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# Telecommunications Access Minnesota

2024 Annual Report to the Public Utilities Commission

Docket Number P999/PR-25-5

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## Executive Summary

In accordance with Minn. Stat. § 237.55, the Minnesota Department of Commerce (Commerce) submits the 2024 Annual Report to the Public Utilities Commission (Commission). This report provides information on the Telecommunications Access Minnesota (TAM) fund, and on Minnesota Relay and Minnesota Access to Communication Technology (formerly the Telephone Equipment Distribution Program), which were established to provide equal access to the telecommunications network for people who are deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing, speech disabled, or physically disabled.

Also, this report reviews the accessibility of telecommunications services to persons who have communication disabilities, describes services provided, accounts for annual revenues and expenditures for each aspect of the fund to date, and predicts future program operation.

Minnesota Relay and Minnesota Access to Communication Technology (MN ACT) are funded by a surcharge on all wired and post-paid wireless telephone access lines in Minnesota, and by a fee on each Minnesota retail transaction for prepaid wireless telecommunications services. In addition to Minnesota Relay and MN ACT, the TAM fund supports six additional programs:

- The Department of Human Services (DHS) – Rural Real-Time Captioning program has a maximum annual budget of \$300,000.
- The Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) – Accessible News for the Blind program has a maximum annual budget of \$100,000.
- The Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing receives \$1,620,000 annually.
- Minnesota IT Services receives \$290,000 annually for coordinating technology accessibility and usability.
- Minnesota IT Services receives \$50,000 annually for a consolidated access fund for other state agencies related to accessibility of their web-based services.
- The Legislative Coordinating Commission (LCC) receives \$133,000 annually to provide captioning of live legislative activity streaming on the LCC’s website.

## Key Points

- In fiscal year 2024, the TAM surcharge and interest generated revenue of \$3,476,973 to fund eight programs providing a variety of services, with expenditures totaling \$3,947,883.
- In 2024, Minnesotans placed 42,234 outbound relay calls with a total of 144,986 conversation minutes of use.
- From 2023 to 2024, Minnesota Relay outbound calls declined 34%, and conversation minutes decreased 31%. Many relay users have migrated to internet-based services, which are under the Federal Communications Commission's jurisdiction.
- In 2024, MN ACT served 121 new clients and 320 repeat clients.
- From 2023 to 2024, MN ACT experienced:
  - An 8% increase in new MN ACT clients served.
  - A 3% decrease in repeat clients served.
  - An 8% decrease in telecommunication devices distributed.
  - A 3% increase in the number of auxiliary devices distributed.
- MN ACT staff provided outreach for both MN ACT and Minnesota Relay at 19 booths and 35 presentations with a total of 59,200 event attendees.

# Telecommunications Access Minnesota (TAM)

## TAM Program History

In 1987, the legislature established two programs to ensure people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or speech disabled have access to telephone service: the Minnesota Relay, which began service on March 1, 1989; and the Telephone Equipment Distribution Program, which began as a pilot program on October 1, 1988. The legislature created the Telecommunications Access for Communication Impaired Persons board to administer these programs.

In 1995, the legislature eliminated the Telecommunications Access for Communication Impaired Persons board and transferred the responsibilities for administering the fund and the Minnesota Relay program to the Department of Public Service (the Departments of Public Service and Commerce merged on September 15, 1999). In 2002, the name of the Telecommunications Access for Communication Impaired Persons program changed to Telecommunications Access Minnesota (TAM). Commerce sought the name change at the request of consumers, who objected to the word “impaired” in the program name.

The Department of Human Services (DHS), through an interagency agreement with Commerce, administers the Minnesota Access to Communication Technology program (MN ACT). MN Act was formerly known as the Telephone Equipment Distribution Program but changed its name in August 2024.

Beginning in 2005, the Minnesota legislature appropriated TAM funds for various other state programs (see [TAM Surcharge Funded Programs](#) below).

## TAM Administration

Commerce administers the TAM fund and manages the following vendor contracts and interagency agreements:

- Minnesota Relay services are provided to the State of Minnesota under contracts with T-Mobile USA, Inc. and Hamilton Relay, Inc.
- MN ACT (including Minnesota Relay outreach services) and the Rural Real-Time Captioning program are provided through interagency agreements with DHS.
- The Accessible News for the Blind program is provided through an interagency agreement with the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED).

## TAM Funding

TAM is funded through a monthly surcharge on all wired and post-paid wireless telephone access lines in the state of Minnesota. In addition, there is a fee on each Minnesota retail transaction for prepaid wireless telecommunications services.

The Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the Federal District Court’s decision that Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) telephone service provided by Charter Advanced Services is an information service and that the Federal Communications Commission’s “policy of nonregulation” of these services preempted state law. *Charter Advanced Servs. (MN), LLC v. Lange*, 903 F. 3d 715, 718 (2018). Thus, VoIP services, where there is a net protocol

conversion as occurs with Charter's VoIP telephone services, are not required to collect and remit the TAM surcharge.

The TAM surcharge is currently \$0.03 per wired and post-paid wireless access line and prepaid wireless retail transaction. The surcharge is capped at \$0.20 per access line per month, or per retail transaction.

## **TAM Surcharge Funded Programs**

- TAM Administrative Expenses
- Minnesota Relay Services and Outreach
- Minnesota Access to Communication Technology
- Accessible News for the Blind
- Rural Real-Time Captioning
- The Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing
- Minnesota IT Services for coordinating technology accessibility and usability
- Minnesota IT Services for a consolidated access fund for other State agencies
- Legislative Coordinating Commission for captioning live streaming of legislative activity

## **Minnesota Relay**

Minnesota Relay is a federally mandated Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) program that allows an individual who is deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, or speech disabled to communicate over the telephone in a manner that is functionally equivalent to the ability of an individual who does not have hearing loss or a speech disability. Minnesota Relay must be in full compliance with the requirements and intent of Title IV of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 47 U.S.C. § 225, 47 CFR §§ 64.601 to 64.606, and Minn. Stat. §§ 237.50 to 237.56.

## **Minnesota Relay Services Provided**

### **Types of Relay Services**

- Captioned Telephone Service (CTS): CTS uses a special telephone with a text display screen so a person who is hard of hearing can listen to and read captions of everything the other person on the call says.
- Hearing Carry Over (HCO): HCO allows a person who can hear clearly but who has very limited or no speech capability to make and receive phone calls.
- Hearing User: A hearing person may use a standard telephone or mobile phone to place a relay call and speak with a person who is deaf, hard of hearing, or speech disabled.
- Spanish Relay: Spanish speaking persons with a hearing or speech disability can make relay calls.
- Speech-to-Speech (STS): STS allows a person who has difficulty speaking or being understood on the phone to communicate using his or her own voice or voice synthesizer.
- Text-Telephone (TTY): This service allows a person who is deaf, deafblind, or speech disabled to use a TTY to communicate with the other person on the call.

- Voice Carry Over (VCO): VCO allows a person with a hearing disability, but who wants to use his or her own voice, to speak directly to the other party.

## 711 Dialing Access

The Federal Communications Commission requires all common carriers, wireless providers, payphone vendors, and Private Branch Exchange vendors to provide 711 dialing access to relay services (see 47 CFR § 64.603; *Use of N11 Codes and Other Abbreviated Dialing Arrangements*, CC Docket No. 92-105, Second Report and Order, released August 9, 2000). Relay users are also able to access Minnesota Relay by dialing the appropriate 10-digit toll-free access numbers.

## 911 Dialing Access

Minnesota Relay automatically and immediately transfers emergency relay calls to the appropriate Public Safety Answering Point the caller would have reached by dialing 911 directly, or to a Public Safety Answering Point capable of dispatching emergency services in an expeditious manner.

## Minnesota Relay Operations in 2024

### Minnesota's Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) Contracts

Minnesota contracts with T-Mobile USA, Inc. (T-Mobile) for the provision of TTY-based (TTY, Voice Carry Over, and Hearing Carry Over) and STS relay services. The contract is effective from April 1, 2024, through June 30, 2026. The contract rate is \$2.60 per conversation minute, plus a \$3,600 monthly recurring fee.

Commerce contracts with Hamilton Relay, Inc. (Hamilton) for the provision of analog-based CTS. The contract is effective from July 1, 2022, through June 30, 2025. The fiscal year 2024 contract rate was \$2.00 per conversation minute and the fiscal year 2025 contract rate is \$2.20 per conversation minute.

### T-Mobile TTY-Based and STS Relay

- On November 22, 2024, the FCC released an Order granting TRS providers a partial, temporary waiver of 47 CFR § 64.604(b)(1), which requires that TTY-based relay services be capable of communicating in American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII) and Baudot formats. The Order waives the ASCII requirement for two years, or until the resolution of a related rulemaking proceeding, whichever is earlier (*In the Matter of Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities*, Order, CG Docket No. 03-123, released November 22, 2024). As such, T-Mobile decommissioned the ASCII protocols for TTY relay service on December 13, 2024. Minnesota has not had any ASCII TTY relay calls since March 2021.
- T-Mobile began implementing TRS billing modernization to improve efficiencies for TTY-based and STS call data. Target completion is the first quarter of 2025.
- T-Mobile migrated from Avaya to Cisco switches for the TRS platform as the first phase of a TRS Modernization project.
- All communications assistants began using security keys for accessing T-Mobile data.

