

NEBRASKA TRS ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

January 29, 2021, 1:30 p.m. CDT

**Location: Nebraska Public Service Commission - Remote Videoconference Via Webex
Lincoln, Nebraska.**

The Nebraska Telecommunications Relay Advisory Committee met remotely on January 29, 2021 via Webex videoconferencing.

The meeting was called to order at 1:36 p.m. by Tami Richardson-Nelson. The following committee members were present at the meeting:

Robert Feit
Tami Richardson-Nelson
Commissioner Tim Schram
Jerry Siders
Norm Weverka

Introduction of Guests:

From the Commission, Cullen Robbins, Director of Communications, Steve Stovall, Accountant/TRS Administrator, Sallie Dietrich, Attorney representing legal support for TRS issues for the Commission and Deb Collins, Public Information Officer for the Commission; Representing Sprint Communications, Emma Danielson, Sprint Relay Program Manager and Marie Protasky, Outreach Specialist for Sprint; Representing the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NCDHH) was John Wyvill, Executive Director and Kelsey Cruz, Public Information Officer; Sharon Sinkler and Frances Beurivage interpreted the meeting. CART (Communications Access Real Time) captioning was provided by Margaret (Mydge) Heaney with Inclusive Communications Access Nebraska.

Election of New Officers:

Motion by Bob Feit to nominate Tami Richardson-Nelson as Chair. Seconded by Jerry Siders. Motion approved by all members present. Bob Feit moved to elect Norm as Vice-Chair. Seconded by Jerry Siders. Motion approved by all members present.

Approval of the Agenda:

Correction to the agenda previously provided to Steve. Item 8, bullet item #1 reference to the NCDHH Advisory Board should be corrected to NCDHH Full Board. Motion by Bob Feit to approve agenda as amended. Seconded by Norm Weverka. Motion approved by all members present.

Approval of the Minutes of January 31, 2020 meeting:

Correction to minutes previously provided to Steve. References in NCDHH Comments section beginning on page 4 of 4 of the minutes should be revised to read NCDHH Full Board. Motion by Bob Feit to approve the minutes as amended. Seconded by Norm Weverka. Motion approved by all members present.

Chairperson's Comments:

Tami expressed gratitude to Steve for his continued involvement with this program. Also, gratitude expressed for involvement by the committee members, the NCDHH and the Public Service Commission. More improvements need to be made regarding broadband availability to communities.

Public Service Commission Comments:

- 1. Updated Relay Statistics (Steve Stovall).** Steve presented an Excel spreadsheet that provided historical and projected revenues, expenses and changes in fund balances to the committee. Historical and projected call volume and cost data was shared with the committee. Steve informed the committee that minutes of use and cost projections utilize rates under the new Sprint contract effective July 1, 2019. Two forecast scenarios were presented for the next assessment period July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022; 1) Attachment 1 - forecast #1 assumes the surcharge remains at its present three-cent (\$.03) rate and; 2) Attachment 2 - forecast #2 assumes the surcharge is reduced to a two-cent (\$.02) rate. The fund balance, assuming the three-cent surcharge continues for FY 2021-22 is projected at \$591,554. The fund balance is projected at \$345,142 for FY 2021-22 if the rate is reduced to two cents. Mr. Stovall expressed concern regarding the spike in conversation minutes, especially for the March, May and June 2020 and the recent spike of 1,464 in December 2020. The forecast scenario at the three-cent (\$.03) rate seems a more viable solution to address any uncertainties impacted by the COVID19 pandemic. Steve proposed the three-cent option to the committee.

Tami urged the committee to carefully consider the consequences allowing the fund balance to escalate to high levels. The legislature periodically looks at these funds and may transfer cash funds to the general fund of conditions dictate. Tami stated that the surcharge could go to \$.02 and still result in an adequate fund balance. Decision was made to defer recommendation until item 5.

- 2. Equipment Program Update (Steve Stovall).** Steve provided reasoning for the \$164,000 expenditure level in March 2021 for NSTEP (column j). Taking historical data since 2012 (date of Verizon participation in the program), the redemption rate comes to 81.06%. If we take the current vouchers issued of 188 for Verizon multiplied by the redemption rate, we get 152 devices. Assuming a \$1,000 per device payment yields \$152,000. Adding the \$152,000 plus \$12,000 for all other (non-Verizon) telecom devices results in the \$164,000 projection. For the NSTEP program, an increase is presumed due to additional anticipated voucher redemptions under the Verizon wireless program. The projections put the NSTEP costs at \$28,000 monthly with \$16,000 as a reservation of fund balance for presumed Verizon redemptions.
- 3. Summary of Legislative Bills Introduced (Cullen Robbins).**

Update on Legislative Bill Regarding 211 Referral Network. This bill, originally passed by the Legislature during the 2019 session, provided for grants under the Telecommunications Relay System Act for a 211 Information and Referral Network.

The bill was amended to provide funding from the Health and Human Services fund, rather than the relay fund. The two year period for which the funding was granted will end in 2021. It is the understanding of the PSC that other funding alternatives have been identified that are not a risk to the TRS. PSC will continue to monitor.

