

Protecting Montana's Future:

Montanans Talk about Public Investments



FEBRUARY 2011

Montana Organizing Project
Alliance for a Just Society

Acknowledgements

This publication would not have been possible without the immense contributions of the many leaders of the Montana Organizing Project and the Montanans who have shared their stories here.

Table of Contents

- 1 Introduction**
- 2 Jim Herron**
- 3 Amanda Neustrom**
- 4 Connie Brox**
- 5 Krystina Prinzing Ward**
- 6 Dana West**
- 8 Anna Volkersz**
- 9 Julie Adams**
- 10 Eileen Sansom**
- 12 Dale Hiscock**
- 13 Mike Johnson**
- 14 Ellen Guettler**
- 16 Margaret Sanderson**
- 17 Dan Krebill**
- 18 Wendy Barnhouse White**
- 19 Dwayne Arscott**
- 20 Brianne Harrington**
- 22 Kayla Miller**
- 23 Warren Peterson**
- 24 Conclusion & Recommendations**
- 25 References**

Introduction

Strong economies are built on a foundation of equity. It is the job of lawmakers to lay this foundation as they make decisions about our state budget. This is the fundamental task before our elected officials as we move into another year in which families are struggling to find living-wage jobs, make their mortgage or rent payments, and put food on the table. The state budget is at the center of the choices lawmakers have before them.

The state budget is about more than numbers and spreadsheets. It has real consequences for real people – for students, parents, workers, small business owners, and communities as a whole. In other words, all of us are affected by state budget decisions.

Our state budget is the vehicle through which lawmakers invest public money and decide who and what is important to us. Budgets also reflect the contributions expected of people and businesses and our choices about who should be expected to contribute. Montana needs to ensure that we are raising revenue sufficient for the investments that our families, communities, and state all depend on.

As of December, Montana was expecting an estimated revenue shortfall of \$360 million after weathering the recession up to this point without such a gap.¹ Without adequate revenue, there are grave risks to the public investments and structures upon which our lives and futures depend. These include schools, clinics, help for families struggling to make ends meet, universities, firefighters, nurses, protection for our land and water, roads, and other public investments.

Meanwhile, in Montana wealthy people contribute less of their income in taxes than do people of limited or moderate means. As of 2009, people earning \$434,000 a year or more gave 4.6 percent of their income to taxes, while those earning less than \$16,000 a year paid 6.1 percent.² Montana is one of only eight states that provides tax breaks for “capital gains,” such as the sale of stocks and bonds.³ Such imbalances suggest that more should be asked of corporations and the very wealthy.

This storybook features the lives and experiences of everyday Montanans. Their stories illustrate the potential costs of bad budget decisions. They also highlight the need for strong, smart public investment in all our families and communities.

Jim Herron

Billings

I'm Pastor of the First Congregational Church in Billings. Although I work too much to properly enjoy my hobbies, I do love camping and fishing in the Montana wilderness with my wife and young children. We're hard-working parents but still find it difficult to make ends meet in this economy. Our family shouldn't be struggling, but we are.

It's not just my own family that I am concerned about. As a pastor, I see how budget cuts are affecting the people of my congregation. Programs and services for children, immigrants, and the homeless are being cut, leaving people without support and stability. The cuts to education programs are of special concern to me.

Education is paramount to our state. We need to make sure that kids are a part of our future. The role of government is to take care of our most vulnerable, especially children. Budget cuts are a short-term fix to the state's troubles, but our problems will always come back to haunt us if we do not address the real issues facing our communities. Montanans value family, freedom of self-determination, as well as community. These budget cuts threaten everything we hold dear.



Montanans are also optimistic; we believe in hard work and the possibility of change. And right now, things must change. Instead of just cutting funding to essential services and programs, we must raise revenue. And revenue should come from the out-of-state corporations and banks who must finally pay their fair share for all the property, goods, and services that they use in our great state.

Amanda Neustrom

Missoula

I am a full-time student at the University of Montana in Missoula. This is my third year in school, and I absolutely love being at the university. I am studying Business Management and possibly Media Arts.

