

February 1, 2005

To: Senate Taxation Committee.

Chairman Elliott and members of the committee:

My name is Susan Kohler, Executive Director of Missoula Aging Services, the Area Agency on Aging for Missoula and Ravalli Counties and I live at 2228 East Summit Drive in Missoula. I am here to testify in support of SB332. I am also here to tell you Aging Services is currently in a crisis and with out a significant increase in funding services to one of our most vulnerable populations, our elders, will begin to decline.

I have had the privilege of serving Montana's seniors for 25 years. During this time, I have worked with seniors who have used their life experiences and skills to help meet a variety of community needs as volunteers. I have also worked with seniors who have reached a point in their lives where they need some assistance to maintain their independence and dignity. Every year the challenge of funding to meet the current demand for services becomes greater. For example, in Missoula County this year the Governing Board approved a budget for FY05 taking \$50,000 out of reserves to prevent cutting existing services like Meals on Wheels. In Missoula County, we are one of the few that serve meals seven days a week. We serve approximately 500 seniors with 68,000 meals per year. In the community of Hamilton in Ravalli County, they recently capped their meals due to the lack of finances and personnel to recruit enough volunteers to deliver meals to the more remote areas of the county. What will we do in the following years without additional funding? Further examples include our transportation system not keeping pace with the current demand, no sliding scale respite program to help families who are on limited incomes and need a break from the care of an aging parent who can not be left unsupervised, no adult day care center so families can continue to work during the day and still keep their parents at home, the ombudsman program is struggling to meet the growing number of assisted living and nursing home beds being built, and we are receiving increasing demands to help families navigate through the complexity of the long term care system. We offer limited homemaking services and we have a volunteer home maintenance program that needs to be expanded. We currently use over 700 senior volunteers to help meet both community and

senior service needs in Missoula County. Despite what most people may think, recruiting and managing volunteers is not free yet they are indispensable in the operation of many non-profits. There is currently no state funding provided for the three primary volunteer programs; Senior Companions, Foster Grandparents, and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Programs.

In addition, the U. S. Census projects that by 2025, Montana will have the third highest proportion of elderly in the country. Florida and West Virginia will be number one and two, respectively. If we can not meet, current demands how do we expect to meet the demands for the future.

SB332 is an avenue for funding services now and into the future.

As former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said, "the quality of a civilization is measured by how it cares for its elderly." How will we be measured?

Thank you Chairman Elliott and senators for this opportunity to comment.

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