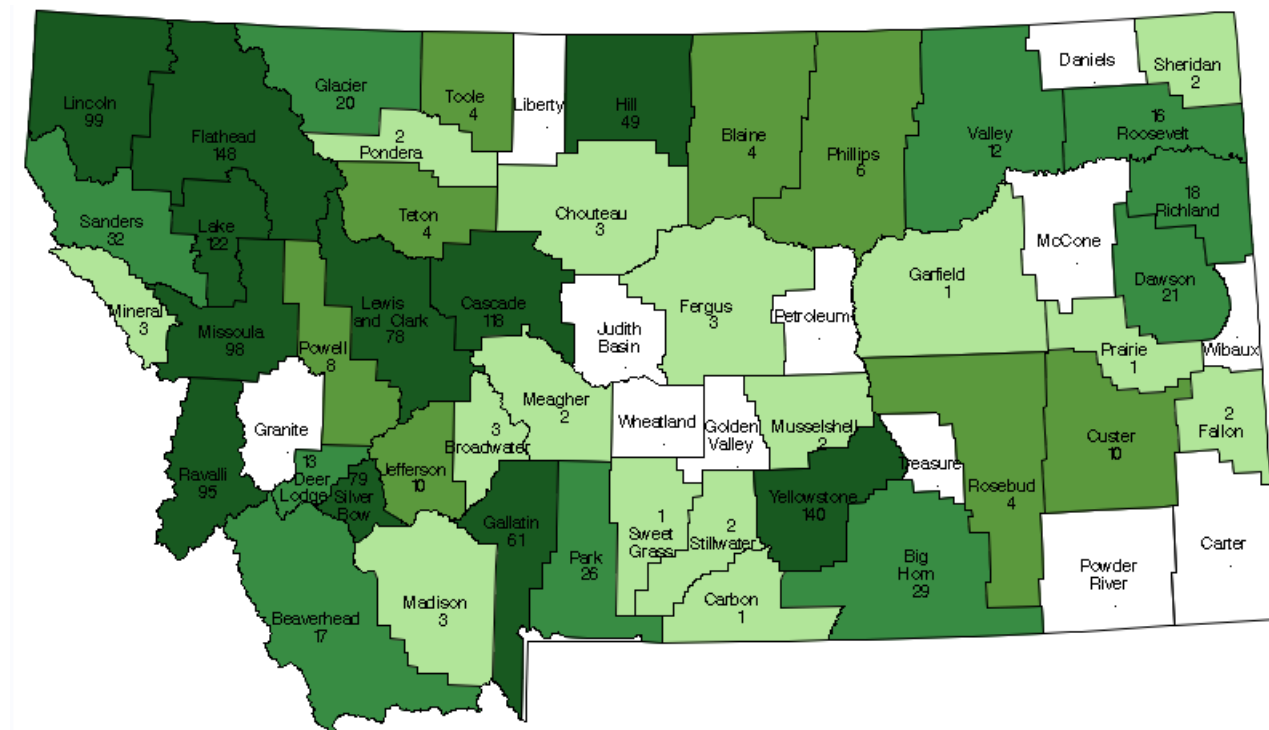
Demographic and economic information about HELP-Link participants was gathered by the DPHHS and the initial program survey. The information from the survey allowed staff to customize the program to meet the needs of participants, identify potential issues with the availability of employment resources, and determine the best methods to educate Montanans about the program's benefits.

Geographical Distribution

HELP-Link is available throughout Montana, with some areas having greater participation. Figure 10 illustrates the location of HELP-Link participants in 2016. Counties with larger populations and counties with higher unemployment rates in the past five years generally had higher levels of participation. Counties with a Job Service Montana office nearby also had higher participation rates.

Flathead, Lake, Ravalli, Sanders, Lincoln, Yellowstone and Cascade counties all had over 10 active participants. The Northwest Region of Montana, including Flathead, Lake, Ravalli, Lincoln and Sanders County, has been slower to recover from the recession than other regions of the state. The unemployment rate in each of these five counties is above the statewide average, and more HELP-Link participants in these counties was expected.

Figure 10. HELP-Link Participants by County



Source: MTDLI compiled 1/4/17. County data also found in table form in the appendix Figure 16. Colors depict quartiles. Light color represents 25% quartile, darkest represents 75% quartile.

Barriers to Employment

Montana HELP Plan recipients were required to fill out a HELP-Link survey, providing important background information on their employment situation and any employment barriers limiting their income potential. The barriers to employment (summarized in Figure 11) highlights the population of all people completing the survey

and the smaller population of HELP-Link participants. Participants do not rank barriers, but select all that apply. Personal finance or bad credit issues are the most frequent barrier to employment, followed by some sort of felony or misdemeanor conviction. The survey also offered assistance to respondents to address their barriers, encouraging the individual to come into the Job Service Montana office and enroll in HELP-Link (if applicable). Only 40% of survey completers identified an employment barrier. Others may not have felt they faced barriers to employment, or were already in a good employment situation.