While it's my third year in school, I'm behind schedule in my classes because I have been working a full-time job and only attending classes two days a week. I managed to do this, albeit barely, and as a result my grades suffered. It was difficult to make ends meet with a low-paying job, not to mention the cost of all the required text books and other school expenses that add to the growing balance on my credit card bill.



I was never given a very good explanation of my financial aid options until this year. This year, thanks to grants and loans, I was able to become a full-time student and a part-time worker. While I could have continued at the rate I was going, it would have taken me six years to get a four-year degree and would have wasted more tuition money in the long run.

I can't describe how great it is to finally put all my energy in school. I have so much desire – not only to finish school, but to do well in school and excel in a field for which I have a lot of passion. With my education, I know I can make a better life for myself. It's great to focus on my dreams and what I'm working towards instead of questioning if I will be able to go another semester or not. Unfortunately, those old worries are starting to come back.

The grants that were offered to me allowed me to catch up this semester. With one more summer school session, I will be on the fast track to graduation in May 2012. However, if funding is taken away through budget cuts to education, I may be back where I started.

Connie Brox

Butte

I work as a housekeeper in Butte, at a nursing home. We provide care for our most disadvantaged seniors and are funded by state money. Now, because of state budget cuts, the nursing home and our patients are threatened, along with my job and health care.

There have already been significant hours cut from people's work schedules due to the recession, and any further cuts could lead to serious layoffs. I am not sure what I would do if I lost hours, or worse — my job. I currently suffer from fibromyalgia (a pain condition) and will struggle to get insured due to my pre-existing condition (which will hopefully be fixed in 2014 when that provision of health reform goes into effect).

The Montana budget cuts will impact my family and others by eliminating jobs and health care coverage. I know just how critical these state-funded services are. When my kids were growing up, we depended on several programs to help make ends meet, even while I was working several jobs.

Butte is a town where people look after each another – we expect the same out of our representatives.



All Montanans want to have good health care, education, and jobs that provide a living wage. Instead of cutting services that help provide these things, we should be raising money to fund them. People in Montana are willing to pay taxes if the money is being used for programs that improve our communities. And if we have to pay, we expect corporations to pay their fare share in taxes in order to support public institutions and programs.

Butte is a town where people look after each another – we expect the same out of our representatives.

Krystina Prinzing Ward

Four Corners

I live with my husband in Four Corners, where I am very involved in my community. I am deeply troubled by the budget cuts that the Legislature is proposing to programs like health care, disability, job training, and education.

These budget cuts would affect my family and my neighbors in more ways than one. My husband depends on disability services to make ends meet for our family. We also rely on energy assistance to help us through the long, cold winter days and nights. Health care budget cuts would force people like us to forgo any medical or dental care, choosing poorer health and a shorter life over the hassle of high costs. My youngest sister would be tragically affected by cuts to child care services she needs.

"I believe that, in Montana, people strive to be extraordinary. But, instead of setting people up for success, the state is making it harder for people to prosper. "

Many people in our community are still banking on the "American Dream." But from what I see, that dream is becoming harder and harder to achieve and the middle class is being wiped out. Health care cuts will lead to high insurance costs and premiums which, when people get sick, could financially destroy low- to moderate-income families. Cuts to job training programs would eliminate the opportunities for low-income, moderate-income, and homeless Montanans to take care of themselves and better their lives.

I believe that, in Montana, people strive to be extraordinary. But, instead of setting people up for success, the state is making it harder for people to prosper. Times are hard, but the Legislature needs to remember that during a recession, anything that affects our society affects low-income people harder than anyone. People don't need these budget cuts; they need help – more than ever.

Dana West

Havre

I work as an Education Counselor (K-12) at the Havre Education Center. Through my work, I know that one aspect of the huge rise in health care costs that has gone virtually unnoticed is access to counseling services by children under severe emotional stress.

As a school counselor who has been in education for thirty years, I've seen drug treatment programs disappear, residential mental health facilities such as Warm Springs become a distant memory, and the number of counseling visits provided for little girls who have been sexually molested diminish. In the 1980s, schools became the residential mental health facilities as patients were moved back into their own communities for local concern and "treatment." The problem is that the treatment never materialized, and the schools became the federally mandated caretakers of these young people. Before the Reagan cuts, we'd had it. Now we can't afford it, and the schools have yet another un-funded mandate.

