2026 – 2027 Winter Webinar Interview Series: TBL

Note: The content of this document was created by Microsoft Copilot from a webinar transcript. The humans who reviewed and edited the document are Colet Bartow, Cara Orban, and Marilyn Bennett.

Contents

Summary 1
Overview of the Program 1
Key Messages and Themes 2
Awareness Remains the Biggest Challenge 2
Expanded Access Through Librarian Certification 2
Libraries Play a Critical Outreach Role 2
Collection Highlights 2
Common Barriers to Participation 3
Program Impact 3
Operational Highlights 4
Conclusion 4
Recommended Next Steps for Montana Libraries 4
Key Actions for Libraries 5
Discussion Questions for Library Teams 7
Optional Reflection Question 7

Summary

The inaugural Winter Webinar featured a discussion with Cara Orban, Marilyn Bennett of the Montana State Library, and Tony Edmundson of the Flathead County Library about the Montana Talking Books Library (MTBL), its services, eligibility requirements, and the life-changing impact it has on readers across Montana.

Overview of the Program

The Montana Talking Books Library is a free library service for individuals who are unable to read standard print due to blindness, low vision, physical disabilities, or reading disabilities. Eligible users can access audiobooks, braille materials, and digital content through the BARD app or receive materials by mail. Eligibility extends beyond visual impairments and includes conditions such as dyslexia, ADHD, traumatic brain injuries, Parkinson's disease, muscle weakness, and other disabilities that prevent effective use of print materials.

Key Messages and Themes

Awareness Remains the Biggest Challenge

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was that many eligible individuals simply do not know the service exists. Both speakers emphasized that almost every outreach event generates responses from people who had never heard of the program, despite its long history and significant benefits.

Expanded Access Through Librarian Certification

An important recent change allows public librarians to serve as certifying authorities for eligible patrons. This removes previous barriers that required appointments with healthcare providers and makes enrollment faster and more accessible. Both speakers stressed that this has significantly improved access to the service.

Libraries Play a Critical Outreach Role

Libraries are uniquely positioned to identify potential participants through everyday interactions. Staff can recognize eligibility indicators, provide demonstrations of Talking Book devices, promote the service through newsletters and media, and build partnerships with senior centers, assisted living facilities, schools, and caregiver organizations.

Collection Highlights

The collection includes popular fiction and nonfiction, children's materials, braille books, and nearly 900 Montana-focused titles and magazines. Montana-interest content is widely used both within and outside the state, with users in states such as California and Texas regularly accessing Montana titles. The collection continues to expand, particularly in children's materials and multilingual offerings.

The program also supports Montana-specific audiobook production through its recording studio in Helena and recently acquired mobile recording equipment to facilitate community-based recordings across the state. A notable focus includes preserving Indigenous languages and Montana stories through local recordings.

Common Barriers to Participation

Participants identified several challenges that can prevent eligible users from joining:

- Lack of awareness about the program.
- Stigma is associated with disability or the perception that services are only for people who are blind.
- Reluctance to acknowledge declining vision or reading ability.
- Geographic distance and rural access challenges.
- Hesitance about learning new technology.

The speakers emphasized that personal relationships, demonstrations, encouragement, and follow-up support are effective strategies for overcoming these barriers.

Program Impact

The webinar was filled with examples illustrating the profound personal impact of the service:

- Older adults who believed they had permanently lost the ability to read regained access to books and information.
- Students with dyslexia gained immediate access to required reading materials through BARD.
- Families with visually impaired children obtained age-appropriate audiobooks and reading resources.
- Individuals experiencing vision loss reported significant improvements in quality of life after reconnecting with reading.

Both Marilyn Bennett and Tony Edmundson described emotional moments in which patrons became overwhelmed upon learning they would be able to read again after years without access to books.

Operational Highlights

- Applications can be submitted online or by mail.
- Processing typically occurs within 24 to 48 hours after receipt.
- Physical playback machines and cartridges are mailed to patrons.
- Materials are exchanged through Free Matter for the Blind postal service.
- Libraries can request institutional demonstration accounts and devices for patron training.
- BARD digital accounts generally become available within a few days of approval.