- T-Mobile continued training quality focus newsletters related to TRS, Speech-to-Speech, Customer Service procedures, customer satisfaction, and diversity awareness.

## Hamilton CTS

- In February 2024, Hamilton updated their monthly reports to include the number of actively used analog-based CTS devices. This allows the state to monitor the decline in use and prepare for the eventual discontinuance of CTS.
- Hamilton is working with carceral facilities to place relay equipment, including CTS devices, ensuring that people who are incarcerated have access to the form of relay service that meets their telecommunications needs.

## Minnesota Relay Call Volumes

In 2024, Minnesotans placed 42,234 outbound relay calls with 144,986 conversation minutes of use. Overall, Minnesota Relay experienced the following changes from 2023 to 2024:

		2023	2024	Change	Percent of Change
<b>Captioned Telephone Service</b>	Outbound Calls	49,078	27,657	(21,421)	-44%
	Conversation Minutes	138,477	79,483	(58,994)	-43%
<b>TTY-Based</b>	Outbound Calls	14,894	14,238	(656)	-4%
	Conversation Minutes	70,759	63,734	(7,025)	-10%
<b>Speech-to-Speech</b>	Outbound Calls	383	339	(44)	-11%
	Conversation Minutes	1,116	1,768	652	58%

Over the years, many relay users have migrated away from TTY-based, STS, and CTS relay services to internet-based services such as Video Relay Service, Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Service, and Internet Protocol Relay. Internet-based relay services are under the Federal Communications Commission’s jurisdiction and are paid for through a federal fund. Internet-based relay services are fully accessible to Minnesota consumers, free of charge, through many providers who offer these services nationwide.

Until all Minnesotans have access to high-speed internet, and at an affordable cost, many users have no option but to use the existing non-internet-based relay services. In addition, there is currently no internet-based STS relay service.



**Appendix A** includes the following Minnesota Relay call charts:

- 2024 Minnesota Relay Conversation Minutes by Type
- 2015–2024 Minnesota Relay Outbound Call Volumes

## **Minnesota Relay Predicted Future Operations**

### **T-Mobile TTY-Based and STS Relay**

There are no known changes to TTY-based or STS services for 2025.

### **Hamilton CTS**

Commerce’s contract with Hamilton for the provision of analog-based CTS expires June 30, 2025. Hamilton is the only analog-based CTS provider available. As such, Commerce and the Department of Administration are currently communicating with Hamilton on a possible single-source CTS contract beginning July 1, 2025.

### **Analog to Digital Transition**

Industry trends indicate consumers will continue to transition from older, analog-based relay services to internet-based relay services and to new technologies that provide communication accessibility (such as text-to-speech apps, built in captioning on smartphones, over-the-counter hearing aids, etc.).

State TRS administrators have begun conversations on a national level (via the National Association for State Relay Administration) regarding the future of analog-based TRS, and if states should begin developing plans to wind down their analog-based relay services. State TRS administrators have also started a dialog with the Federal Communications Commission, as it will take the collaboration and cooperation of state TRS programs, TRS providers, the Federal Communications Commission, the Department of Justice, and stakeholders to formulate a possible plan to transition analog-based TRS users to internet-based TRS.

Analog-based TRS users may not have access to internet service, or they may have access but are not able to afford the service. It would be detrimental to potentially cut those users off from telephone access, including access to emergency services, family, and friends by eliminating analog-based TRS. Those involved with analog-based TRS want to ensure consumers who rely on these services are not cut off without notice and resources.

## **Minnesota Access to Communication Technology**

Minnesota Access to Communication Technology (MN ACT), formerly the Telephone Equipment Distribution Program, provides specialized telecommunications equipment to enable persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, speech disabled, or physically disabled to access telecommunications services. Program participants must meet eligibility requirements, including income, disability, and residency. MN ACT is administered through an interagency agreement between DHS and Commerce.

## MN ACT Services Provided

MN ACT is responsible for:

- Distributing specialized telecommunications devices and interconnectivity products to eligible Minnesotans.
- Conducting outreach to inform the public of services available through the program.
- Providing training for the use of distributed equipment.
- Troubleshooting problems with distributed devices and replacing or repairing devices at no cost to the client.
- Assisting MN ACT applicants with applying for discounted telecommunications or internet services (when appropriate).
- Informing MN ACT clients about other assistive technology available in the industry.

MN ACT services are provided through four of DHS' Deaf, Deafblind and Hard of Hearing State Services Division regional offices: Duluth, Moorhead, St. Cloud and St. Paul.

