

Minutes of the
Governor's Advisory Board for Telecommunications Relay Meeting
Ocean City, Maryland
August 26, 2000

Board Members in Attendance: Mitch Travers (Chair), Isaac Agboola, Robin Krout, Rebecca Ladew, Joy Larson, Susan Miller, Adele Shuart, Al Sonnenstrahl, James Stevenson.

TAM Staff: Gilbert Becker, Sue Holiway, Brenda Kelly-Frey, Willis Mann, Nancy Seidman, Pam Stewart.

Representatives from Sprint: Randy Murbach, Lennox Hood

Interpreters: Liz Mohr, Jeff Kirkwood, Ann Acampora

The meeting was called to order at 9:11 a.m.

MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting were accepted with minor corrections.

TAM STAFF REPORTS

Nancy Seidman

Public Relations Outreach: Recent outreach efforts have focused on getting the information out to seniors about the telecommunications opportunities available to them through the relay service. Related efforts include a long running advertising campaign in local newspapers, attendance at senior expositions, giveaways, and visits to senior centers. The seniors campaign will continue well into next year.

The Relay Partners program is another area of major publicity efforts. Both Sprint and TAM staff are working together to spread the word about the Relay Partners program to businesses and the deaf community.

TAM is also working with an educational consultant to develop a hands-on kit with Maryland Relay themes that could be given to elementary school teachers to be incorporated into their curriculum. This program is expected to be more effective and reach many more students than the students-to-students program. The kits will be field tested during the coming school year. The MAT program is also planning to provide students who need assistive telephone devices with the necessary equipment. On a related topic, Maryland has passed a law requiring all infants born in Maryland to be screened for hearing loss.

An initiative by Robin Krout resulted in a directive from the Governor's Office to the State Department of Education to instruct local school superintendents that their school staff are required to be trained in using the relay.

Questions for Nancy Seidman:

Al Sonnenstrahl inquired whether outreach efforts could include educating the public to recognize the tones of a TTY. Nancy responded that it would probably be a tedious process. Pam Stewart said many people find TTY tones unpleasant and that most would not call back after getting such tones. Willis Mann noted that some people persist in calling a deaf person's number directly, apparently ignoring explicit instructions to call the relay number first.

Brenda Kelly-Frey

The MAT program has been targeting specific constituents on a monthly basis and the responses to date have been good. The program has added more staff and several localized sites in order to be more accessible to people in various parts of the state. As a result, the program is receiving a steady stream of inquiries from individuals and agencies. Every effort is made to meet the needs of qualified applicants. Some individuals have required as many as five different pieces of equipment in order to use a phone, but it is positive to see people who have not been able to use a phone in years to be able to do so again.

Pam Stewart

711 Voice First: Answering 711 voice first has resulted in noticeable increase in the percentage of voice calls relative to TTY calls. As explained previously, the decision to answer 711 numbers voice first was made in part to encourage hearing people to call back. The current practice of not branding 711 calls was adopted partly because of the PBX factor.

FCC: TAM continues to work with the FCC on various relay issues such as the TRS report and order, and carriers of choice.

Maryland Relay Race: This year's event is scheduled for September 17th. There will be random prizes for both runners and walkers. The deaf community is especially encouraged to participate, as this would be a special opportunity for businesses to network with them.

Willis Mann

Board Accommodation: Due to a hotel personnel change, previously agreed bookings for nonsmoking rooms for some Board members were not being honored upon arrival. TAM will ensure that such problems do not recur for future reservations. Al Sonnenstrahl requested that accessibility to deaf guests should be a factor in future selection of a hotel. Robin Krout observed that some hotels only keep a few accessibility kits on hand and that she would push for legislation to increase the number of available kits.

Board Vacancies: About five applications to serve on the Board have been forwarded to the Governor's Office. There are currently four vacancies on the Board.

SPRINT REPORT

Randy Murbach

New Accounts Manager: Lennox Hood has recently joined the Maryland relay management team.

Outreach: Sprint and TAM are working together on a new outreach effort targeted to the deaf community. One of the activities in this regard is a take-off on the game show “Who wants to be a millionaire?” that will be called: “Who wants to be a relay millionaire?”. It will feature contestants competing for prizes by answering questions about the relay service. The events will take place at about 14 different locations throughout the state. Board members are eligible to participate as contestants.

Relay Partners Program: In order to become a Relay Partner and be identified as such in the yellow pages, a business must at least have received training materials, and some may receive on-site training in using the relay and in deaf culture. Such businesses are also educated about accessibility issues and expected to be accessible when patronized by deaf clients.

