

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Northwest Area Foundation provided the communities of Northcentral Montana with a unique opportunity and challenge to develop a community driven plan to reduce poverty across the eleven counties and three reservations which include:

- Blaine County
- Cascade County
- Chouteau County
- Glacier County
- Hill County
- Judith Basin County
- Liberty County
- Phillips County
- Pondera County
- Teton County
- Toole County
- Blackfeet Reservation
- Fort Belknap Reservation
- Rocky Boy Reservation

People from all walks of life from across the vast region have come together over the last year and a half to talk, debate, learn from each other, and to plan together.

Poverty is the unspoken tragedy across these eleven counties and three reservations, which together are larger than ten states. Depending on the community, between one third and almost half of our children under five live in grinding poverty. The life span of Indians in Northcentral Montana is twenty-five years less than that of whites, and the parts of life that most of us take for granted such as housing, clean drinking water, access to telephone service, jobs and essential hope are missing for many. At the same time, the farmers and ranchers of our communities are struggling. Drought, low grain prices, changes in agricultural technology, corporate farming, and the transfer of land into CRP have conspired to cause continuing failures of the family farms. This in turn, has led to the shrinking of our small towns, the loss of retail and the loss of our young adults who can no longer earn a living wage. All are reluctant to ask for help, being proud and independent, and many suffer in silence and despair, no longer believing that life can be different.

This is a poverty that has many dimensions, and through our dialogue about poverty, the Coalition has defined poverty in Northcentral Montana as:

The collection of individual sorrows that overwhelms the ability of individuals and communities to help themselves and each other and erodes the well-being of the region.

The outcome of our effort is a comprehensive and at times daunting set of 28 strategies and more than 100 actions organized in seven overarching strategic directions which we believe will, in combination and in concert, improve the lives of people living in poverty. The seven strategic directions are:

<i>Community:</i>	<i>To identify, learn about, and celebrate the spirituality and uniqueness within our regional community.</i>
<i>Health:</i>	<i>To create healthy communities by improving the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of those living in poverty.</i>
<i>Children, Youth, and Families:</i>	<i>To provide families and communities with the resources and skills necessary to build and maintain healthy families.</i>
<i>Economy:</i>	<i>To build and live in a sound and healthy regional economy.</i>
<i>Education:</i>	<i>To create educational opportunities and resources that are readily available and affordable to people at all educational levels.</i>
<i>Housing:</i>	<i>To ensure that safe and affordable housing and home ownership is available.</i>
<i>Transportation:</i>	<i>To ensure access to affordable, accessible, and convenient transportation for low-income individuals.</i>

These strategic directions are bound together by some common approaches and themes, carried out through the strategies and actions:

- Building social capital
- Removing barriers to moving out of poverty
- Building healthy communities in which all aspects of health are improved
- Using the land while protecting it
- Increasing assets and capital available to low-income persons
- Assuring access to and the use of technology
- Learning as a tool and an end

The Northwest Area Foundation set six criteria by which it will evaluate the Community Ventures Plans. The Northcentral Montana Community Ventures Project used the criteria as their guiding principles throughout the process. The following describes how the plan meets those criteria.

Criteria: A significant focus on reducing poverty

To truly understand the poverty in Northcentral Montana in depth, the Coalition carried out more than 200 Community Conversations across the region. We spoke with people who were living in poverty and with people who had moved out of poverty. The Coalition also spoke with people who worked with low-income persons, as well as people in government, business, education, criminal justice, and churches. From these conversations, we gained an understanding of how poverty affects people's lives, what the barriers are to moving out of poverty, and how people, whatever their economic status, define poverty. These conversations ultimately drove the Coalition's definition of poverty and the strategies and actions. In the process of finalizing the strategies and actions, we chose among many more than we could possibly undertake, and the primary criterion for retaining a strategy or action was that it "will result in a major reduction of the number of people living in poverty in Northcentral Montana."

Criteria: Substantial involvement of diverse interests

One of the greatest challenges for the Coalition was to involve people from all eleven counties, the three reservations, and from all economic backgrounds in meaningful ways. The region is large and, while sparsely populated, is highly diverse in many dimensions including race, tribal affiliation, faith, geography, income, and work. Involvement of all interests was a constant effort, and will need to continue to be a focus of learning and evaluation in the future. In the past year, the Coalition grew to 118 people and the people staying informed through the newsletter grew to more than 500. The most intense work in formulating the plan came during the development of the strategies and actions, and the Strategy Teams were made up of and led by both Indian and non-Indian, with participants from all three reservations, as well as, urban Indians and residents from most of the eleven counties. Teams included

"Although we have different philosophies of what we envision may work...we have tried to the best we can to meld those together in way that encourages the changes to take place at the grass roots level."

