



## 20 | ANNUAL 24 | REPORT

MonTECH PROVIDES TECHNOLOGY, SUPPORT, AND SERVICES THAT IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR MONTANANS OF ANY AGE WITH ANY DISABILITY.

# How MonTECH Serves Montanans

## LOANS

In 2024, MonTECH loaned 1,859 items to 793 Montanans. MonTECH ranks 11th out of 56 assistive technology (AT) programs nationwide for number of short-term loans; remarkable given Montana's comparatively low population!

### To Wild Horse Island – All Together!

Wild Horse Island is an isolated haven the Kootenai Indians historically used to keep horses safe from rivals. When her family visits the island, Aubree typically sits on the beach – but not this year!

“When we borrowed the Hippocampe, literally as soon as we got home, my husband said, ‘We’re strapping this on (the wave runner) and going over there,’” mom Jessie remembers.

Hippocampe is an all-terrain wheelchair with balloon tires that float. The family strapped it to the back of Jessie’s wave runner and crossed the lake. “Aubree always sees her sisters way out, splashing around, having fun,” Jessie shares. “But with this, she went out deep, she was safe, they were splashing with her, and it was incredible.”

Aubree has Rett Syndrome. It’s been a family mission from the start to include her in every adventure. Having discovered MonTECH’s Hippocampe, that mission just expanded to include ski trips. “Normally Aubree stays in the lodge with me, but this year we’re hoping to take the chair so she can be on the hill with the kids skiing around her,” Jessie says. “Resources like MonTECH have been huge for helping us do these things.”





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## Can't Keep a Griz Fan Down

Tom Donofrio has been a passionate member of Griz Nation for 45 years. He's missed only one home football game in the past two decades, but recently, Tom's vision sharply deteriorated. "The doctor would say, 'Tell me what letters you see?', and I'd say, 'What letters?'" Tom recalls.

Being unable to follow Griz action on the field has been heartbreaking. He could see colors of uniforms, but not numbers. The scoreboard? Nope. "It felt like I should just stay home and watch the game on TV, but that doesn't include the crowd, the friends and players we've met," he explains. "I don't want to lose all of that."

At MonTECH, Tom discovered Patriot ViewPoint, a wearable device that magnifies near and far, reads text, and has multiple contrast settings. Tom recognized a way to fully experience a game again. It isn't perfect, but with the device he can track plays and see the scoreboard.

Reflecting on his MonTECH experience, Tom says, "My vision is not going to get better. But I'm not going to change my lifestyle and if these tools will assist me to enjoy some portion of it, it's worth the time and energy to explore it."



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## REUSE

This year, MonTECH saved Montanans \$331,459 by providing long-term loans of equipment, eliminating the need to purchase new. MonTECH ranks 21st of 56 assistive-tech programs in saving state residents the most money.

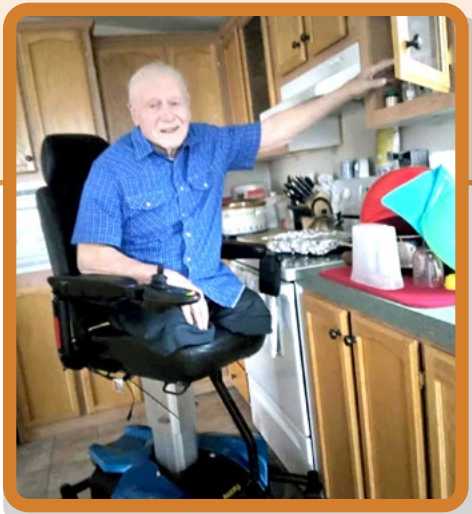
### Second-hand Chair Brings New Freedom

Seventeen miles north of tiny Kremlin, you'll find Stan Wall's wheat farm. After losing his leg in 2006 to an injury causing loss of circulation, he continued to run his combine and drive tractors. "Once I got up there, I was able to stick with it until quitting time," Stan recollects.

