

Memorandum

TO: Interested Individuals
FROM: Nick Holom, Economist, Montana Dept. of Labor and Industry,
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DATE: 01/14/2024
SUBJECT: History and Changes to the HELP-Link Program in Montana

HELP-Link, Montana's workforce training and employment assistance program for Medicaid Expansion enrollees, was established as part of the Montana Health and Economic Livelihood Partnership (HELP) Plan under the 2015 HELP Act (Senate Bill 405).¹ Administered by the Montana Department of Labor & Industry (MTDLI), the program was designed to provide career planning, training, and job placement services for individuals enrolled in Montana's Medicaid Expansion. The initiative aimed to connect these low-income Montanans with opportunities for stable, higher-paying employment. This memorandum details the program's inception, subsequent legislative enhancements, and its transition from DLI-run services to contractor-delivered services, highlighting the extensive impact these changes have had on the program's ability to aid Montanans in achieving economic self-sufficiency. For a timeline, and detailed description of the types of services offered by HELP-Link over the course of the program, see the appendix.

Job Service Montana Provision of HELP-Link Program Services (2016-2022)

The 2015 HELP Act

In 2015, the Montana Legislature passed the HELP Act to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), extending healthcare coverage to low-income individuals earning up to 138% of the federal poverty level (FPL). Lawmakers introduced HELP-Link as part of the HELP Act to promote economic self-sufficiency. MTDLI began administering HELP-Link began on January 1, 2016 through Job Service Montana offices. The program offered voluntary workforce services to HELP Plan enrollees and providing a platform for career development through personalized support like resume writing, skills assessments, and career counseling.

Evolution of HELP-Link Program Services

HELP-Link initially included tiered set of services ranging from light touch job search assistance, such as resume writing and interview preparation services, to case management and intensive training services geared towards credential attainment. When entering the program, participants completed an intake survey that allowed Medicaid-enrolled clients to outline their employment needs, skills, and barriers, facilitating the creation of individualized career plans by program staff. If appropriate, these plans included training and supportive assistance funded by HELP-Link and supported through case management. Between fiscal years 2016 to 2019, about 32,000 Medicaid-enrolled Montanans received services funded either by HELP-Link or other federally funded workforce training programs by MTDLI.² The more intensive case management and training services were provided to approximately 1,950 individuals. An additional 1,000 Medicaid Expansion enrollees were served through other workforce programs such as WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker.

In the 2019 legislative session, lawmakers added new community engagement requirements for Medicaid Expansion enrollees to the HELP Act.³ These new requirements included workforce participation or job training activities. In 2020, following these changes, the HELP-Link program changed its focus to case management and

¹ Montana Legislature, "Senate Bill 405 - Montana Health and Economic Livelihood Partnership (HELP) Plan," 2015. Available online: <https://leg.mt.gov/bills/2015/billpdf/SB0405.pdf>.

² Help-Link Program 2019 FYE Report https://lmi.mt.gov/docs/Publications/LMI-Pubs/Special-Reports-and-Studies/HELP-Link_2019Report.pdf.

³ HB 658. Accessed December 12, 2024. Available: <https://archive.legmt.gov/bills/2019/BillPdf/HB0658.pdf>.

intensive training services, utilizing direct referrals from workforce centers and collaborations with community organizations to maintain effective service delivery. Through this model the program continued to offer robust services including career counseling and connections to training programs in high-demand industries.⁴

HELP-link Workforce Development Grants (WDGs) were also added as a component to the HELP Act during the 2019 session.⁵ These grants supported Montana employers who hire lower-income individuals on Medicaid and in doing so facilitate access to job opportunities offering higher wages or employer-sponsored health insurance for Medicaid Expansion enrollees. Eligible employers must be operational within Montana, registered with the state (or legally exempt), and must employ qualifying individuals. They are also required to submit an application and a W9 form. Grants offer up to \$5,000 per eligible employee for a duration of up to 12 months and can be used for permanent wage increases, training or testing, providing health insurance that enables disenrollment from Montana Medicaid, and purchasing necessary work-related tools, equipment, or clothing⁶. These WDGs continue to be administered by MTDLI.

Contractor Provision of Help-Link Services (2021-2024)

2021 Legislative Session Changes and SFY2022-2024 contracts

In the 2021 legislative session, House Bill 614 mandated that the Montana Department of Labor and Industry (MTDLI) contract with private entities, either nonprofit or for-profit, to administer HELP-Link workforce development services.⁷ This resulted in a phased transition of services starting in 2021, with Job Service Montana gradually transitioning HELP-Link clients to services provided by contracted entities. By mid-2022, Job Service had concluded serving clients through HELP-Link, with some continuing to be supported through other programs like WIOA.