The logistics of educating the partners and the effectiveness of the program was discussed at length. It was observed that factors such as the size and structure of a business, turnover, and other things could impact the effectiveness of a partnership. It was suggested that some deaf consumers need to be educated about making business calls in order to make businesses more accepting of relay calls.

Questions for Sprint:

Mitch Travers noted that, in his experience, most of his VCO calls handled by the Baltimore center were satisfactorily processed but that when his calls were processed by a foreign center, the results were often unsatisfactory and inquired as to the possibility of VCO calls being handled exclusively at the Baltimore center. Gil Becker responded that efforts are being made to ensure uniformity in training and that it would not be a good idea at this time to restrict certain calls to a specific center. Randy Murbach promised to look into the request, but with no promises of getting the desired results.

PUBLIC INPUT

Lennore Golden

Ms. Golden complained that the lack of number identification of calls from Maryland Relay sometimes caused her to miss important calls that she assumed were from telemarketers or other nuisance sources. Mitch Travers observed that this is a common complaint of deaf relay users. Pam Stewart responded that Maryland relay users would

ultimately be able to identify the actual originating number of the person making a relay call.

(Unidentified Audience Member): Sometimes, there is a long wait before any further response after the number to be called has been given to the relay operator. Several other people, including a Board member, confirmed that they have experienced similarly unusual waits and that it was a common experience. Pam Stewart suggested taking down the operator's number and following up with a complaint.

BOARD MEMBERS REPORTS AND COMMENTS

James Stevenson

Grant Proposal Update: The after-school grant proposal in Allegheny County mentioned at the previous meeting was successful. Another grant proposal in the works is the Judy Center Grant. These and other programs will have tie-ins to the relay in support of outreach efforts.

Isaac Agboola

Consumers Feedback: Many deaf relay users can't understand why it is still not possible to identify Maryland relay calls on their caller identification equipment. Some hearing children of deaf parents have a negative view of the relay service for a variety of reasons, including the relatively slower conversation pace and perceived inaccuracies in relaying conversations between deaf and hearing users. It was suggested to explore the sources of dissatisfaction further through focus groups.

Rebecca Ladew

Activities Update: Rebecca reported that she recently attended a convention of the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication. She suggested that Sprint contribute an article or place an advertisement in the society's newsletter to educate the members about telecommunications opportunities available through the relay service.

Al Sonnenstrahl

Consumers Feedback: On the subject of the somewhat negative attitude of some hearing users towards the relay, in particular with regard to the relatively slower pace of conversation, the recent FCC rule and order announced in February this year includes a requirement to increase the typing speed to about 60 words per minutes.

Robin Krout

Activities Update: Recent outreach efforts include trying to get hospitals in Hartford County to be more accessible by being relay friendly, but the results have been mixed. Nancy Seidman observed that it is difficult to achieve consistent impact on a decentralized operation, such as a hospital, that also has several shifts.

Joy Larson

Attitudes of Hearing Users: On the subject of attitudes to the relay, some hearing people are not comfortable talking freely to friends and family members when using the relay. This is especially true of the older generation.

Mitch Travers

Consumers Feedback: Recent feedback indicates that the more sophisticated deaf relay users think there should be a way to use profiling to make it possible for their 711 calls to be answered TTY first. Other feedback indicates that many deaf users are not sufficiently informed about certain features of the relay, or how they could integrate emerging technology, such as wireless phones, with the relay service. So, there is a need for greater focus on getting the word out to deaf relay users.

OLD BUSINESS

New Relay Web Site: The Board reviewed the new relay web site and offered suggestions for improvement, such as better ways of arranging the content, how to make navigation easier, how to make the site more accessible to visually impaired people, and making it possible to use the web site as a communication link between the relay and the consumers.

Web Relay: Mitch Travers inquired as to the status of the proposed web relay. Gil Becker responded that certain issues need to be worked out with the FCC first and that it would be necessary to be able to maintain current user restrictions.

NEW BUSINESS

New RFP: Gil Becker reported that the current RFP is being reviewed to meet new FCC requirements. Maryland Relay is generally proactive in meeting FCC regulations. One area where the requirements have not been met is the 60 words per minute typing speed requirement. Al Sonnenstrahl, Isaac Agboola, Susan Miller, and James Stevenson volunteered to serve on an ad-hoc evaluation committee to review the updated RFP.

The meeting adjourned at 12:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Isaac Agboola
Secretary