Blackfeet Representative

people currently living in poverty, people who have moved out of poverty, as well as, professionals bringing specific expertise (and in some cases these were the same people).

Coalition members did not come to this process with a knowledge or trust of each other. By sharing and learning about each other's interests and concerns, a mutual respect and increasing trust has been fostered. With ongoing attention and nourishment, it will continue to grow providing an increased capacity to work together to reduce poverty.

Criteria: Do no harm

Early in the planning process, the Coalition drew from the Community Conversations a set of community values that are held by people across the region. These encompassed family, schools, learning, the land, spirituality, community, and a sense of safety. They represent the qualities and the aspects of the region that the Coalition wishes to preserve and protect, while it undertakes other fundamental community change. The Coalition also identified values that it, as a group, hold and want to advocate for, but which may not be present throughout the region. These include: truth, health and wellness, humor, continuity of a way of life, respect, jobs that support a living wage, and parenting. By holding each other and our communities to these values, we assure that we “do no harm” to those aspects of community life that we wish to preserve or enhance.

This criterion also provided much to consider and debate, particularly in arenas such as the economy where competition has been more common in the region than collaboration. As strategies and actions were developed, an emphasis grew on developing networks of organizations, sharing information, encouraging cooperative marketing ventures, joint business planning by neighboring communities, and other specific means of assuring that communities worked together to solve mutual issues, and reducing the potential for harm.

To keep the Coalition's attention on its values and the potential unintended consequences of change initiatives, we will evaluate new directions and strategies as the plan is implemented, using a process designed to test for, identify, and mitigate potential harm to other communities or individuals.

Criteria: Thoughtful and realistic strategies for accomplishing community goals

The Coalition took an encompassing look at poverty and concluded that targeting one arena, such as the economy, education, or health, would not reduce poverty. Instead, we have taken a holistic approach of addressing the many issues that prevent individuals and communities from moving out of poverty. This has resulted in what may at first look like an impossible plan, which cannot be accomplished because of its complexity and multiplicity of effort. The Coalition has come to a number of understandings about the Plan, which cast it in a different light:

- The strategies and actions were evaluated by the Strategy Teams using a set of criteria which helped them weed out strategies that would be difficult to implement or have little long term impact on poverty.
- It is a ten-year plan, and it will be staged and prioritized.
- The Coalition is committed to creating an ongoing organizational structure and approach to sustaining and implementing the Plan.
- The Plan provides a framework and structure for the region as a whole to address poverty. Some strategies and actions will be stimulated by and coordinated with efforts of the Coalition, but undertaken and funded independently of the Coalition. Other actions will be the focus of the Coalition's efforts. Some actions will be implemented region-wide, but many others will be first implemented locally in the communities where there is the greatest interest and impact, and then the learnings and services disseminated across the region.
- The role of the future Northcentral Montana Community Ventures Council will be to provide an avenue for implementing the Plan, giving assistance and support to communities throughout the region as they need and desire it.

Criteria: Development of local abilities to achieve long-term community goals

An integral part of the process of developing the Plan was to provide training to Coalition members in new ways of communicating with each other and planning. This included training in holding dialogue, in learning organizations, systems thinking, and the development of strategies and actions. Coalition members also learned much from each other about their respective communities, regional issues

ranging from agriculture to racism, their different cultures, what is important to them, and different approaches and philosophies of problem solving.

The plan itself includes specific strategies and actions to build the leadership capacity at local and regional levels and describes the broader issues of community capacity for change that must be addressed in the coming years. These range from having the skills (as well as the desire) to collaborate to supporting local and tribal governments so they have the capacity to carry out poverty reduction actions and build economic growth.

Criteria: Learning and adapting in response to new knowledge and changing circumstances

Coalition members have gotten much practice in the last year and half in gaining new knowledge, listening in new ways, changing attitudes, and changing behaviors. This is just the beginning of the larger process, which must occur as the Plan is implemented. The Plan includes a framework for the evaluation of both qualitative aspects, such as the collaboration of Coalition members, as well as the impact on poverty, as defined by the Coalition. The Plan identifies indicators of progress in a number of arenas, such as economic well-being, health status, education, housing, and transportation. A process for evaluating and changing the plan over time is to be identified during the transition period from planning to implementation. The financial plan itself supports ongoing evaluation and planning by setting aside dollars that are not attached to specific strategies and actions, but will be available to support new ideas and actions over time.

The Community Ventures Project Plan to reduce poverty will bring positive change to the communities of Northcentral Montana. The opportunity to come together as a region in dialogue and with a common focus to reduce poverty has generated a new hope, a new energy, and renewed commitment