

Independent Record

TUESDAY, JULY 20, 2010 | helenatv.com | SERVING HELENA, MONT., SINCE 1867

Foundations rally for early child care **Child care**

Cash-strapped | Early education proven best use of money long-term in society

By **JENNIFER MCKEE**
IR State Bureau

Led by one of Montana's most successful industrialists, a group of nonprofits has launched a drive to bring large private donations to Montana's cash-strapped early childhood educational system — where the average teacher makes less than \$17,000 a year.

"Parents worry so much about how they're going to send their children to college, but it costs more to send them to child care," said Kelly Rosenleaf, executive director of Missoula's Child Care Resources.

Montana's early childhood educational system is funded almost entirely with tuition money from parents and includes large child care centers, free-standing private pre-schools, church-sponsored pre-schools and more informal child care in homes. The only tax dollars that go into the system include Head Start and Early Head Start centers for

children living below the federal poverty line and the state's Best Beginnings Scholarship program, which provides tuition assistance for working families with incomes at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty line.

But there is one important area of child care in Montana that is almost entirely publicly funded, Rosenleaf said: Montana's statewide child care resource and referral network, including the center she runs in Missoula.

The centers don't provide

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child care directly, but they typically provide the only training most child care workers are going to get, all funded by federal grants handled through the state. They also help parents find quality child care and offer curriculum help and other assistance to the state's child care providers. Rosenleaf's center also does fundraising to help pay for child care for families who make too much to qualify for state help, but can't afford child care or for families facing medical problems who need respite care.

There is almost no private money in that piece of the puzzle, Rosenleaf said, and with public funds drying up, Rosenleaf said she worried the assistance the centers offer could be in danger.

The Big Sky Institute for the Advancement of Nonprofits, a Helena-based organization, launched a project late last month to start working with the network to help them attract private donations.

The field needs more money, said Mike Schechtman, executive director of the institute. But it's not an industry with a lot of knowledge on how to apply for grants or where to find them.

The initiative is intended to open up that door.

The campaign is funded with \$46,000 in private donations from several large foundations, including \$10,000 from the Missoula-based Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation.

The foundation has made early childhood education one of its principal efforts, said Mike Halligan, executive director of the foundation and a former state lawmaker. Halligan said he anticipates a time when the foundation may make donations to the state's Department of Public Health and Human Services, which is launching a major quality improvement program for Montana's early child care system.

"We're willing to be the lead dog," Halligan said.

Quality early childhood programs reap enormous social benefits, he said, and have been proven to reduce social costs in the

long-term.

"Investment in early learning has a far greater return than literally any other (social) investment you can make," he said.

Dennis Washington is a major Montana industrialist who owns a number of businesses, including Montana Rail Link. One of his companies, Montana Resources, reopened and operates the copper mine in Butte after it was closed by the Atlantic Richfield.

The foundation Washington and his wife began embraced early childhood education in 2004, Halligan said, after seeing research on importance of quality programming on society.

Ironically, Rosenleaf said, early childhood education and care is very expensive for parents, yet the industry remains chronically underfunded, with most center owners and employees making low wages.

"The best people won't stay (in the industry) because they can't afford to," she said.

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