Contracted partners began serving their first clients starting enrollments in December 2021. Through these partnerships, approximately 170 individuals were served from December 2021 to February 2024. Approximately 60 people were served through more intensive retraining services, 70 were served through the Diversion Assistance program, and 34 were served through a new HELP-Link Scholarships offering. Figure 2 shows the contracts awarded and total expenditures during this time period.

⁴ Montana Legislature, "Workforce Activities Related to Medicaid Expansion," January 2018. Available: <https://archive.legmt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2017-2018/Children-Family/Committee-Topics/medicaid-expansion/jan2018-workforce-activities.pdf>.

⁵ Montana Code Annotated 2022, "39-12-106," Montana Legislature, accessed December 19, 2024, https://archive.legmt.gov/bills/mca/title_0390/chapter_0120/part_0010/section_0060/0390-0120-0010-0060.html [archive.legmt.gov]

⁶ Montana Department of Labor and Industry, August 2022. <https://archive.legmt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2021-2022/Children-Families/Required-Reports/aug2022-help-link-report.pdf>.

⁷ HB 614. Accessed December 12, 2024. Available: <https://legiscan.com/MT/text/HB614/id/2388141/Montana-2021-HB614-Enrolled.pdf>

Figure 1: SFY 2022-2024 Contract Awards and Expenditures

Providers	Total Contracts	Total Expenditures	Remaining (unspent) Contract Amount
Service Provider - CTI	\$ 181,610	\$ 91,359	\$ 90,251
Service Provider - Career Futures	\$ 191,344	\$ 125,462	\$ 65,882
Financial Literacy - RDI	\$ 250,000	\$ 135,765	\$ 114,235
Service Provider - District 7 HRDC	\$ 219,668	\$ 104,388	\$ 115,280
Service Provider - Opportunities, Inc	\$ 151,117	\$ 114,890	\$ 36,227
	\$ 993,739	\$ 571,864	\$ 421,875

2025 Contracts Awarded

In February of 2024, four private contractors were awarded contracts to serve Medicaid enrollees through the HELP-Link program in SFY 2025. Figure 3 shows the total contracts awarded and expenditures by contractors, which include Confident Women LLC (\$4,700), Opportunities Inc. (\$164,208), Rural Dynamics Inc. (\$125,000), Tech Talent South LLC. (\$213,040). Career Futures was awarded a contract, but later closed in 2024 and ultimately did not accept their award.

Figure 2: SFY 2025 Contract and Expenditures

Providers	Total Contracts	Total Expenditures	Remaining (unspent) Contract Amount
Service Provider - Confident Women	\$4,700	\$4,700	\$0
Financial Literacy - RDI	\$125,000	\$34,029	\$90,971
Service Provider - Opportunities Inc	\$164,208	\$129,874	\$34,334
Service Provider - TTS	\$213,040	\$54,348	\$158,692
Total	\$506,948	\$222,951	\$283,997

Not all contractors provide the same services. For example, Rural Dynamics focuses on financial literacy trainings, Tech Talent South provide IT programmer trainings, and Confident Women has provided CDL Trainings. Opportunities Inc on the other hand provides variable trainings, which include industrial truck operator, certified athletic trainer, certified dental assistant, long distance operator, truck engine technician, and real estate agent.

Fiscal Year Expenditures By State and Contractor Provided Services

Figure 3 shows expenditures across administration, case management, training, and employer grants can be seen by fiscal year and by state and contractor provision of Help-Link services and training funds. On average state expenditures on case management were about \$350,600 from FY17 to FY22, the last full FY when the state provided services. The state spent an average of \$460,500 per FY in these years. Employer grants have averaged approximately \$52,700 per FY since 2020, though recent years have had higher expenditures.

Contractor provided services have had lower expenditures, but also lower clients served (see Figure 4). Approximately \$128,700 have been spent per fiscal year on financial literacy trainings. \$100,500 per fiscal year on case management, and \$94,300 per fiscal year on training and related services.