As society began experiencing an increase in harsh addictions to drugs such as meth, the children of the addicted began to bear the consequences, and the cost to insurance companies became burdensome. They began to rewrite policies to avoid those costs, and the children began to rely more on school counseling. As a school counselor, it is now almost routine to handle severe mental disorders that, at one time, wouldn't have been in our hands. When I began counseling, adjustment to divorce was the main issue; now bipolar diagnoses and suicidal ideation are common issues we deal with in our youth.



"Whenever there is a public massacre by a disturbed individual, the instant response is, 'Why wasn't something done?' Residents wonder how that individual 'slipped through the cracks.' Well, now you know. We cannot afford to let this continue."

We provide mental health services largely through Medicaid funding to students with a diagnosis of being “severely emotionally disturbed.” However, we have little support when it comes to preventing students from becoming so. School counselors typically have caseloads of 200 or more students. Guess what: that doesn’t provide nearly enough contact time to deal with issues such as bi-polar disorder or suicidal ideation.

Kind and caring teachers have always filled in the gaps as they give time to listen to their stressed students’ concerns. I routinely hear of teachers who hand out their cell phone numbers, as they can’t bear the worry of what will happen to their student over the weekend. Some take their homeless students into their homes for informal foster care. No one hears about these efforts, and no one is billed for the services.

Budget cuts for education have been going on for years now. Freezes in education salaries have been occurring for years. Havre Public Schools has been innovative in becoming more streamlined and efficient. We moved to leveled schools (K-1, 2-3, 4-5) at the elementary school so that class sizes can be maximized. Ask yourself, however, what a larger classroom does to the ability of that teacher to address the unmet emotional needs of his or her students, and it shouldn’t be too difficult to forecast that the future will present even more severely emotional disturbed students who lack health care resources.

Anna Volkersz

Belgrade

I work for Home Care Services in Belgrade and I am a proud member of SEIU. I had the opportunity 15 years ago to help take care of my father while he was undergoing cancer treatment. As a family we found it hard and struggled to find answers and support and guidance, not only through the government, but through local home care agencies. My father wasn't able to live his remaining days at home where he should have been – instead he was in the hospital.

To a surprising number of our clients, we are the only connection they have to the outside world. Some clients have no family left alive, others have been forgotten by their kin, and many live far from any relatives. They depend on us every day to provide the essential care they need to survive.

Although times are tough all around, keeping the elderly and disabled in their own homes allows them to live their lives more fully. Home health care is a dignified form of care, and is arguably more cost-effective. Instead of clients living at group homes, or being financial burdens on family, they choose to live in their own homes, owned or rented, and receive care in the places most dear and comfortable to them.

As the majority of home care is funded by state and federal budgets, we home care workers are now depending on our lawmakers to make the right decisions and to maintain or increase the funding that makes hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of lives better across this country. This greatly affects both the lives of home care workers and the lives of the elderly and disabled in our state.



This legislative decision will affect the lives of thousands of Montanans. Spending on home care is not a frivolous handout. There are disabled and elderly in our communities – our parents, or former teachers and coaches, the cousins of our friends, our neighbors – who need and want home health care. Their lives are greatly improved by this system of care. They cannot be forgotten. Also, home care workers deserve fair pay and protection from harassment and other unfair actions.

Montana needs to continue its tradition of being both a progressive, forward-thinking state and an old-fashioned neighborly state where people watch out for each other. Home care workers and the amazing people we care for are a largely silent and “invisible” portion of our communities, and our combined needs are important.

Julie Adams

Hardin

I work for the Crow Tribe as a Chemical Dependency Counselor with Indian Health Services. I have a large extended family of relatives and friends, and I love to take family members – nieces, nephews, children, friends of family – to basketball games and tournaments.

Hardin can be tough town to live in. There is a shortage of housing on the Crow Reservation, so many of us live in town, where the rent is very expensive and continues to rise. It is also a racially tense town where Native people are often targeted. On paydays, police often pull people over without just cause and issue tickets and fines.

"We live on an uneven playing field. It is time to make it more even, more fair."