## Telecommunications Equipment Provided

The types of equipment available through MN ACT include:

- Amplified telephones (both hearing and voice output)
- Bluetooth enabled cordless amplified phones
- Captioned telephones
- Basic cell phones and smartphones with hearing aid compatibility
- Apple and Android tablets and smartphones
- Smart displays
- Smart speakers
- Bluetooth streamers to be used with hearing aids
- Electrolarynx used with a landline or cell phone
- Wireless accessories (Bluetooth neckloop, cell phone amplifier, and headsets)
- Ring signaling devices (auditory, visual, and tactile)
- Text Telephones (TTYs)
- Special needs devices (for multiple disabilities)

## MN ACT Operations in 2024

### MN ACT Changes from 2023 to 2024

Category	2023	2024	Increase/ Decrease	Percent
New Program Clients	112	121	9	8%
Repeat Program Clients*	331	320	(11)	-3%
Telecommunications Devices Distributed	324	299	(25)	-8%
Auxiliary Devices Distributed	32	33	1	3%

\*Current clients often contact MN ACT to receive additional training, for repair/replacement of equipment, or to exchange equipment because their communication needs have changed (e.g., a person's hearing deteriorates and the equipment they initially received no longer meets their needs).

### New Client Population Served

New Clients - Age Range	Number of Clients	Percentage of New Clients
80+ Years Old	77	64%
50-79 Years Old	43	36%
26-49 Years Old	1	1%
0-25 Years Old	0	0%

New Clients - Disabilities Served	Number of Clients	Percentage of New Clients
Hard of Hearing	78	64%
Hard of Hearing with Vision Loss	17	14%
Deaf	14	12%
Other Disability (e.g., Deafblind or Speech Disability)	8	7%
Physical Disability	4	3%

**Appendix B** includes the following MN ACT charts:

- 2015–2024 New MN ACT Participants
- Types of Telecommunications Equipment Distributed to New and Current Clients
- Types of Auxiliary Equipment Distributed to New and Current Clients

## **Program Name Change**

On August 1, 2024, the Telephone Equipment Distribution Program changed its name to Minnesota Access to Communication Technology. The purpose of the change was to modernize the program name to reflect how telecommunications access has broadened beyond telephone devices.

## **MN ACT Predicted Future Operations**

### **DHS Equity Toolkit**

In 2024, the DHS equity toolkit was implemented agencywide. DHS' administration and divisions are expected to apply this to their programs and services. MN ACT plans to analyze program application policies and procedures utilizing the DHS equity toolkit analysis. The analysis will include stakeholder engagement to identify inequities among MN ACT clients and stakeholders. Based on feedback, MN ACT will implement policy and procedure changes to provide improved services.

### **Consumer Surveys**

MN ACT plans to reinstate client surveys to determine if they are utilizing the telecommunications device(s) they received from the program to their expectations, and how the device has impacted their lives. Surveys will be sent in incremental timeframes to determine if the client needs additional support through time and to ensure they are utilizing the device to the best of their ability.

## **Minnesota Relay and MN ACT Outreach**

The TAM administrator and MN ACT staff serve as points of contact for Minnesotans who have questions or need resources. Outreach efforts are tailored to target appropriate demographics, including consumers who are deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing, late deafened, speech disabled, or have mobility limitations. Staff also educate hearing consumers and businesses.

Outreach activities primarily include:

- Staffing a booth at exhibitions, conferences, and fairs.
- Presenting at senior centers, health care facilities, and social service agencies.
- Mass mailings/emails.
- Advertising.
- Providing needs assessments and equipment training.
- Providing brochures, instruction sheets, informational videos, and referrals.

- Providing information and resources to consumers and businesses on communication accessibility outside the scope of Minnesota Relay, such as internet-based relay services, apps, built-in smartphone features, and state and federal programs.

A consumer reached out to the TAM administrator to express her gratitude for assistance, stating, “Thank you for all this information! It’s a lot to take in and I appreciate your help and hard work in gathering all this information and resources for me.”

In 2024, MN ACT staff provided outreach for both MN ACT and Minnesota Relay at 19 booths and 35 presentations with a total of 59,200 event attendees. In addition, 25 advertisements were placed in newspapers and other publications.

## **Telephone Directories, Bill Inserts, and Newsletters**

Annually, the TAM administrator sends a letter to all telephone companies serving Minnesota consumers to remind them of their responsibility to ensure customers are aware of the availability and use of all forms of Telecommunications Relay Services. TAM provides carriers with a sample Annual Notice to Customers for carriers to use in their telephone directory, bill insert, and/or newsletter. TRS annual notice requirements and resources are available on Commerce’s website ([mn.gov/commerce/business/telecom/reporting/](https://mn.gov/commerce/business/telecom/reporting/)) so carriers have access to up-to-date information on Minnesota Relay and MN ACT services.

