

Minutes for the
Governor's Advisory Board for Telecommunications Relay
Rockville, Maryland
February 12, 2000

Board Members in Attendance:

Mitch Travers (Chair), Isaac Agboola, Patsy Bowman, Joy Larson, Robin Krout, Rebecca Ladew, Susan Miller, Adele Shuart, Alfred Sonnenstrahl, James Stevenson

TAM Staff: Gilbert Becker, Maggie Billings, Brenda Kelly-Frey, Willis Mann, Nancy Seidman, Pam Stewart

Representatives from Sprint: Randy Murbach, Arthur Moore

Visitors: David Birnbaum, Peggy Bowen, Samuel Simms

Interpreters: Liz Mohr

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The meeting was called to order at 9:35.

The Chair welcomed everyone and led the rounds of introduction of Board members, TAM staff, and visitors. He announced that the real time captioning system was not available due to a last minute emergency on the part of the equipment operator.

MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The following correction was made to the minutes of the previous meeting:

- Robin Krout was a volunteer, not a participant at the recent Maryland Relay race (page 5 of the minutes).

TAM STAFF REPORTS

Mr. Mann

Board Vacancies: There are still two vacancies on the Board despite recent efforts to fill them. One is for a deaf consumer and the other is for a mobility-disabled consumer.

Future Board Meeting Dates and Locations: The next Board meeting is scheduled for May 6th at the Rocky Gap Lodge and Golf Resort. Other meeting dates and locations this year are: August 26th at Ocean City, and November 18th at Bel Air.

Jim Stevenson suggested considering students as Board members. Mr. Mann responded that students are eligible to serve on the board but that their parents must accept responsibility for their transportation, care, and safety when attending Board meetings. Adele Shuart suggested asking state organizations to nominate representatives to the Board as is the practice in Connecticut.

Pam Stewart

FCC Issues: TAM is an active participant in ongoing discussions on issues involving telecommunications and the relays. TAM has recently submitted comments to the FCC on issues such as cell phone relay calls and FCC-mandated enhancements to the relay

systems. TAM has also met with an enforcement group that was set up under Disabilities Issues Task Force to discuss concerns such as carrier of choice. Although there are about 1,300 carriers nationwide, the average number of carriers available through relay services is about 25.

Relay Web Site: The web site is scheduled to be updated in order to have a more active presence on the web. The RFP for the enhancement has just been issued. While minorities and women are encouraged to bid, quality is the overall criterion for selection.

Nancy Seidman

Public Relations Update: TAM sent out about 20,000 brochures of the Relay Partners Program to various organizations and businesses throughout the state. TAM and Sprint are also following up on these mailings and providing training on request. One of the short-term objectives is to sign up all state agencies as Relay Partners.

Educational Kit Project: TAM is also working with the state department of education and an advertising agency to develop an educational kit. The kit, which would include an interactive CD-ROM, would be made available to schools so that every child that goes through the state school like third or fourth grade is exposed to the relay, learns about relay, learns about deafness and hard of hearing, and speech disabled people as well. TAM is actively seeking grant money for the project.

Reaching Senior Citizens: This continues to be a major focus of TAM's outreach efforts because many senior citizens who are losing their hearing are unaware of the relay and how it could help them. One of the outreach efforts in this area is to interview selected senior citizens across the Maryland counties who use the relay and share their experiences with other senior citizens.

Brenda Kelly-Frey

Update on MAT: To date the MAT program has received 802 applications and approved 649 applications. The rest have either been denied, pending, or are closed for one reason or another. The program recently focused on the mental health centers, retirement homes, assisted living organizations, and other services to the elderly. The responses have been very encouraging.

Al Sonnenstrahl asked if comparable figures were available for equipment distribution rates in other states that have a similar program. The information was not available but Ms. Kelly-Frey said she would check. Mr. Agboola said it was more important to ensure that all the people who are eligible for the program are aware of the program and getting the necessary equipment.