The proposed budgets will have many bad effects on my community and family. I'm very concerned about how the proposed budget cuts will impact the lives of public employees. Public programs have provided long-term employment for my extended family, and now these programs – and people's jobs – are threatened. I have family that works for the Hardin school system, and the impacts on school funding could paralyze my aunt financially if her job is reduced or eliminated. She is currently the only breadwinner for her family and has worked in Hardin Public schools for over 10 years.

Education is central to our values – both in the Crow tribe and for everyone across Montana. We should be investing in it, not taking it away. Instead of making cuts to services, we should be raising revenue, maybe through natural resources and development. We should be making corporations pay their fair share of taxes in the state.

Eileen Sansom

Missoula

I am the Chief Program Officer at the Missoula Aging Services center. Montana's State Health Insurance counselors have helped many clients by enrolling them in the Big Sky Rx program. This assistance allows eligible seniors to receive all of the medications they need. The Big Sky Rx program and other services help seniors avoid having to make the impossible choice between medication and food. I urge our Legislature to please support programs that help keep elders in their homes.

Here is an example of one of the many situations Aging Services counselors see: Roy, age 94, and his wife Zelda, age 90, have lived in Montana their entire adult lives. They are hard-working, independent Montanans. Roy is also a veteran. He raised cattle in Malta before they moved to Missoula to be closer to their daughter; their son stayed home on the family ranch.

Roy and Zelda are no strangers to hard work and enduring hard times. As a retired rancher and veteran, Roy keeps himself busy taking care of Zelda, who at 83 was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Since then, Roy has been her primary caregiver, making sure she is safe, preparing her meals, and helping her in and out of the shower. Zelda is on several prescription drugs to postpone the effects of Alzheimer's and another to keep her blood pressure down. Roy is healthy for 94; he takes one baby aspirin each day. Our SHIP Counselor understands his hardships: it's not easy being a caregiver.



It is also not easy for him to support himself and his ailing wife on his income of \$1,900 a month. After all the Medicare and Supplemental Insurance deductions, their monthly income drops to \$1,367. Zelda's three medications cost \$521 per month. By enrolling in the least expensive plan, Roy will pay \$173 per month January through June, at which point Zelda will fall into the "coverage gap," and then Roy will pay \$303 per month for the cost of those three medications. For the entire year, the out-of-pocket expenses, including monthly premiums and drug costs, will be \$3,273. Roy also buys a drug plan even though he takes no prescriptions. It costs Roy \$168 per year just to have drug coverage he may need in the future.

Roy and Zelda's Social Security is considered "too high" for them to qualify for any financial assistance other than the Big Sky Rx program – which will pay up to \$37.55 toward the monthly premium of each of their drug plans. It's not much, considering the cost of medication and drug insurance, but it is enough to give them the boost they need and deserve.

The Aging Services program has helped other seniors who have been hospitalized because they could not afford their medicine. Please do not cut the funding that helps people like Roy and Zelda access the services they need. This includes Aging Services and Big Sky Rx. Without the staff at the Area Agencies on Aging and Councils on Aging throughout Montana, seniors would not have access to the programs and services they so desperately need and deserve.

The Big Sky Rx program and other services help seniors avoid having to make the impossible choice between medication and food. I urge our Legislature to please support programs that help keep elders in their homes.

Dale Hiscock

Bozeman

I am 28 years old and attend Montana State University. After I graduated from high school, I moved to Florida to pursue a life in music. I moved back to Montana specifically to attend MSU and study audio electronics design through the Electrical Engineering department. MSU not only offers a quality education, but since I'm a state resident, the tuition is more affordable.

While being a full-time student is a job in itself, I also work part-time as a server in a restaurant, in my department at school, and as a tutor to my fellow students. I'm putting myself through college through jobs and scholarships. I am not taking out loans, because that would put me in a cycle of debt that I may never be able to get out of.

The state budget cuts currently being discussed would slash funding for education. If tuition goes up – especially the 18 percent that's been talked about – I'd have to work more, which would mean I would have to cut back on the number of classes I take or limit the number of hours I can study and let my grades suffer. Either of these things would cause me to lose my scholarships.