## **Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing State Services Division Regional Advisory Committee Meetings**

The DHS Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing State Services Division has six advisory committees throughout Minnesota. Each advisory committee meets three times per year and serves as a venue to provide information to, and gather information from, the community. Advisory committee meeting minutes are provided to the TAM and MN ACT administrators so issues, questions, and concerns regarding Minnesota Relay and MN ACT may be addressed. The TAM and MN ACT administrators attended many of the advisory committee meetings in 2024.

## TAM Fund Revenues and Expenditures for Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025

Revenue	FY 2024 Actuals	FY 2025 Budgeted
Per Wired and Post-Paid Wireless Customer Access Line (FY 2024= \$0.04; FY 2025=\$0.03)	\$ 3,048,292.03	\$ 2,324,716.27
Prepaid Wireless Retail Transactions	\$ 307,267.87	\$ 223,528.76
TAM Fund Interest	\$ 121,413.04	\$ 75,000.00
<b>Total TAM Fund Revenue</b>	<b>\$ 3,476,972.94</b>	<b>\$ 2,623,245.03</b>

Expenditures	FY 2024 Actuals	FY 2025 Budgeted
TAM Program Administration	\$ (138,636.18)	\$ (179,629.00)
Telecommunications Relay Services	\$ (352,270.17)	\$ (564,890.17)
DHS-MN ACT	\$ (1,116,771.43)	\$ (1,189,710.00)
DHS-Rural Real-Time Captioning	\$ (153,063.01)	\$ (180,892.00)
DEED-Accessible News for the Blind	\$ (84,142.00)	\$ (100,000.00)
MN Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing	\$ (1,620,000.00)	\$ (1,620,000.00)
MNIT Services (1)	\$ (290,000.00)	\$ (290,000.00)
MNIT Services (2)	\$ (50,000.00)	\$ (50,000.00)
Legislative Coordinating Commission	\$ (133,000.00)	\$ (133,000.00)
Governor's Office Transfer	\$ (10,000.00)	\$ 0.00
<b>Total TAM Fund Expenditures</b>	<b>\$ (3,947,882.79)</b>	<b>\$ (4,308,121.17)</b>

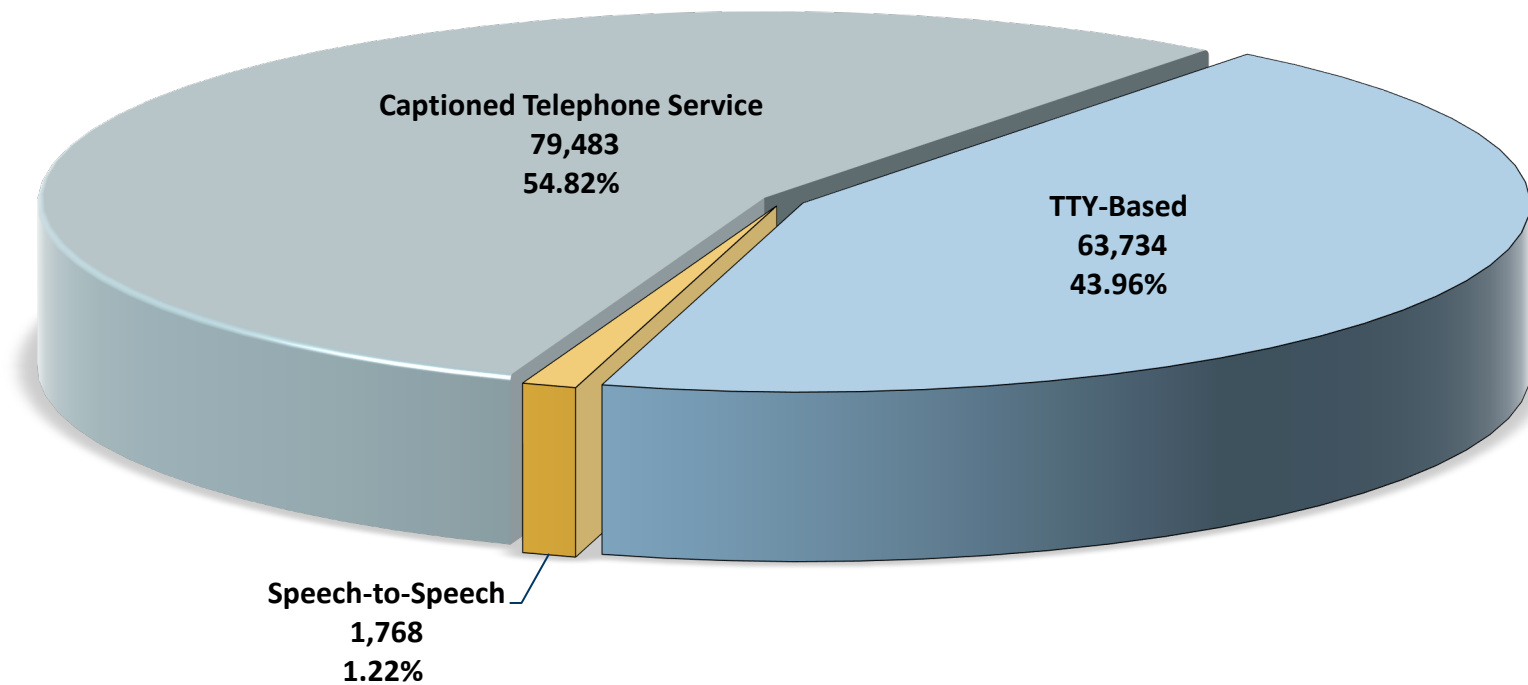
<b>Revenue vs Expenditures</b>	<b>\$ (470,909.85)</b>	<b>\$ (1,684,876.14)</b>
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Statement of TAM Fund Balance	FY 2024 Actuals	FY 2025 Budgeted
TAM Fund Balance at Beginning of Fiscal Year	\$ 3,946,100.83	\$ 3,412,602.77
TAM Fund Revenue & Interest	\$ 3,476,972.94	\$ 2,623,245.03
TAM Fund Expenditures	\$ (3,947,882.79)	\$ (4,308,121.17)
<b>TAM Fund Balance at Close of Fiscal Year</b>	<b>\$ 3,475,190.98</b>	<b>\$ 1,727,726.63</b>