SPRINT REPRESENTATIVES REPORT

Randy Murbach

Temporary Replacement: Arthur Moore is working with Maryland Relay as a temporary replacement for Paula Holbrook, who is on maternity leave.

Relay Enhancements: Sprint's contract with Maryland Relay has been extended through November 2000. Recent enhancements include Turbo Code capability, which allows variable speeds of up to 210 words per minute.

Dedicated Lines: New dedicated lines have been added for voice only, VCO, and ASCII. Having dedicated lines speeds up or eliminates the call setup time and it is more convenient for the consumers who regularly use the features.

Speech to Text: The Speech-to-Text trial continues through February 28th. People who have not tried the system should do so to experience the difference.

Consumer Feedback: Consumer feedback for the months of October, November, December, has been compiled by Sprint. The feedback includes compliments as well as complaints.

David Birnbaum said some local telephone companies do not provide 711 access. Mr. Murbach responded that local telephone companies and cell phone operators couldn't yet be compelled to provide 711 access until an FCC ruling on that issue is made.

Al Sonnenstrahl complimented Sprint for adding Turbo Code but said he sometimes could not interrupt the operator. Randy Murbach responded that it might depend on the type of equipment or the point in the process where the interrupt attempt was made. In general, interrupt should work while the operator is typing.

Arthur Moore

Arthur Moore said he would continue to commute to Maryland from Connecticut until Paula Holbrook returns on April 3rd. He complimented the state of Maryland as a relay services leader. He briefly compared the Maryland Relay and the MAT program to similar programs in Connecticut. For instance, Connecticut does not set any income limitation for the equipment distribution program.

PUBLIC INPUT

Comments from the visitors (*names of contributors were not clear on the transcript*):

- Complaint that the noise of typing could be heard when using VCO. (The consumer was advised to remind the operator to mute his/her microphone)
- Request for a dedicated line for two-line VCO. (Gil Becker responded that it is a possibility depending on the demand for it.)
- Federal employees are encouraged to use the FRS at work, and long distance charges do not apply when calling the FRS.
- The VRI method enables a smoother and richer exchange than typing and should become a permanent service.
- Maryland Relay should collaborate with deaf businesses to address their communication needs.

BOARD MEMBERS REPORTS

Mitch Travers

Pocket VCO System: Mitch Travers shared his experience using a new pocket VCO system made by Ameriphone. The system features a two-line display and can work with most phone equipment including cell phones and pay phones.

Long Distance Discount: Mitch Travers led a discussion about the actual savings on long distance calls made through Sprint. The savings were set at 50%, which translated to a 6-cent per minute rate. It was noted that AT&T advertises a 7-cent per minute rate for the general public, so Sprint's claim of 50% to 60% for deaf consumers might not be as significant as it seemed.

Relay Access Through the Web: Maryland Relay should take a leadership role in integrating web technologies to enhance communications for deaf consumers.

Call Volume: Call volume data for deaf consumers appear to be declining in recent months. Gil Becker observed the number of voice calls have increased by as much as 20 percent and speculated that a possible explanation for the decline in TDD calls is the reduced incidence of TDD calls that ended in hang-ups on the part of the hearing caller and greater willingness by hearing callers to return calls from deaf consumers. Adele Shuart noted that the availability of IM and ICQ could also explain the decline since deaf consumers could use these to communicate with the general public.

Board Vacancies: The plan to sponsor a new Board member fell through because the person did not formally apply for appointment to the Board.

Consumer Complaints: Gil Becker was asked to respond to two consumer complaints filed by a member of the MDAD board: limited or nonexistent access to carrier of choice; and deaf consumers paying higher rates than the general populations with some carriers. Gil Becker responded that the number of carriers available through the relay is still very low compared to the total number of national carriers and that it is not a problem that could be solved at the state level. He promised to look into the higher rate complaint.

Jim Stevenson

Outreach Efforts: The TAM office provided publicity materials to several community development centers in Alleghany County that could benefit from increased awareness of the relay. The centers serve all age groups including senior citizens who might need to use the relay as their hearing declines with age.