Figure 3: State and Contractor Provided Expenditures

Year	Total	State Services			Contract Services			
		Admin	Case Mgmt	Training & Related	Employer Grants	Financial Literacy	Case Mgmt	Training & Related
SFY17	\$1,214,633	\$565,058	\$291,169	\$358,406				
SFY18	\$975,679	\$158,006	\$297,491	\$520,182				
SFY19	\$939,151	\$147,399	\$297,621	\$494,131				
SFY20	\$1,191,109	\$261,040	\$266,466	\$649,408	\$14,195			
SFY21	\$1,498,863	\$251,708	\$568,794	\$509,522	\$16,565	\$152,274		
SFY22	\$1,049,406	\$181,490	\$382,313	\$231,214	\$16,889	\$170,491	\$54,537	\$12,472
SFY23	\$770,613	\$197,407	\$55,279	(\$80)	\$138,050	\$104,187	\$165,262	\$110,509
SFY24	\$592,578	\$170,573	\$14,924		\$77,657	\$87,799	\$81,734	\$159,892

Source: DLI Central Services Division

Figure 4 shows that total on average for FY21 and FY22, the state has served approximately 2.9 clients for every client served by contractors. The service types also vary, with state clients being mostly served through enrollments, compared to clients being dispersed across industry-driven trainings and enrollments, as well as financial literacy and diversion assistance.

Figure 4: Clients Served by Type

Provider	Service Type	SFY21	SFY22	SFY23	SFY24
MTDLI	Total Clients Served	472	325		
	Enrollment	453	306		
	Diversion Assistance	19	19		
Non-State Providers	Total Clients Served		109	173	136
	Enrollment + Training Scholarships		8	83	
	Diversion Assistance		20	39	17
	Financial Literacy		81	51	29

Source: DLI Workforce Services Division

Workforce Development Grants

HELP-Link employer grants began in March 2020. The program started as a pilot in 3 Montana Job Service offices. Currently all 19 Montana Job Service Offices offer HELP-Link employer grants. As of SFY2024, the program has served 97 clients with expenditures of \$263,355 or roughly \$2,700 per client.

Figure 5: Total Spending and Clients

	Clients	Spending
SFY23-SFY24	76	\$215,707
Total Since 2020	97	\$263,355

Figure 6 shows that employer grants mostly pay for work-related expenses such as tools and equipment needed for employment as well as for training related expenses such as testing fees and training costs as listed below.

Figure 6: WDG Spending by Type

Employer Grant Service	Grants SFY23-SFY24	Grants Since 2020	% of Spending
Work Related Materials / Supplies	73	85	96%
Skills Upgrade / Training	3	9	3%
Employee Retention	0	3	1%

Workers in the employer grant program are mostly in construction and extraction as well as installation, maintenance and repair. All occupation groups and the number of clients served are listed below:

Figure 7: Occupation Groups and Clients Served

Occupations	FY23-FY24	Total Since 2020
Construction and Extraction	56	59
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	9	15
Production	6	8
Educational Instruction and Library	1	4
Healthcare Support		3
Community and Social Service	1	2
Personal Care and Service	1	2
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	1	1
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	1	1
Office and Administrative Support	1	1
Protective Service		1

Conclusion

The HELP-Link program has taken many forms since its inception, having adapted to legislative changes and evolving service delivery models to serve Medicaid enrollees. By addressing employment barriers and enhancing career services, the program supports participants in attaining greater financial stability and independence. HELP-Link has been a model of how health care initiatives can be successfully integrated with economic and workforce development strategies to foster broader benefits.

Appendix

Figure 8: Timeline of HELP-Link Program Changes											
Service Type	Operator	Fiscal Year									
		2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Enrollment	State	2016-2021									
	Contractor							2022-2025			
Workforce Dev. Grant	State					2020-2025					
	Contractor										
Scholarship	State										
	Contractor							2022-2025			
Diversion Assistance	State					2020-2021					
	Contractor							2022-2025			
Financial Literacy	State					2020-2021					
	Contractor							2022-2025			

Figure 9: Service Offerings and Descriptions	
Service Type	Description
HELP-Link Enrollment	Case managed services with an emphasis on creating and following a comprehensive career action plan to improve employment outcomes. Includes career coaching, employment assessments, training assistance, supportive assistance, and job placement services.
HELP-Link Diversion Assistance	One-time short-term financial support aimed at helping recipients maintain or obtain employment. This assistance can cover various work-related expenses, such as equipment or clothing necessary for a job.
HELP-Link Financial Literacy Training	Personalized financial education and support. Participants work with certified financial coaches to develop skills in managing finances, credit, and debt.
HELP-Link Scholarships	Financial aid to support training and educational pursuits that can improve employability. The funding is designed to help cover costs related to tuition, testing fees, and other educational expenses to prepare participants for in-demand jobs.