## **Appendices**

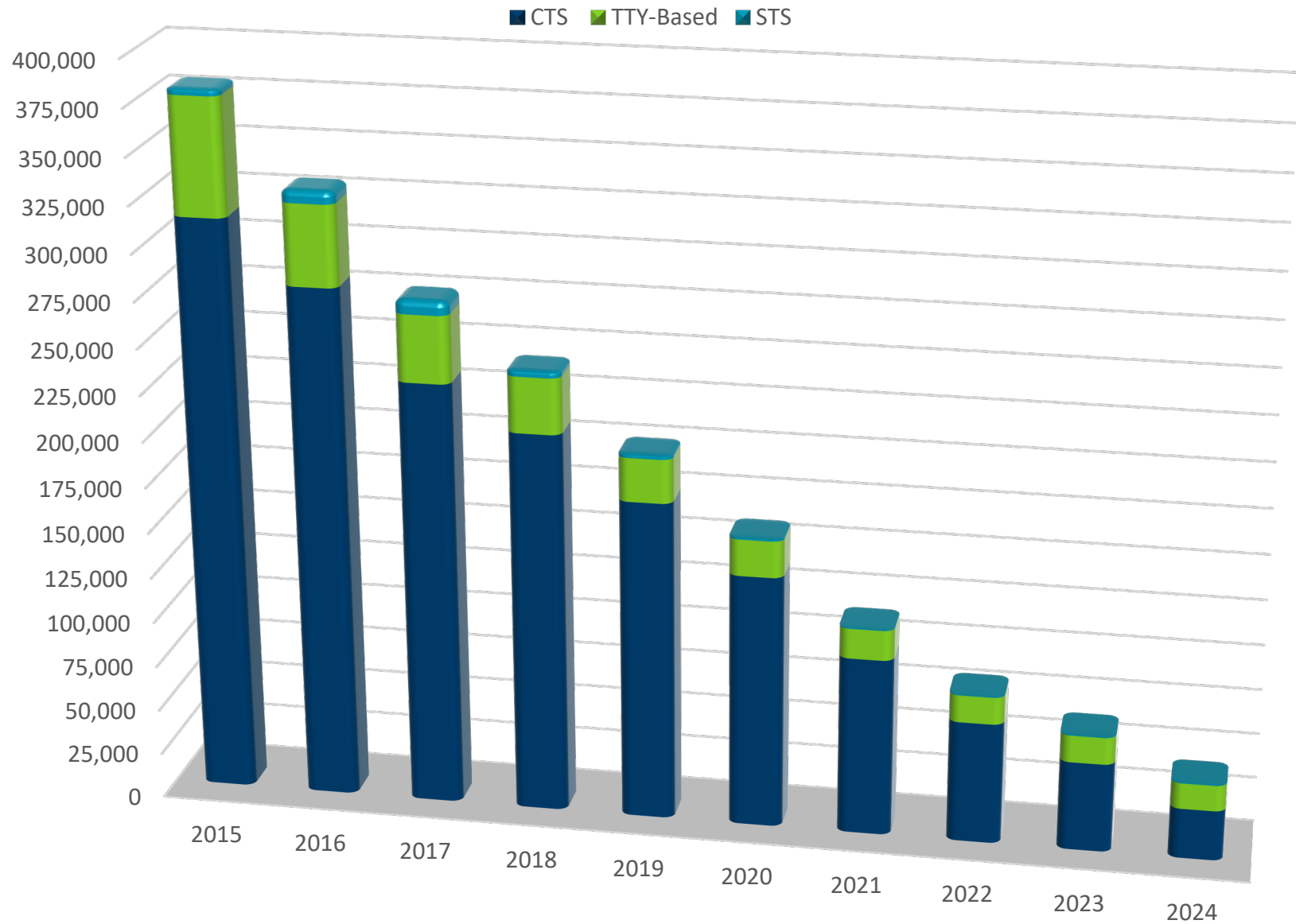
## Appendix A – Minnesota Relay Call Charts