Then in February 2024, he lost his other leg to the same circulation issue and could no longer run his equipment. He couldn't even rummage through the high cupboards in his kitchen, but Medicare refused to fund a chair with an elevating seat. "I can't even get into a car without the riser," Stan explains.

Stan connected with Cutting Fences Founder Kendra Lewis, who found an electric chair with a 10-inch seat riser on MonTECH's Community Buy-Sell page. Now Stan can get in the car, onto a four-wheeler, and yes, into his wife's kitchen cupboards.

Before the chair, there was a four-month period when Stan was able to leave the house only twice. Now he heads into Havre weekly to play mandolin. "We have a western, old-time bluegrass group," Stan says. "Folks seem to enjoy it. Once I get in this chair, it makes a world of difference."



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## DEMONSTRATIONS

In 2024, MonTECH's teams in Billings and Missoula held 216 appointments to show 420 Montanans how to use adaptive equipment.

### Figuring Out What Works for Stewart

Transfers had become unsafe for Stewart and his group-home staff, and physical therapist Arline Welch felt his diagnoses of cerebral palsy and cognitive delay made an appointment with MonTECH a necessity – to see what might work.

Despite support from his home administrator, Nick Matthaes, Stewart's fear of falling in MonTECH's unfamiliar environment was intense. Hope for a successful appointment began to fade. There was also a communication challenge; Stewart is deaf.

"I didn't come in expecting to need help, but when it became apparent we did, Michelle (MonTECH's ATP) jumped in and did everything she could to make him feel welcome and ease his fear," Arline shares. "She got Nick into the lift to show Stewart, 'Hey, look! This is cool!'" Nick agrees that was a smart move: "He was able to take in some of that info, seeing me in the devices, and mull it over."

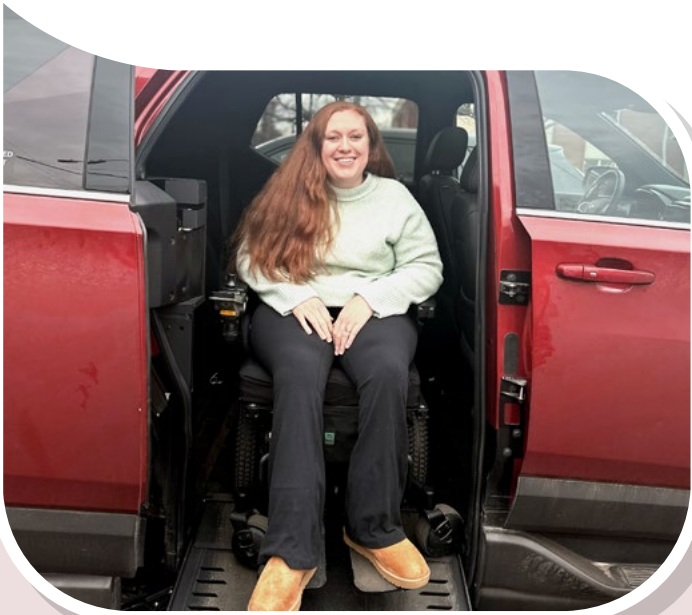
Information gained through the session helped Arline determine what equipment could work. "With Medicare you can't try equipment before you buy it, but with someone with developmental disability you have to be able to try first," Arline says. "MonTECH fills such a gap and is an amazing resource for the whole state."



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## MONTANA ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY LOAN PROGRAM (MATL)

MonTECH (in partnership with Rural Dynamics, Inc.) offers low-interest financial loans to help Montanans fund home modifications and purchase disability-related equipment, medical devices, adaptive recreation equipment, and accessible vehicles.



### Attorney Reclaims Independence with MATL

Gabrielle Broere's hard work was paying off. She'd earned her law degree and landed a great job with Missoula firm Rhoades & Erickson. But what's that saying about 'best laid plans'? An unexpected pregnancy exacerbated her symptoms of cerebral palsy, ultimately forcing transition to a powerchair.

Gabrielle had a van to transport her chair but couldn't use the steering-wheel-mounted hand-controls. The contrast between her role as a professional attorney and her reliance on her husband for transportation became increasingly untenable. "I have a three-year-old, I'm a full-time attorney, but I couldn't drive my van," she remembers. "We had to do something."