Broadband-Related Bills. Among several broadband related bills introduced in the 2021 session are three bills related to broadband deployment. These include; 1) LB 338, 456, and 604, which create broadband grant programs; 2) LB 600 and 656, which expand entities that could provide broadband to include rural electric utilities and municipalities and; 3) LB 398, which would change the definition of broadband speeds from 25/3 (megabits per second downstream/upstream, respectively) to 100/100.

4. Discussion on NCDHH Petitions RE: Wireless Devices in NSTEP (Cullen Robbins discussion).

Cullen indicated that this petition was brought by Tami before the NCDHH in March 2020. The petition comprises two items; 1) Increase the number of persons per household rule (current rule allows only one per household) and; 2) Shorten the reapplication term from five (5) years to three (3). Comments from the committee centered on husband + wife arrangements in acquiring wireless devices. Wireless devices being mobile and personal regarding individual use were offered as rationale. Additionally, COVID19 communication and the ability to reach 911 for safety concerns by the deaf community may be necessary. Bob indicated that obsolescence may present barriers to the applicant in accessing features to allow better communication. Bob stated that the program must be flexible enough to take advances in technology and support into consideration. Tami's concern was providing enough financial support to continue the improve the quality of lives for the deaf and hard of hearing community.

Questions next involved legislative involvement. Cullen stated that the NPSC typically does not draft legislation for programs that we already regulate. Commissioner Schram indicated that getting a senator to sponsor the bill from the Transportation & Telecommunications or Health committee would be a good starting point.

5. Determination of Surcharge for July 1, 2021 Assessment Period. Steve informed the committee the surcharge proceeding on Docket C-5198 will be held March 23, 2021 at 10:00 am in the Commission hearing room via Webex videoconference.

Bob Feit made a motion to recommend to the Commission the surcharge for the telecommunications relay service remain at its present three-cent (\$.03) level effective July 1, 2021. Jerry Siders seconded. Upon approval of all committee members present, the recommendation was approved. Tami Richardson-Nelson, as chair of the committee, agreed to provide a letter to the Commission documenting the Committee's recommendation.

6. Update on Text-to-911 Implementation in Nebraska (Director, Dave Sankey). Dave presented two colorized maps for the committee's review;

- Nebraska Text to 911 Implementation and;
- Nebraska PSAP Regionalization.

The Nebraska Text to 911 provided a status of counties that have live Text to 911 technology implemented, counties in the process of implementing Text to 911 and counties not yet implemented. Dave indicated that these maps are available on the NPSC's website for the 911 Department under 'PSAP Information.'

Norm expressed appreciation for what the Wireless 911 department is doing for Nebraskans – especially for those who are elderly and farming communities.

Emma inquired about promoting consumer awareness. Dave indicated he works extensively with Deb Collins and counties utilizing various social media outlets and news releases to disseminate information.

Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NCDHH) Comments (Kelsey Cruz in place of John Wyvill):

Advisory Committee Members terms. Member's terms are summarized as follows:

- Norm Weverka and Robert Feit were reappointed to three-year terms beginning March 15, 2019 – March 15, 2022 per the March 15, 2019 NCDHH Full Board meeting;
- Commissioner Tim Schram and Tami Richardson-Nelson were reappointed September 19, 2018 and are serving a three-year term September 19, 2018 – September 19, 2021;
- Jerry Siders was appointed July 12, 2018 and is serving a three-year term beginning July 12, 2018 – July 12, 2021;
- There are still two (2) vacancies on this committee – 1) one position representing speech-impaired individuals and; 2) one representing the telephone industry.

Kelsey indicated that appointments (or reappointments) will have to be made for the three members terms expiring around year-end 2021. All appointments are made by the NCDHH Full Board.

People on the Move. Kelsey indicated various personnel changes have transpired:

- Susan Whitaker is the Advocacy Specialist in the North Platte office;
- Abby Giambattista is now Advocacy Specialist in the Lincoln office;
- Cody McEvoy is now a Behavioral Health Specialist with NCDHH;
- Ashley Wulf is an Advocacy Specialist in the Omaha office;
- Dillon Curren's last day was February 5.

The agency has been busy communicating with members of the deaf and hard of hearing community via social media outlets, the E-Communicator, blogs and V-Blogs.

Sprint Telecommunications Comments:

Emma Danielson gave a presentation to update the committee on recent activities and outreach plans for Sprint in 2021. Emma indicated the Bob Feit and Marie Protaskey are Sprint's

Outreach Specialists. A new website for Nebraska Relay has been implemented. A Q & A segment followed the presentation. Tami thanked Emma for a presentation that was well organized and complete.

Old Business: None.

New Business: Jerry Siders expressed concern that meetings and presentations need to be more accessible for people with low vision.

Public Comment: None.

Next Meeting: To be scheduled as needed.

Meeting adjourned at 4:10 p.m. by Tami Richardson-Nelson.

Respectfully submitted,
Steven G. Stovall - Staff Accountant
Nebraska Public Service Commission
February 16, 2021