Growing up in Bozeman, I know that this is a community that truly values education. This town wouldn't exist without education, without the university. Cuts to MSU would have substantial impacts on the entire town. The diversity of the community, which exists because of MSU, would be sacrificed as well. Legislators should stop and consider all of this before stripping down our education system.



Montana needs revenue – not cuts – to continue to provide essential services to people. Montanans understand how important education is. In order to set the next generation up to have a better future and be qualified for good jobs, our representatives need to make sure anyone who wants an education can receive one.

Mike Johnson

Billings

I work hard as a business agent for International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 400, in Billings, but I also enjoy spending time outdoors, boating and camping, with my family. Things are a little tough on us right now, though, as my wife is dealing with cancer and two of our children work out of state because they can't find jobs in Montana.

Because of the recession, good jobs are getting harder and harder to come by here, and now the legislators are taking about reducing the state budget by cutting funds to infrastructure maintenance. IUOE provides good paying jobs for our members, but with these cuts, I could lose my job. And so could many of the people I work with, because many of us are public employees who work as heavy equipment operators, mechanics, and surveyors.

We are willing to pay our fair share in order to help our communities out. Instead of cutting money and taking jobs away, legislators should be working to make a more equitable tax system, one where higher earners pay more, so that we can all share the load.

"Montanans have a strong work ethic. All we want are decent jobs in Montana so that our families - our children - can find work, live here, and start their families here."



Ellen Guettler

Bozeman

I am the coordinator of the Adult Basic Literacy and Education (ABLE) program in Bozeman. The ABLE program prepares students to earn a GED, equips them to attain and retain employment, and prepares them for post-secondary study and training leading to gainful employment. A GED used to be sufficient for getting a decent paying job, but this is no longer the case. Now the GED is the first step toward an Associates degree or an apprenticeship program.

Since taking my position in 2003, the number of students in the program has tripled. When I began, 30 students each year obtained a GED compared to approximately 100 students last year. Nearly half of the more than 300 students currently being served are between 16-19 years old. Of this group of teens, roughly 70% of them are “at risk” because of addiction issues, learning or emotional disabilities, or as a result of economic and poverty issues. I know firsthand that if we don’t educate all our children, the future is imperiled. At-risk youth are especially vulnerable.

Since the beginning of the economic recession, there has been a marked increase in the number of students coming into the program who formerly held well-paying jobs in the construction industry, but who are now unemployed. They are seeking their GED as well as other training opportunities to regain employment.



In the last year, I’ve also noticed that a growing number of students are coming to the center hungry. In response, the staff and I have sought ways to make food available to the students so that they are able to learn properly. Single mothers in the program talk about health care for their young children and worry about what they will do if the state cuts funding to the Healthy Montana Kids Program. More and more of my students are becoming concerned about how they will make it if their unemployment benefits run out before they complete their training programs.

It is so critical that we don't let our kids fail. The longer we let them go without help, the higher the cost to society at the other end of their lives.

The ABLE program operates on an annual budget of approximately \$110,000. Funded by a federal grant, a local mill levy, and state funds for adult education, the program is able to do what it does with a small paid staff of one full-time person and four part-time staff, along with over 50 volunteers from the community. We also partner with the Montana Department of Labor and its Personal Employment Plan program which helps to identify career clusters compatible with individuals through an instrument called the Montana Career Inventory Survey. Budget cuts threaten our program's stability.

"I believe unequivocally in the incredible financial value that education adds to our community and state, and I urge our state government to recognize this priority. The ideal value of community is that it empowers everyone - and education is the key!"

Margaret Sanderson

Billings

I am 88 years old and was born in Yellowstone County, Montana, in the same cabin in which my father was born. I have lived on this property all of my life, raising sheep and caring for my aging aunt and father. I like to think that hard work has kept me pretty sharp and physically pretty healthy. I only take one medication, and that's for my blood pressure.

The Yellowstone County Council on Aging has assisted me in many ways. I was able to apply for and receive Medicare Extra Help and enroll in the Medicare Savings Program, which has gone a long way toward keeping me in my home. They also provide a volunteer who helps me with bill-paying and other financial matters.

Because we were farmers all our lives, we worked hard but did not save a lot of money. So I have no savings and am on a pretty fixed income. The benefits I receive from the state are very important to me. I love this place I have called home for 88 years, and I want to continue living where I am for as long as possible.



