

Minutes of the  
Governor's Advisory Board for Telecommunications Relay Meeting  
Aberdeen, Maryland  
November 18, 2000

**Board Members in Attendance:** Mitch Travers (Chair), Isaac Agboola, Patsy Bowman, Robin Krout, Joy Larson, Al Sonnenstrahl, James Stevenson.

**Absent Board Members:** Adele Shuart, Susan Miller.

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

**Representatives from Sprint:** Lennox Hood, Randy Murbach

**Interpreters:** Ann Acampora, Jeff Kirkwood, and Liz Mohr

The meeting was called to order at 9:22 a.m.

**MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes were accepted as read.

**TAM STAFF REPORTS**

**Willis Mann**

Board Vacancies: The names of candidates to fill Board vacancies are now in the hands of the Governor and it will be up to him to make the selections and announcements. This process should be completed in the next several weeks and we will once again have a full board.

Board of Public Works: The Maryland Relay contract is one of the items on the agenda of the BPW's rescheduled meeting on November 29<sup>th</sup> at 9:00 a.m. in the Governor's Conference Room at the State House in Annapolis. TAM will arrange for interpreters if Board members are interested in attending the meeting.

Reporter: The AEGIS Newspaper in Harford County will send a reporter to cover the present GABTR meeting.

Relay Game Show: TAM and Sprint, specifically Willis Mann and Randy Murbach, have been working hard to develop the game show, "*Feel Like A Relay Millionaire.*" The planning is nearing completion and a dry run is planned for the week of November 27<sup>th</sup>, with the first show in Columbia on December 2nd.

Change in Meeting Date: The Board meeting scheduled for August 11<sup>th</sup> next year would need be rescheduled because the date coincides with the National Congress of the Jewish Deaf. Several Board members will be attending the conference.

Sending E-mail: Board members should be sure to send e-mail intended only for a specific individual to that person, and not to the group e-mail system. Mitch Travers explained the difference between group e-mail and individual e-mail, and how to send e-mail intended for all Board members or e-mail to only a specific person. In response to a question from Al Sonnenstrahl, Mitch Travers said he administers the Board's group e-mail.

### **Nancy Seidman**

Public Relations Update: At present the main outreach activities are directed at senior citizens and the deaf community. The senior citizen focus has been underway for some time and the results have been very good in terms of increased awareness on the part of seniors, their families, and their caregivers. The Relay Partners program continues to grow even without recent direct advertisements. The educational kit project is close to full development. The kit will cover topics such as deaf culture, sign language, telecommunications, and students to students. Five counties will participate in the pilot program when the kit is fully developed, which would be around January next year.

Al Sonnenstrahl asked for an update on his recommendation to include recognition of TTY tones in TAM's outreach efforts and inquired whether the educational kit would cover TTY tones recognition as well. Nancy Seidman responded that although she has not made any recent changes to the outreach program to address TTY tones specifically, recognition of TTY tones is usually covered in TAM's public awareness presentations and that it would be feasible to include TTY tone recognition in the kit. Al Sonnenstrahl suggested that the Board be given an opportunity to review the educational kit and provide feedback. Randy Murbach offered to show the Board his standard presentations to businesses at a future date so the Board could provide feedback.

### **Brenda Kelly-Frey**

MAT Program Update: A summary of MAT equipment distribution data covering the years 1997 through 1999 was distributed and reviewed. The data showed that TTYs and visual ring signalers were the most requested items. The MAT program continues to promote public awareness of the program by making presentations to various groups and responding to individual inquiries. To bring the program closer to the public, evaluation sites are being established at about 20 selected locations throughout the state. The program is also developing a database for more efficient record keeping.

Al Sonnenstrahl asked why only a few Braille phone devices have been given out and inquired whether income considerations could have been a factor. Brenda responded that the MAT program has made considerable efforts to publicize the program within the deaf-blind community and that there are indications that most people who need such equipment already have them. She said the high cost of Braille equipment relative to TTY equipment is normally taken into consideration when requests for Braille equipment

are evaluated, so an individual with a relatively higher income could still qualify to receive the equipment. Al Sonnenstrahl observed that more comprehensive data analysis would facilitate evaluation of how the MAT program is meeting the legislative mandates and requested that future reports include information about the number of approved applications relative to the number of actual applications. Randy Murbach also suggested that future reports include a breakdown of applicants by types of disability. In response to a question from Robin Krout, Brenda said about 33 states have telecommunications equipment distribution programs.