Gabrielle found a car with room for her daughter's requisite toddler gear, and a place that would install what she needed: a floor-mounted hand-control system, transfer seat, and ramp system. The hang-up? Those features cost more than the car, with banks offering interest rates of 8-9%.

The Montana Assistive Technology Loan Program (MATL) was the answer with an interest rate of 3.5% and a friendly application process.

Gabrielle relishes her return to independent transportation. "I will be able to better represent my clients, make memories with my daughter and husband, and be able to get where I need to go without inconveniencing others," she says. "MATL means true independence."





## Empowering Rural Schools with AT

This was a year of high-octane school outreach! MonTECH's Public Education Specialist gave presentations and free AT to 124 schools and education coops in 40 communities, mostly rural and unfamiliar with our service. This tremendous effort, funded by the Office of Public Instruction, touched 47 of Montana's 56 counties.

The project started in 2022 with a survey of 554 Montana educators and school-based therapists. Responses showed a dearth of knowledge around AT and how to use it. Action was needed, so MonTECH hired Kendra Lewis.

Kendra grew up in a small farming community and is the founder of Cutting Fences, a foundation supporting ranchers, farmers, and veterans with disabilities. She is the perfect fit for our mission to connect with schools and encourage enhanced student support through AT in rural classrooms.

In 2025, our school outreach moves into Phase 2: strengthening these new relationships. We are committed to being a robust partner and dependable resource for all Montana schools.

## Christmas in July

Santa, in the form of students from Alberton, delivered switch-adapted toys to MonTECH in July. Teacher McKenna Akane devoted one week of her six-week STEM camp to circuitry, culminating in the production and donation of the toys.

Switch-adapted toys have an external switch, or button, that activates the toy. They are fun for children who are unable to interact with toys in a typical way and have therapeutic value in teaching cause and effect.

Why switch-adapted toys? "My son Mercer, who is 3, gets supplies through MonTECH and at the time he had just gotten his first switch-adapted toy," Ms. Akane explains. "I realized how simple it was to modify a toy. I also saw that these toys are really overpriced, when adapting them is something a seven-year-old can do."

An anonymous donor funded the purchase of five toys for students to adapt. The kids set to work, installing battery interrupters. Then they boarded a bus and delivered the goods to MonTECH. Many Montana children (and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities) will benefit from the kids' work and generosity.





## A Mission and a Tribute in One

MontCOMM started because of Scott Thomas. Scott had a knack for facing obstacles head-on, and as ALS stripped him of the ability to move and speak, he countered by fully embracing assistive tech. He communicated by typing with his eyes, utilizing a Surface Pro to do his speaking and Alexa to do his bidding.

Scott challenged MonTECH to learn more about supporting Montanans with speech loss. We learned quickly: while Montana has hundreds of wonderful speech-language pathologists (SLPs), many did not feel adept with alternative communication systems.

In response, MonTECH launched MontCOMM in 2019, a conference focused solely on communication tech and alternative ways to speak. The mission? Provide training and resources for SLPs, occupational therapists, educators, and family members.

Since then, we have welcomed advocates and internationally-recognized experts in augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) every August.

Obstacles to attending have been eliminated through a high-quality, remote-attendance option and scholarships offered by the Office of Public Instruction, Children's Special Health Services, Montana Transition and Employment Projects, and the Montana Family to Family Health Information Center.

For six years, we've provided an excellent, accredited training opportunity serving Montanans who need help finding a new way to communicate. It started with Scott; we pursue this essential mission in his honor.



### MonTECH's Services (in a Nutshell)

- Free loans of adaptive equipment and assistive technology (AT)
- Free appointments to learn what's available and how to use it
- Low-interest financial loan program
- Free information and supports for schools, programs, and agencies
- Trainings on topics related to disability, accessibility, and AT



MonTECH has physical locations in Missoula and Billings.

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MonTECH is housed in the:

**Rural Institute**  
For Inclusive Communities