Dan Krebill

Bozeman

I am the Co-Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Bozeman, Montana. I'm also a Board Member of the Montana Organizing Project and President of the Montana Association of Churches.

As part of Montanans from across the state, I want to tell my story about the importance of health care, quality education and other public systems that make this state a great place to live and work.

Unfortunately, many of these resources have taken a big hit lately. Cuts to public services passed in the first week of the session will make it harder for Montana families to get by and overcome the lingering effects of the recession.



As a pastor, I see the consequences of gaps in public service in my ministry every day. When human services are cut, churches are often left with a heavy weight of their absence – we have to increase charity and outreach with less staff.

We need to do better. The first step in reversing the irresponsible cuts passed in the first week is for legislators to talk to the people who use and provide these services every day.

As people on the frontlines, we have the best perspective on how well they work and what they mean to our communities and families.

"We need to tell our story to the Legislature and the public about what it takes to build strong Montana communities."

Wendy Barnhouse White

Great Falls

I run the Eastside Barber Shop in Great Falls with my father-in-law and also work as a consultant for Tastefully Simple, which sells health food for people with busy lifestyles.

My own life is very hectic and busy. My husband and I each work two jobs to keep up with the educational and medical needs of our two children, five-year-old Caitlin and three-year-old Ethan. Caitlin has a lot of medical issues and needs: absence epilepsy, anxiety, occupational therapy, play therapy, and medications like Prozac.

The health care community in our area has been wonderfully supportive. The Healthy Montana Kids program allows my children to stay healthy and up-to-date on all their medical needs. The

therapists and specialists at the Great Falls Clinic and the Center of Mental Health Services have been so good to our family. I don't know what we would do without them, or what we will do if the cuts that the Legislature is thinking of making were to go through. It would be ugly; the cuts would drastically affect our ability to get the therapy and medications my daughter needs.

"Montana is a great state made up of real people who work hard to protect our family. The Legislature should be working for and with -- not against -- us. We need to straighten our tax system out so it can be equal. Everyone should pay their fair share."

Dwayne Arscott

Bozeman

I'm 47 years old and was born in Gary, Indiana. When I was a young boy, I was removed from an abusive home by social workers who relocated me to the Chicago area. It was there, at just age six, that I first became homeless. From that time on, I was moved in and out of foster homes and orphanages, running away again and again, and living on the streets of Chicago. As a teen I was adopted into a loving household, but my pattern of running away continued because I'd been swept up in a life of crime in order to support the destructive addictions I had already developed. This pattern continued for many years and ultimately I landed in prison.

I now live in Bozeman as an ex-offender. I've worked hard to reform my life and am determined to live the rest of my life as a sober, productive, and contributing member of society. While I've been able to find employment in a series of short-term positions, I've been unable to secure a job that provides financial stability from month to month.

As a member of First Presbyterian Church in Bozeman, I've received much support and encouragement from church members, who have lovingly reached out to me. And while the church has offered spiritual and moral support, with some limited financial help, I have also received assistance from other public service agencies that have helped me gain a foothold towards rebuilding my life.

In 2006, I was diagnosed with Non-Hodkins lymphoma, a cancer of the lymphoid tissue. I receive treatment with the help of Medicaid, and I receive Social Security benefits, including disability. I have also received assistance from services offered by the local Human Resource Development Council, such as the food bank, as well as programs that provide resources to secure permanent housing



I'm currently employed by a concrete company, but due to the sluggish economy, I've had very few days of work during the winter months.

I am living on the margin, where any cuts to the public services that help me survive on a daily basis are likely to result in a return to homelessness. All I desire is to make the most of my remaining life by helping others to learn from my mistakes. I recently received special permission to attend AA meetings with a group of men who are in a pre-release program, with the hope that I can help some of them avoid the same mistakes I made.

I want to tell legislators and those with power to please understand how the cost of programs that benefit children and young adults is a small fraction of the costs borne by society later if we don't support youth. We truly can't afford to cut these programs and, more importantly, these people.

