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January 17, 2005

Dear ~~Sir~~ Madam Chairman and Committee Members,

I am the parent of two young adults with Serious Emotional Disturbances, and a member of several committees related to children's mental health, including the Mental Health Oversight Advisory Committee, the Montana State Delegation to the Policy Academy, the Children's System of Care Committee, and the Missoula Kids' Management Authority. I also participated on the Targeted Youth Case Management Task Force in 2004 for the Children's Mental Health Bureau, and facilitate a support group for parents of children with emotional and behavioral challenges in Missoula. I come before you today both as a parent, and as a representative of the State Systems of Care committee.

Parenting these children is a difficult task which is as emotionally, mentally and physically challenging as raising any special needs child. When I began the journey that led to my involvement in all of the above committee, I lived in Malta, Montana, and was dealing with a psychiatrist and hospital program two hundred miles from home (Billings), a psychologist 90 miles from home (Havre) and a school district lacking the knowledge base and the professional services needed to address my children's needs. I thought "I have a flexible job, decent insurance and reliable transportation, and I'm having THIS MUCH difficulty getting services--what must it be like for families who don't have those resources!"

By definition, children with Serious Emotional Disturbances require services from more than one agency or system. Our kids are involved in school, in mental health care, and often in the child welfare or juvenile justice system. Not all of those involvements are the result of "bad behavior"--at one point a community member recommended I call the sheriff and have my son arrested so he could qualify as a "child in need of supervision" under the juvenile justice system as a way to address his difficulty in attending school, which was the result of his severe depression.

Every time I have explained the System of Care philosophy of getting the various agencies together to create a coordinated, family driven plan for a child and family with the goal of keeping the child home if possible and reducing long distance out of home placements to a parent, the response has been "Of course! That's how we should have been doing it all along!" However, as I have worked with various groups to make it happen I have realized there are many obstacles and challenges to overcome in order to make this philosophy the norm in our state, ranging from agency and funding structures to attitudes of providers. We have much work to do. I urge you to support the efforts of the Children's Mental Health Bureau and all other child serving state agencies to pursue this agenda.

In order to make the System of Care a reality, we need both support from the top and from the bottom. We need agency heads to develop and implement policies encouraging collaborative work and shared funding, and permission for staff to spend time at the meetings needed to develop the plan. Yet the real work happens at the local level, as the Care Team meets to consider the case of each individual child and family. Having served on the KMA at the local level, I can tell you the difference having field

staff from the Children's Mental Health Bureau makes in our ability to develop an effective care plan. Before these staff were available, every meeting would end with "I will call the state and see if this is possible". Now that the field staff is present, we can simply ask if an idea would work, and go from there. Thus, I urge you to support the retention of the five regional field staff in the Children's Mental Health Bureau budget.

In 2004, the state of Montana was awarded a grant from SAMHSA, the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, to build our state's System of Care for Children's Mental Health. We are one of the last states to be awarded such a grant, and as such, have access to an incredible array of learning from groups that have tried this before. The experience and knowledge available through the technical assistance associated with this grant will allow us to build a more effective system in less time than we could have otherwise done. The funds provided by this grant will allow us to build the infrastructure needed to truly implement this model of care. I urge you to support the allocation and spending of money provided by this grant.

In closing, I would remind you that we really don't save money when we fail to meet our children's needs. Children who do not receive early intervention and effective mental health care go on to cost us money in systems like adult and juvenile corrections, chemical dependency services, and the welfare system and child welfare system as the next generation is born. The cost savings of meeting their needs are not immediately obvious--the results can not always be seen in next year's budget--although reduced numbers of out of state placements and declining numbers of youth in facilities such as the Pine Hill and Riverside Correctional Centers indicate that we are beginning to have some success. With adequate treatment and support, more and more of our children can grow up to become productive citizens, contributing to the economy and tax base of our state. Please support the efforts of the Children's Mental Health Bureau and the Systems of Care for Children's Mental Health to make this a reality in Montana.

Sincerely,

Melanie Martin-Dent
Missoula, Montana