Figure 11. Barriers to Employment

<i>Barrier</i>	HELP Link Participants		HELP Link Survey Completers	
	Total	% of Total Identifying Barriers	Total	% of Total Identifying Barriers
<i>Personal finances/credit history</i>	125	8.9%	884	11.1%
<i>Felony/misdemeanor conviction</i>	100	7.2%	805	10.1%
<i>Lack of transportation</i>	70	5.0%	682	8.6%
<i>Poor physical health</i>	61	4.4%	456	5.7%
<i>Mental illness</i>	44	3.1%	374	4.7%
<i>Physical disability</i>	43	3.1%	308	3.9%
<i>Lack of childcare</i>	35	2.5%	454	5.7%
<i>Lack of housing</i>	35	2.5%	330	4.1%
<i>Caring for a family member with health issues</i>	28	2.0%	289	3.6%
<i>Lack of telephone</i>	23	1.6%	321	4.0%
<i>Learning disability</i>	22	1.6%	177	2.2%
<i>Drug or alcohol addiction</i>	17	1.2%	152	1.9%
<i>Probation</i>	17	1.2%	227	2.9%
<i>Domestic violence</i>	12	0.9%	103	1.3%
<i>Court mandated programs or classes</i>	8	0.6%	90	1.1%
<i>Pending felony/misdemeanor</i>	4	0.3%	82	1.0%
<i>Number Identifying At Least One Barrier</i>	633	45.3%	3,217	40.4%
<i>Total</i>	1,398		7,955	

Source: MTDLI compiled on 1/04/17

Other Characteristics of HELP-Link Survey Completers

The HELP-Link survey also asked about the respondent's employment situation. Figure 12 shows the answers to the other survey questions for all survey completers and for HELP-Link participants. Roughly, 45% of the survey completers were unemployed at the time they completed the survey, and a similar percentage expressed interest in finding a full-time job. In addition, while roughly 10% of respondents were working at minimum wage in their most recent job, over 16% were earning over \$15 per hour. Wage earnings of \$15 or more in their previous job suggests many survey respondents already have the skills necessary for self-sufficiency, and may not benefit from HELP-Link. Respondents at lower wage levels in their prior job are better targets for program participation.

Figure 12. HELP-Link Survey Answers

QUESTION	ANSWER	HELP Link Participants		Survey Completers	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Are you currently employed? <i>Full time is defined as an individual that works 35 hours or more per week in a single job. Part time is defined as an individual that works less than 35 hours per week in a single job.</i>	No	577	45.2%	4721	63.0%
	Yes - Full-Time Seasonal	11	0.9%	164	2.2%
	Yes - Full-Time Year-Round	66	5.2%	898	12.0%
	Yes - Part-Time Seasonal	39	3.1%	273	3.6%
	Yes - Part-Time Year-Round	102	8.0%	944	12.6%
Are you currently enrolled for credit in any accredited college?	No	694	54.1%	5684	85.7%
	Yes	32	2.5%	370	5.6%
Are you willing and able to seek and accept full-time work?	No	120	8.5%	1070	14.1%
	Yes	664	46.8%	5792	76.2%
Do you currently hold multiple jobs? <i>Only consider jobs where you are paid.</i>	No	766	59.3%	6654	89.3%
	Yes	21	1.6%	271	3.6%
Have you been discharged from US military service in the last year?	No	776	60.1%	6801	92.5%
	Yes	5	0.4%	30	0.4%
Have you made specific efforts to find employment in the last month?	No	190	14.5%	2045	27.3%
	Yes	588	44.9%	4838	64.5%
Please indicate the per hour wage of your most recent job from the ranges listed below. <i>If you hold multiple jobs, please indicate the wage of the job offering the highest per hour wage.</i>	Less than \$8.05	15	1.2%	190	2.6%
	\$8.05 to \$9.00	131	10.3%	1141	15.7%
	\$9.01 to \$10.00	104	8.2%	1052	14.5%
	\$10.01 to \$11.00	82	6.5%	972	13.4%
	\$11.01 to \$12.00	83	6.6%	759	10.5%
	\$12.01 to \$13.50	68	5.4%	658	9.1%
	\$13.51 to \$15.00	81	6.4%	581	8.0%
	\$15.01 and above	206	16.3%	1405	19.3%
What is the highest level of education you have received?	Less than High School	34	2.7%	356	4.9%
	HS Diploma/GED/HiSET	265	21.1%	2645	36.2%
	Some College - no degree	257	20.5%	2224	30.4%
	Associates Degree (2 year)	109	8.7%	742	10.1%
	Bachelor's Degree (4-year)	84	6.7%	710	9.7%
	Master's Degree	20	1.6%	122	1.7%
	PhD or Professional	7	0.6%	28	0.4%

Notes: The individuals included are only those people who completed a HELP-Link survey. This table does not include active HELP-Link participants who completed an RESEA survey instead. Compiled on 1/04/17.

