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STATE FUNDS AVAILABLE FOR ADVANCED TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACCESS

Montana's schools, libraries, and health care providers, gearing up to file applications for federally funded discounts for telecommunications services, may also be eligible for state-funded assistance. The Montana Universal Access Program, funded by a surcharge on intrastate telecommunications services, provides an additional source of assistance for Montana communities where high costs are a barrier to obtaining advanced telecommunications services.

The state program provides \$250,000 in internet access funding assistance for fiscal year 1998 and \$500,000 for fiscal year 1999 for schools, libraries, health care providers, tribal colleges, and community public access points. The priority of the program is to ensure access to advanced telecommunications is available in each Montana community.

Applications for the Montana program will be available next month from the Public Service Commission. Qualified applicants will receive a 50-percent discount off of the telecommunications provider's lowest business rate for a high-speed, dedicated phone line. Discounts provided under the state program will be reduced by the amount of any federal discounts received by the applicant.

The PSC has actively assisted education, library, and health organizations in public outreach so that all eligible users in Montana may take advantage of the federal and state discount programs. Applications for federal discounts will soon be posted on the FCC Web site (fcc.gov/ccb). Applications for state discounts will be available from the PSC.

The PSC administers the state program, with advice from the Montana universal access program oversight committee, which held its first meeting October 1. Members of the oversight group are: Michelle Burchett (Chair), US WEST; John Cleaveland (Vice-chair), University of Montana; Thelma McClosky Armstrong, Eastern Montana Telemedicine; Jim Ereaux, Salish Kootenai College; Karen Strege, Montana State Library; Becky Pleggemeyer, AT&T; Christine Day, Bozeman Public Schools; Thomas Hart, Butte Catholic Schools; Robert Anderson, Montana School Board Association; Phil Campbell, Montana Education Association.; Mike Strand, Montana Independent Telecommunications Systems; and Fred Lark, Skycell Satellite/Commnet Cellular, Lewistown, Montana.

The PSC is actively involved in informing education, library and health organizations about the federal and state telecommunications discounts. Persons interested in learning more about these discounts should call the Public Service Commission at 406-444-6191 or visit the PSC's Internet website at www.psc.mt.gov.

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