### **Gil Becker**

VRI/VRS: Currently, only two states provide VRS service. The FCC issued a ruling on VRS in May this year that covers, among other things, how VRS calls would be paid for. The National Exchange Carriers Association (NECA) pays for operator time for both intra- and interstate calls, but not for equipment and other recurring local costs associated with VRS. New technologies such as DSL are making it more feasible for the average consumer to access VRS from their homes instead of having to travel to VRS centers, and TAM is working on the possibility of such equipment being available through the MAT program. It would be helpful if the Board would work with TAM to get the necessary legislation passed.

Al Sonnenstrahl cautioned not to confuse VRS with VRI and then asked Gil Becker whether he objects to NECA paying for interstate costs, perhaps in order not to give up control. Gil Becker responded that he has no reason to object to NECA paying these costs, and that he would have no control over interstate calls handled by out of state carriers and providers anyway. On the issue of VRS versus VRI, it was noted that both deaf consumers and businesses are likely to attempt to take advantage of VRS to avoid having to pay for interpreters.

Speech to Speech Funding: Maryland is way ahead of the FCC mandate to provide STS service. The FCC mandated that NECA would pay for the interstate calls. Maryland was covering the STS costs well before the FCC mandate and the new ruling will not immediately affect the Maryland Relay surcharge.

NASRA: Gil Becker was congratulated by the Board on being elevated to the presidency of NASRA during the organization's October 2000 meeting in Portland, Oregon. He replaces the previous president who resigned. He gave a summary report of the meeting.

Relay Website: The new web site is up and running and TAM has retained the services of a professional organization to make the site more user-friendly, accessible, and navigable.

Resolving Complaints and Quality Issues: Maryland Relay has few complaints relative to the number of calls processed, and there are procedures for resolving complaints. Human factors potentially affects quality, so the issue of proper training of relay operators continues to be given a high priority in the efforts improve the overall quality of the relay system.

Al Sonnestrahl regretted that the Board did not have opportunity to provide substantial input into the RFP discussions during the previous funding cycle. Mitch Travers said Board members could offer feedback and input to TAM at any time, not just during the Board meetings. He added the Board could also take advantage of the electronic message board to discuss issues between Board meetings.

### **Pam Stewart**

Complaint Process: Maryland Relay has a long-established complaint process that is updated as necessary and consumer complaints are taken quite seriously. While efforts are made to resolve complaints, it is difficult to resolve every complaint to every customer's satisfaction. In some instances, the complainant may not provide sufficient information. Al Sonnenstrahl said one of the things complainants often mentioned was that they did not receive any follow-up after filing a complaint and that this discourages people from filing complaints.

## **SPRINT REPORT**

### **Lennox Hood**

Consumer Complaints: Sprint takes consumer complaints seriously and continuously works to improve user satisfaction with the service. Making the system responsive to consumer needs has been a learning process for providers and consumers alike, as was illustrated when a Board member visited the relay center recently to review the interruption feature. The proposed focus group has not yet been organized but it could be set up by the beginning of next year. Mitch Travers observed that Sprint did not furnish complaints statistics at this meeting.

## **PUBLIC INPUT**

### **Samuel Jones**

711: Samuel Jones reported that access to 711 has been, in his experience, inconsistent, confusing, and affected by the location from which a call is made. He said he would sometimes get DC Relay when he wanted Maryland Relay even though he was calling from a Maryland location. This usually happens when the Maryland location is close to the DC border.

ASCII: Samuel Jones reported that when he uses his computer to access the relay, the connection was sometimes lost or the computer would stop responding.

