

Mr. and Mrs. Representatives, Mr. Senators,

First of all I want to thank you all for allowing me the opportunity to be here today to talk to you about Vocational Rehabilitation and Independent Living. My name is Travis Hoffman; I am currently 26 years old and live in Missoula, MT. It was not too many years ago, five to be exact, that I had no idea what Vocational Rehabilitation or Independent Living even were. You see, that is because I've not always been a wheelchair user. Before becoming a wheelchair user I had worked in the retail market, the timber industry, on a cattle ranch, and I have even been blessed enough to have served as a soldier in the United States Army. Five years ago I was involved in a motor vehicle accident which resulted in my acquisition of a spinal cord injury which required me to become a wheelchair user and unable to maintain the active lifestyle in the vocational fields I had once been a part of. It was this experience that led me to Vocational Rehabilitation and Independent Living Services. Both of these programs, and I cannot stress this enough, have been invaluable assets to me on my journey to once again obtain employment so that I may once again be self-supporting and a taxpayer of this great state. Independent Living has opened my eyes to the injustices that this society places on people with disabilities and through Independent Living Services, I have learned not only had to live independently with my own disability, but also how to speak out in the attempt to create positive change for those who have been oppressed for generations and simply do not have a voice. Vocational Rehabilitation has enabled me to acquire an education in social work so that I can use my newfound skills to become employed and eventually become a self-supporting and taxpaying citizen. These programs are but one link on the road for people with disabilities to become self-supporting and taxpaying citizens, and I hope to come back on February 4th to discuss a few others with all of you, but they are very important ones and ones that if they were not available would make the entire system collapse, thus leaving people with all disabilities, not just severe disabilities, even more dependent and higher tax burdens on the state. So I urge you, please adequately fund these invaluable programs and please put this funding permanently in the General Fund, they are too important to receive only one time funding from the tobacco fund with the risk of not being funded every time the Legislature meets. Thank you for all of your time and I hope that my being here today can make a difference for the thousands of Montanans who depend on these programs and for the thousands of Montanans who will depend on these programs in the future.