Conclusion

The webinar highlighted the Montana Talking Books Library as a highly effective but underutilized service that provides access to reading for individuals with print disabilities of all ages. Speakers encouraged libraries to actively promote the program, leverage their role as certifying authorities, and build partnerships throughout their communities to connect eligible residents with resources that can substantially improve education, literacy, independence, and quality of life.

Primary takeaway: The most significant barrier is not eligibility or technology. It is awareness. Librarians are uniquely positioned to identify eligible readers and connect them with a service that many participants described as transformative.

Recommended Next Steps for Montana Libraries

1. Designate at least one MTBL champion on staff.
2. Request an institutional account and demonstration player.
3. Train all public-facing staff on eligibility and referrals.
4. Add MTBL information to your website and outreach materials.
5. Contact local senior centers, schools, and caregiver organizations within the next six months.
6. Include MTBL promotion in at least one community presentation or event annually.

Bottom line: Libraries are uniquely positioned to identify eligible readers, remove enrollment barriers, and restore access to reading for individuals who may believe they have lost that opportunity. Awareness, staff training, and community partnerships are the most impactful actions libraries can take.

Key Actions for Libraries

The webinar concluded with several practical actions libraries can take to increase awareness, improve access, and connect more eligible residents with the Montana Talking Books Library (MTBL).

1. Become a Certifying Authority
    - Train designated staff to certify patron eligibility for MTBL services.
    - Incorporate MTBL enrollment into regular reference and reader advisory interactions.
    - View certification as a simple, good-faith process rather than a complex administrative responsibility.

2. Train Frontline Staff
    - Ensure all public service staff understand eligibility requirements and available services.
    - Teach staff to recognize common indicators such as vision loss, dyslexia, physical limitations, or comments like "I can't read anymore."
    - Empower staff to initiate conversations and referrals.

3. Increase Community Awareness
    - Promote MTBL through newsletters, websites, social media, local newspapers, and radio appearances.
    - Display brochures and informational materials at service desks and community events.
    - Include MTBL information in outreach presentations and public programs.

4. Build Community Partnerships
    - Develop relationships with senior centers, assisted living facilities, long-term care facilities, caregiver organizations, healthcare providers, schools, and local aging services agencies.
    - Encourage partners to refer individuals who may qualify.
    - Present MTBL services during partner events and informational sessions.

5. Request an Institutional Demonstration Account
    - Obtain a demonstration player and access to the BARD app for hands-on training.
    - Allow patrons to see and practice using the equipment before enrolling.
    - Use demonstrations to reduce anxiety and technology-related barriers.

6. Identify and Serve Underserved Populations
    - Look beyond traditional assumptions that the program is only for individuals who are blind.
    - Actively identify patrons with reading disabilities, learning disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, physical limitations, or age-related challenges.
    - Promote the service as supporting readers from infancy through older adulthood.

7. Provide Enrollment Assistance
    - Help patrons complete applications online when possible to speed processing.
    - Assist with BARD account setup and password creation.
    - Offer follow-up support after enrollment to ensure successful use of the service.

8. Share Success Stories
    - Collect and share local examples of how MTBL has improved patrons' access to reading and quality of life.
    - Use stories to reduce stigma and encourage participation among hesitant users.
    - Highlight educational benefits for students and quality-of-life benefits for older adults.

Discussion Questions for Library Teams

1. How aware are our staff of the services offered by the Montana Talking Books Library, and what training would help them feel more confident discussing the program with patrons?
2. What signs or patron interactions might indicate someone in our community could benefit from Talking Books services, even if they do not identify as having a disability?
3. Are we currently serving as a certifying authority, and if not, what steps would we need to take to begin certifying eligible patrons?
4. How can we incorporate information about Talking Books into our existing outreach efforts, including newsletters, social media, programs, and community events?
5. Which local organizations, such as senior centers, schools, assisted-living facilities, healthcare providers, or caregiver groups, would be valuable partners in identifying and referring eligible individuals?
6. What barriers might prevent people in our community from using Talking Books services, and how can our library help reduce those barriers?
7. How could we use a demonstration player or institutional account to introduce patrons to the service and increase confidence in using the technology?
8. What specific action will our library commit to taking in the next three months to increase awareness and enrollment in the Talking Books program? Who will be responsible for leading that effort?

Optional Reflection Question

Imagine that every eligible resident in our service area knew about the Montana Talking Books Library.

What would need to change in our outreach, partnerships, or staff practices to make that vision a reality?