### 2024 Minnesota Relay Conversation Minutes by Type



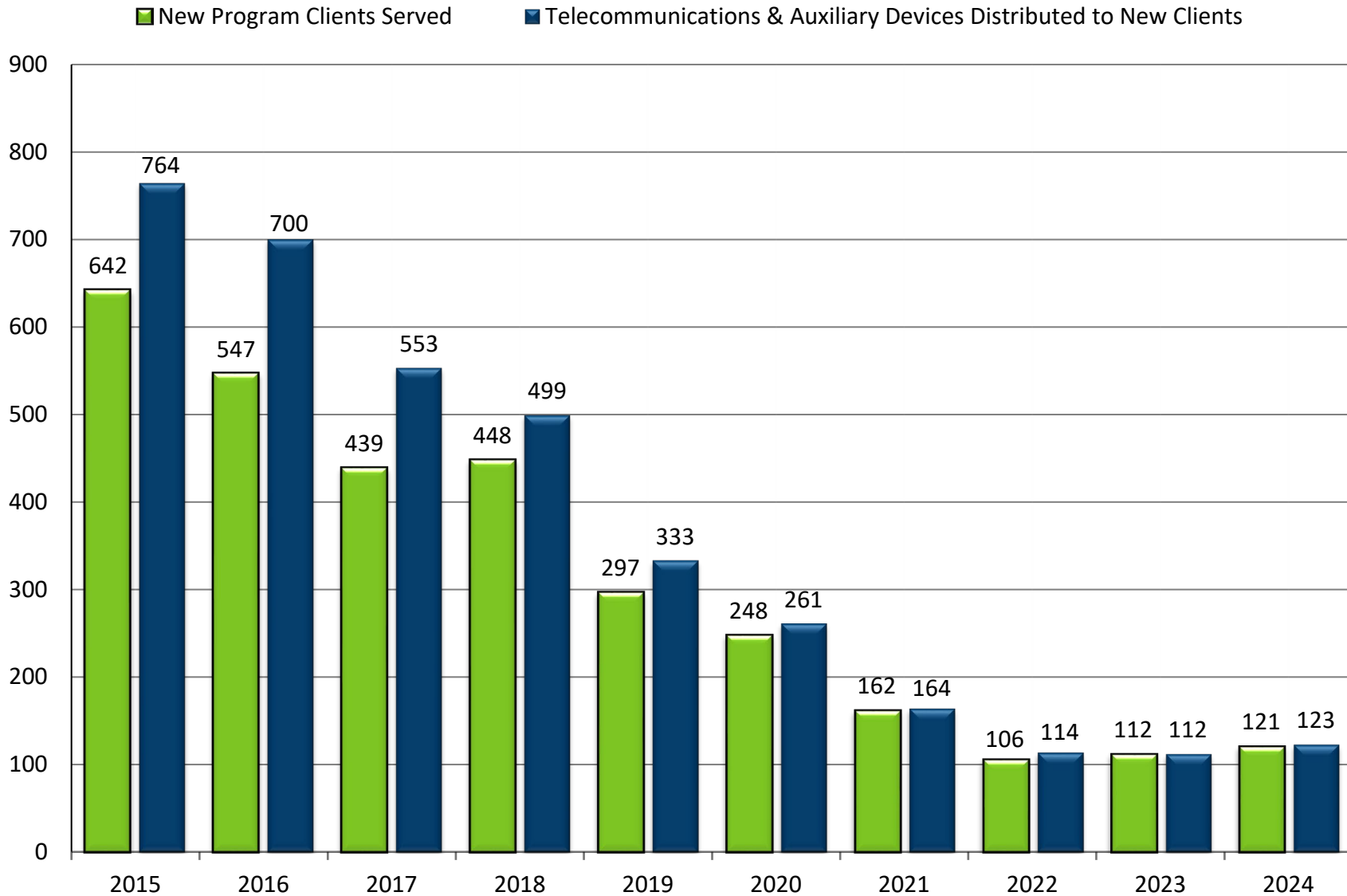


## 2015 - 2024 Minnesota Relay Outbound Calls



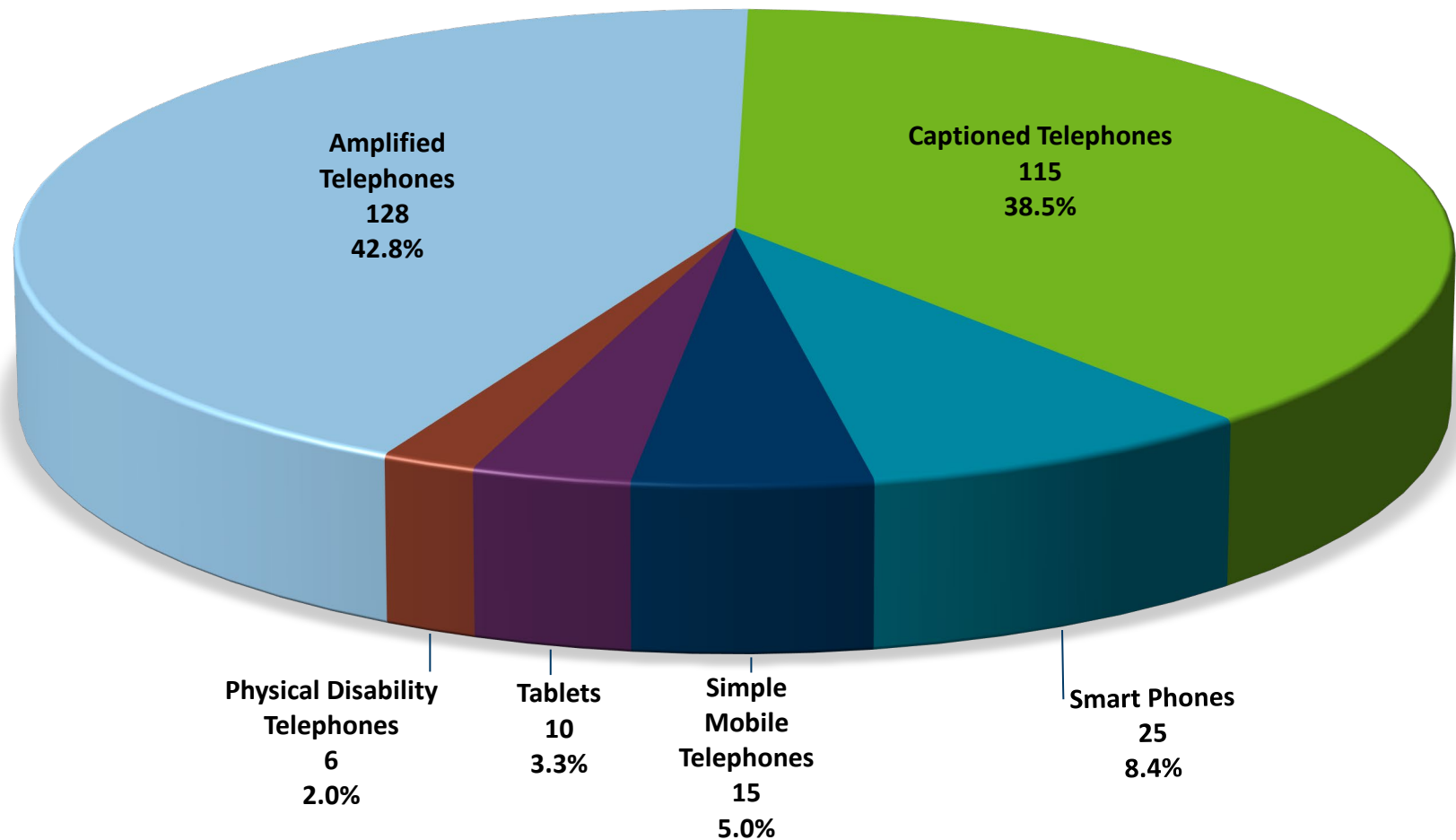
## Appendix B – MN ACT Charts

### 2015–2024 New MN ACT Participants



# MN ACT

## Types of Telecommunications Equipment Distributed to New and Current Clients in 2024



# MN ACT

## Types of Auxiliary Equipment Distributed to New and Current Clients in 2024