Maryland Relay Web Site: The web site is definitely in need of updating. Much of the material at the site is not readily downloadable and not available in the PDF format.

Students to Students: The program is still in need of funds and grant proposals are in the works. Board members are invited to help in this regard.

Susan Miller

711 Access: There are actually about 40 local phone service providers in the State of Maryland, and many of them unfortunately do not provide 711 access. Although some of these providers actually use Bell Atlantic lines through mutual agreement, they may not feel compelled to provide 711 access until required to do so by the FCC.

Mitch Travers asked what the Public Service Commission could do to prevent public money from being used to literally support monopolistic companies. He cited the Turbo Code issue as an example of where only one company provides the equipment that has the feature. Susan Miller responded that the problem could not be effectively addressed at the state public service commission level because the PSC has no jurisdiction over equipment and the functions of telecommunication equipment.

Rebecca Ladew

Speech-to-Speech Relay: Like Australia, Sweden now provides speech-to-speech relay; this is very encouraging.

TRS Coalition Team: Rebecca Ladew said she recently joined the TRS coalition team as the speech-disabled representative. The coalition team appeared before the FCC commissioners and their staffers on February 1st to ask them to update their regulations in the accordance to new technologies, and to propose a national TRS council to assist the FCC in keeping in touch with the changing world of TRS.

Al Sonnenstrahl

TRS Activities: Al Sonnenstrahl reported on the recent activities of the TRS team, which includes representatives from the various constituents that use telecommunication relay services. He said the group has worked together to submit proposals and maintains a good working relationship with the present FCC administration. However a new team may take their place after the next national elections. He noted that consumer groups, service providers, and administrators are often working in concert to achieve common goals with regard to FCC rulings on telecommunication relay issues.

Calling Cards: There should be a standard procedure to ensure that when using a prepaid calling card, and an answering machine responds at the other end, then the second call to leave a message should not be billed. Pam Stewart noted that this is a training issue that would be followed up.

Robin Krout

Outreach Efforts: Robin reported that her recent community outreach efforts focused on businesses and private communities such as chamber of commerce, schools, churches and social organizations. She reported mixed responses to her outreach efforts but promised to keep trying. She suggested including schools in the Relay Partners program and using that avenue to reach children who would in turn educate their parents about the relay.

494 Extension: There have been some complaints that the 494 extension is not able to get through to Maryland Relay. The problem has been reported to Sprint and TAM and they are looking into it.

Patsy Bowman

Outreach Efforts: Patsy Bowman reported that Nancy Seidman recently made a presentation in Harford County on the Students-to-Students program before the Maryland State Steering Committee on Deaf and Hard of Hearing Issues.

Feedback on VRI: Consumers who participated in the VRI Trial at the Maryland Rehabilitation Center were disappointed when the trial period ended. The consumers, especially those with limited English language skills, loved the system and expressed a wish that the equipment could have been donated so they could continue to use it. Adele Shuart said the consumers at the NAD test site also expressed similar sentiments.

OLD BUSINESS

Letter to the MDAD: Mitch Travers requested an update on the matter of the proposed letter to the MDAD on the subject of the right to choose the race of the communication assistant. Gil Becker responded that TAM and Sprint decided not to send the letter since MDAD apparently has dropped the issue.

NEW BUSINESS

Mitch Travers reviewed the agenda of new business and decided that we had already covered some of them at length during the meeting. Items that were not yet covered adequately include carrier of choice, 711 access, speech-to-speech, and the next Board training. He suggested that the Board could discuss these issues later through e-mail. There were no objections.

Motion: Al Sonnenstrahl (Adele Shuart) moved that the Board should establish specific criteria for communication equipment and procedures during Board meetings with the goal of minimizing the incidence of interruptions due to equipment malfunctions and associated problems. It was suggested that all participants in the meetings could contribute ideas for correcting the problems through e-mail.

The meeting adjourned at 1:25 p.m.