### **Martha Hood**

Educating the Public: Martha Hood reported that businesses and the public in general are often confused when given a TTY number to call, and some appear reluctant to communicate directly with a deaf person. She cited instances where she has experienced such problems, including her doctor's office. She reported that businesses would try to call her number directly even after she has given them the relay number and explained how to reach her via the relay. Samuel Jones recommended a device that would inform direct callers that they had reached a TTY number and direct them to call through a relay service.

## **BOARD MEMBERS REPORTS**

### **Jim Stevenson**

Improving Lines of Communication: To illustrate a point about how Maryland Relay has helped to improve communications in the state, Jim Stevenson gave each Board member two small pieces of fabric, one with a smooth texture and the other with a rougher texture. The smooth-textured fabric represented smoother lines of communications among Maryland citizens since Maryland Relay was established.

Update on Grants: As usual, efforts were made and will be made to include Maryland Relay in county and Board of Education grants in Allegheny County. Examples of grant-supported initiatives that have incorporated telecommunications and disabilities issues are web-based kiosks placed in public places and on-line courses that are accessible to the visually impaired. Such inclusiveness have been made possible by continued cooperation by TAM and Sprint.

### **Mitchell Travers**

Board Vacancies: Candidate information for filling Board vacancies has now been forwarded to the Governor for further action.

Ad Hoc Committee on Quality Assurance: A quality assurance committee is being established. Interested Board members are welcome to join.

Call Delays: Mitch Travers invited Pam Stewart to clarify call delays said to be out of the Relay's control. Pam Stewart explained that Maryland Relay has no control over what happens before a call reaches Sprint switches and that what some consumers mistakenly assumed to be Sprint delays might actually be busy circuits that they were not aware of.

Improving the Relay: The Relay does not seem to be very aware of or responsive to the changing needs of deaf business professionals in an increasingly mobile telecommunications environment. For instance, the request for a dedicated number for two-line VCO is still pending, and there seems to be no progress on Web-based relay and taking advantage of Internet technologies, which could facilitate the addition of desired features, like VRS.

Proposing Agenda Items: Board members could, if they wish, propose meeting agenda items to TAM directly, without going through the Board chair.

## **OLD BUSINESS**

Turbo Code Compatibility: Mitch Travers asked Gil Becker for an update on the speed compatibility issue. Gil Becker responded that the equipment manufacturers are still working on the matter through their lawyers.

Web-based Relay: Mitch Travers inquired about the status of Web-based relay. In the discussion that followed, it was noted that some key issues, notably jurisdiction and cost

control, still need to be worked out since the Web is a global entity and accessible from virtually everywhere.

Maryland Relay Web Site: Suggestions and feedback on the Maryland Relay web site are always welcome. The site is being developed to become a key public outreach and consumer information tool.

Al Sonnenstrahl suggested, as a possible solution to the TTY number issue, a system by which deaf consumers would give the public only a specific phone number which, when dialed, would reach a relay operator who could look up that deaf person's home phone number on a computer screen. The system is necessary because businesses normally only have room for one phone number in their computer systems, making it impossible to include both a relay number and the person's phone number.

The pros and cons of such a system were discussed at length. Mitch Travers suggested forming a special committee consisting of Sprint, TAM, and GABTR representatives to look into the feasibility of such a system and report back to the Board.

## **NEW BUSINESS**

Quality Assurance Committee: Mitch Travers announced the formation of a GABTR committee on quality assurance. He said four people have expressed interest in serving and invited other interested Board members to join.

Minutes: Al Sonnenstrahl suggested that the minutes of the Board meetings should be distributed within 30 days of meetings and not only through e-mail but also in printed format. A motion to that effect was made, but was not seconded or passed. However, Mr. Agboola and Mr. Mann agreed that it would be possible to provide the minutes within 30 days of the meeting date.

Supporting the MAT Program: Lennox Hood suggested that concerted efforts could be made to help the MAT program obtain additional funding from the legislature. Gil Becker said individual citizens and organizations are always free to lobby the legislature. Al Sonnenstrahl suggested getting the MDAD involved.

The meeting adjourned at 1:34 p.m.

*(After the meeting, Randy Murbach showed the Board a prototype of the proposed game show: "Feel Like A Relay Millionaire?" The Board offered several suggestions to improve the game design and volunteered to help publicize the shows.)*