

September 28, 2023

RE: Benefits and services to neighbors/constituents in Lake County at risk!

Dear Lake County Senators,

My name is Yvonne Brady and I am the Director of Working Innovations, Inc. We have provided the TANF employment and training program in Lake, Sanders and Mineral Counties for 28 years. We are a small 501C3 non-profit dedicated solely to the TANF employment programs (formerly JOBS and WoRC, now Pathways). I ask that you read this letter with your most vulnerable neighbors and friends in mind. I ask for your help to keep Montanans living in the most rural locations receiving the services they need and deserve.

Our incredibly talented team consists of 6 people who have dedicated their entire careers to serving our neighbors and community members struggling to end their dependence on public assistance. We average 19 years of experience between us. We do not just provide case management to clients to keep them in compliance with the Pathways program, we assist them in gathering the information and navigating the application process to even be eligible for TANF because the Offices of Public Assistance have already become so remote. We can and will travel to serve all our clients where they are, geographically and in life.

Nobody applies for TANF just because they want extra money. With the current job market, those who can work, can get jobs. The clients who come to us today are crippled by numerous and sometimes hidden barriers. Here are some true current case examples:

Case #1 involves a newly separated mother who had never worked, paid her own bills or lived on her own. She and her 5yo son were homeless, couch surfing with whomever would let them, and with no legal form of transportation. She spent her first few meetings with her Client Advocate crying about her perceived disabilities and trying to find excuses for not participating. Through skill and experience acquired over 27 years, the Client Advocate was able to determine she was not refusing to comply, she was unable to comply. The client had agreed to submit 10 housing applications but had not completed one. Within just a few face-to-face meetings, our Client Advocate concluded the client was cleverly covering the fact that she was functionally illiterate. Once established, we had to win her trust so we could help her plan for success while coping with her issues. When she finally trusted us, she brought in a huge pile of mail from the State that she had been unable to read/comprehend. We helped her understand, complete the paperwork needed and navigate the system. In less than 5 months, she has her first rental house, her first real job and her first hope of living a self-sufficient life.

Case #2 is a young man in his 20's living in a very rural area with his child and parents. After skillful, compassionate case management and referrals to mental health, we found he is afflicted with a serious case of agoraphobia and amaxophobia (fear of driving). He only signed up for the program because his parents insisted. He is now on the verge of completing his secondary education certificate to do IT work from home and is working on his mental health. He has started attending in-office, face-to-face meetings which is a big step for him.

Case #3 involves a woman who just enrolled. She has no computer skills to participate remotely. She has a phone she uses for calls/texts only. She has an email address she goes to the Library to access

every couple of months. Her Client Advocate is traveling over 100 miles to help her gather the required documentation and will submit it, on her behalf, from her office when she returns.

How are clients with similar barriers who live in rural areas expected to successfully participate in this complicated program remotely? Case # 1 also could not have participated remotely. Case # 2 is a gifted computer-user but his true barrier would never have been discovered, much less addressed.

Montana has always strived to serve our clients with a community-based, individualized, client-oriented case management model within the Federal regulations. I believe this is what makes Montana's programs successful. Seven years ago, DPHHS did a TANF Strategic planning study State-wide. What they found is that individualized and community-based services are critical to success, especially in the rural areas.

DPHHS/State of Montana's choice is to move to 1 state-wide provider who will run 5 offices in the urban areas only. All other clients, your constituents included, will only be served "remotely" unless they are willing and able to travel weekly to Missoula or Kalispell. Is that reasonable? This model has already drawn the interest of large, out-of-State, for-profit companies who have already contacted the 5 current providers in these "urban" areas (prior to the RFP even being announced so we aren't sure how they knew the State's intentions before the current providers).

We believe a large, for-profit business will provide the most basic services required by the Federal government, with no regard for the individual needs of each client. It will be a more cookie-cutter, one size fits all approach to serving clients. We all know what fits the cities of Montana, does not always serve the needs of the rural areas. Will an out-of-State company understand?

While we acknowledge stream-lining the State government for a more cost-effective approach is the focus of the current Administration, we believe that there are many departments and services that can be out-sourced but serving our most vulnerable people should not be one of them.

At this time, we ask that you remind HCSD/DPHHS that our neighbors/constituents deserve equal services to what will be provided in the 5 "urban" Counties. You can help ensure the community-based, client-oriented and individualized focus remain part of the wording/requirements of the Pathways program RFP so that anyone who wins the RFP will have to serve all the clients equally.

You should know that we are not the only rural human-service providers facing this so please look into what providers of children's services are going through at the discretion of the new out-of-State provider of Medicaid billing. Your neighbors' special needs kids will be losing services too. Our communities should not be underserved just because they choose to live in rural Montana.

Sincerely,

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