Participation by County

Figure 13 illustrates the number of participants and survey completers by county.

COUNTY	SURVEY COMPLETERS		PARTICIPATION IN QUALIFYING WORKFORCE PROGRAMS		HELP LINK PARTICIPANTS	
	Number	1-Month Growth	Number	% of Target Pop	Number	3-Month Growth Rate
BEAVERHEAD	82	9.3%	50	9.7%	17	41.7%
BIG HORN	76	1.3%	90	9.2%	29	16.0%
BLAINE	25	8.7%	19	4.0%	4	
BROADWATER	17	6.3%	11	5.4%	3	
CARBON	28	3.7%	17	3.8%	1	
CARTER			1	2.1%		
CASCADE	865	1.1%	671	14.1%	118	42.2%
CHOUTEAU	15	7.1%	9	4.0%	3	50.0%
CUSTER	91	8.3%	79	14.9%	10	42.9%
DAWSON	90	1.1%	52	16.2%	21	40.0%
DEER LODGE	118	12.4%	51	9.4%	13	
FALLON	12	20.0%	7	7.9%	2	
FERGUS	64	3.2%	36	6.1%	3	200.0%
FLATHEAD	813	1.4%	508	8.9%	148	32.1%
GALLATIN	367	0.5%	266	7.1%	61	38.6%
GARFIELD	2	0.3%	1	2.9%	1	
GLACIER	92	1.1%	172	12.0%	20	122.2%
GOLDEN VALLEY			1	1.3%		
GRANITE	8	14.3%	3	2.5%		
HILL	239	2.6%	146	11.8%	49	22.5%
JEFFERSON	46	2.2%	32	7.2%	10	
JUDITH BASIN	3	50.0%	3	3.6%		
LAKE	344	12.8%	364	16.2%	122	45.2%
LEWIS AND CLARK	500	2.5%	337	10.4%	78	34.5%
LIBERTY	7	16.7%	3	1.6%		
LINCOLN	267	1.5%	293	19.5%	99	33.8%
MCCONE	3	50.0%	2	4.4%		
MADISON	25	13.6%	15	5.6%	3	200.0%
MEAGHER	8	14.3%	4	2.0%	2	
MINERAL	26	4.0%	23	6.6%	3	
MISSOULA	1069	1.8%	674	9.9%	98	40.0%
MUSSELSHELL	20	17.6%	20	5.3%	2	100.0%
PARK	107	16.3%	81	8.3%	26	52.9%
PETROLEUM	2	0.9%				
PHILLIPS	19	5.6%	10	3.8%	6	50.0%
PONDERA	16	6.7%	17	3.2%	2	
POWELL	48	20.0%	24	7.6%	8	100.0%
PRAIRIE	7	16.7%	3	9.7%	1	
RAVALLI	421	2.2%	210	7.8%	95	28.4%

RICHLAND	103	2.0%	90	27.1%	18	63.6%
ROOSEVELT	78	4.0%	76	8.1%	16	14.3%
ROSEBUD	32	3.2%	23	4.4%	4	33.3%
SANDERS	91	1.1%	112	12.5%	32	28.0%
SHERIDAN	10	11.1%	5	4.6%	2	100.0%
SILVER BOW	473	1.5%	230	9.3%	79	43.6%
STILLWATER	34	9.7%	17	5.4%	2	
SWEET GRASS	7	40.0%	5	4.1%	1	
TETON	23	9.5%	18	4.6%	4	100.0%
TOOLE	27	28.6%	16	7.8%	4	33.3%
TREASURE	2	3.7%	1	3.2%		
VALLEY	59	7.3%	68	17.7%	12	33.3%
WHEATLAND	5	25.0%	3	1.5%		
WIBAUX	5	25.0%				
YELLOWSTONE	1002	1.1%	803	10.5%	140	37.3%

Conclusion

The launch of HELP-Link has been a significant undertaking for MTDLI, but the successes from the first year of demonstrate the value of the program. Workforce development programs are always undergoing improvements to efficiency and effectiveness; HELP-Link is no exception. Staff continue to identify better ways to deliver services and broaden access to HELP-Link so more Montanans can benefit from better employment outcomes.