Brianne Harrington

Helena

I own and run a small business called the Painted Pot. Without the public infrastructure and the services that government makes possible, my business wouldn't exist. The truth is that none of Montana's small businesses would exist without the roads, communications and energy grids, and educated workforce that our public funding makes possible.

The Painted Pot is a paint-your-own pottery and glass fusing studio in downtown Helena. My customers and I are able to get to my business every day on publicly funded roads and sidewalks. I am confident that my business will still be standing every morning because public building codes make sure it is structurally sound and because of our publicly funded firefighters and law enforcement officials. I turn on the lights, powered by electricity from a public utility, and open my new shipment of goods, which traveled to me by interstate highways. The kids who come to paint pottery wash their hands in safe, clean, publicly funded water. The list goes on and on – almost every aspect of my business operation is supported by public investments.

Then, there are my customers. My business' success is built on my customers. I have regular customers who come from all over the state, from Great Falls to Missoula to Bozeman. The majority, of course, is from Helena, and I'd estimate that 75 percent of them serve our state as government employees.



Public services and government spending help keep our communities' economies moving. Cut the state budget, and you cut small businesses' customer base – and our ability to create jobs. The critical customer base formed by public employees is what makes private job creation possible at businesses like mine.

I have three part-time employees and would love to hire more staff. It would give me the opportunity to work on marketing and expanding my business. I've had no shortage of new applicants, as well as interest from previous employees, and I'd love to be able to say yes. But in order to hire more people – in order to create jobs – I need significantly higher sales. For that to happen, I need a larger, more affluent customer base which creates more opportunities to invest in and expand my business. Cutting state workers' jobs or pay would have the opposite effect.

The most important public investment of all is education. I can't emphasize enough the importance of public education for businesses and for Montana's future. One of the most important factors for business owners in choosing a location for their business is the education level of the workforce. An educated workforce is essential for businesses, and our communities need the higher-paying jobs that a more educated workforce can obtain. We must make this critical investment in Montana's future.

These public investments require public funding. As a business owner, I want to invest in the future of my town and state, and I pay my taxes willingly. These are the things that pay for my son's school, and the education of all our kids, our future. I want them to have money for good books, computers, and teachers. I feel confident that my son can go to any school in Helena and get a good education, and that is a blessing not many have. I can't think of a more important investment in our future. These public investments are our tax dollars at work, and businesses need the things our taxes pay for.

"Our publicly funded infrastructure, services, and regulations are critical to the success of private businesses. If the Legislature takes away funding for these important investments, we will lose jobs, and our economy and communities will suffer. We need to pursue a balanced approach to the budget and regulations that will strengthen, not undermine, our communities."

Kayla Miller

Billings

I am the Student President of the Associated Students of Montana State University Billings. I also work part-time as a case manager at the Human Resource Development Council, a state-run program that helps low-income, elderly, minority, and disabled Montanans find educational and training opportunities.

I grew up in a family that values self-reliance and hard work. While my family is very supportive of me, they cannot be financially supportive, so I am working and putting myself through school in order to better my own future.

While I am working hard towards my future, it feels like my state government, which is talking about cutting state funding for the University, is working against me. Without state support, my tuition will be much higher — beyond the point where I could afford to continue my education. I chose to stay in-state because it was the most cost effective option, but if the cuts happen, that will no longer be the case.

If tuition increases, I will have to take on even more debt in order to graduate. Additionally, funding cuts mean larger classes, which will lead to a decrease in the quality of my education.



I was raised in Montana, and one thing I know is that neighbors here are willing help their neighbors. It is one of our most important community values.

Montanans support fair and just taxation. What our elected officials need to realize is that an increase in university tuition is, in fact, an increase in taxes — an unfair one that targets people seeking improvement through education. I would rather see the corporations that do business and make big profits in this state pay their fair share of taxes to help relieve the unfair burden that is placed on students and those who don't make a lot of money.

Warren Peterson

Billings

I'm 58 years old and am blessed with a very close-knit family, though we are currently struggling with the loss of a child. I'm grateful to be part of a very supportive church that I can turn to in good times and bad. I am currently unable to find work, but I do enjoy working through my church and visiting with people of all ages.

I'm facing a lot challenges when it comes to finding work. There are so many people applying for the same few jobs due to the recession, and because of my back issues, I cannot lift more than 25 pounds, which makes me ineligible for many jobs. I suffer from osteoporosis and some hearing loss, and employers do not want to hire people with health issues for fear of liability or how it will affect their health care costs and insurance rates. It is also hard to find work being so close to the retirement age.

I'm very worried about the cuts that the Legislature is talking about making to the state budgets. If the Legislature cuts funding for public service jobs, it will impact my life in two major ways. It will make it harder to get the help I need, and it will also create more unemployment and more competition for the few jobs that are available.

While I'm unemployed, I get health insurance through the COBRA program. The state helps me



find health care that I can afford while I look for work. If the cuts happen, I won't know where to go for help. Regular doctor visits cost \$185, and without any assistance I will be forced to forego health care or use free clinics if coverage runs out.

One of Montana's basic values is taking care of one another. We also care about health care and good jobs. Our state legislature needs to remember this; they need to have the same values.

Conclusion & Recommendations

We are counting on our state lawmakers to make the right choices for Montana. As our representatives in decisions about how to raise and invest revenue, we need them to build a foundation of prosperity, not auction our state away. Accordingly, we call on our local and state lawmakers to use the following principles as their guide when making budget decisions:

Address the challenges for the community as a whole. In tough times, we turn to our families, neighbors, and friends. We also need to come together as a state. Lawmakers must not draw up budgets that force low-income people, Native people, the unemployed, seniors, and students to bear the brunt of budget cuts.

Invest in public structures that support families, communities, and the state. The only way forward to a strong and secure economic future for everyone is to increase our commitment to public structures that underlie prosperity. Public structures are all around us – from public schools to parks; from health clinics to libraries; from our community colleges and child care centers to our roads and bridges. Lawmakers should invest in these public structures, and remember that our human infrastructure is as important as our physical infrastructure.

Anchor the budget-making process in racial and economic equity. Our future depends on investing in people. This includes addressing the racial and economic disparities that burden Native people and low-income families and undermine financial security for everyone. Lawmakers must ensure that their budget choices not disproportionately hurt low-income people and Native people.

Fix our revenue picture. Everyone in Montana should make a fair contribution toward the investments needed to build prosperity. But our tax system is skewed in favor of large corporations and the very wealthy, and our foundation has become eroded by disinvestment. Our lawmakers should reclaim our legacy of fairness by raising the revenue needed for investments in families, communities, and the state.

Listen to the needs of all members of our families, communities, and state. Budget decisions have real consequences. Before making any decisions about revenue and investments, elected officials should consult affected communities – especially those most directly impacted by budget cuts – to assess the potential damage and solicit ideas.

References

- 1 Montana Budget & Policy Center, "Improving Tax Collections: Making Sure All Taxpayers Contribute What They Owe," December 13, 2010, p. 1, viewed at: <http://www.montanabudget.org/reports/making-sure-all-taxpayers-contribute-what-they-owe>.
- 2 Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, "Who Pays?: A Distributional Analysis of the Tax System in All 50 States," November 2009, p. 68, viewed at: <http://www.itepnet.org/whopays3.pdf>.
- 3 Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, "A Capital Idea: Repealing State Tax Breaks for Capital Gains Would Ease Budget Woes and Improve Tax Fairness," January 2011, p. 3, viewed at: <http://www.itepnet.org/pdf/capitalidea0111.pdf>.



The Montana Organizing Project is a collaboration of diverse community, civic, labor and faith groups and community members who have come together to form a new organization. We actively work for social, economic and racial justice, promoting the dignity and empowerment of people with low and middle incomes whose voices have not been heard in their communities.

Montana Organizing Project
208 E. Main Street
Missoula, MT 59802
(406) 529-8497

& **Montana Organizing Project**
c/o First Congregational
Church – Billings – UCC
310 North 27th Street
Billings, MT 59101-1292
(406) 490-9777



Alliance for a Just Society convenes community and racial justice organizations nationwide on critical public policy issues, providing research and policy analysis and fostering public conversation.

3518 S. Edmunds St., Seattle, WA 98118
Voice: (206) 568-5400
Fax: (206) 568-5444
www.allianceforajustsociety.org