

January 19, 2011

Testimony before Health & Human Services Subcommittee
Montana Children's Initiative (MCI): Children's Mental Health Hearing

Mister Chair and Members of the subcommittee: My name is Michael Kalous. I live in Lewis & Clark County and work here in Helena at Intermountain where I have been a Counselor for over 10 years. I work as direct care staff now, but I first came to live at Intermountain as a child in 1965. My brothers and I were there for one year. It was the first safe place I had lived in all of my young ten years of age. My experiences there had many "firsts" – my first dental visit, my first church service, my first time at camp. It was here that I first witnessed what a real family could be – Elmer and Shirley, my dorm parents, showed me what a family was supposed to be like - and I wanted it. I wanted it so much I carried this hope through my adolescent and young adult years, and Intermountain was in my heart every step of the way. And I made it!

I am now happily married with four children. Zach works in cyber intelligence, Adam is a Sergeant at the Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge, and Beth and Jake are still home; doing well in school. I am one year out from completing my Masters in Professional Counseling degree and intend to become a licensed professional counselor here in Montana.

When I go to work each day I work to help the kids of Intermountain find the same kind of hope I found. They too have had tough beginnings. They come to Intermountain failing at home, in school, and in adult and peer relationships. They are head-long on a course toward drug and alcohol abuse, addictions, violence, death, or prison. Too many loathe themselves. They believe they deserve nothing good and have learned to set it up that way; giving them some sense of control over their lives. It's a sad existence.

At Intermountain they are provided therapeutic interventions and corrective emotional experiences through interactive, healing relationships with loving, caring, accepting, yet firm adults. At Intermountain they can relearn how to live successfully and appropriately within relationships – at home, work, school, and play. Most importantly, they are provided hope for a better life. But this does not come without cost. *Hiring* capable staff willing to withstand often brutal defenses presented by hurting, untrusting kids is a challenge. *Keeping* them is even more difficult. At Intermountain we do not push children away for their behaviors – we draw them closer; and these kids are masters at pushing away those closest to them. It is a tough job with very tough kids. Intermountain does a great job training, developing, and supporting their staff, and the retention rate is remarkable. However, because of the difficult nature of this work, the lure of greater earnings elsewhere is tempting and sadly, too many leave because of it.

All too often it seems that professionals and volunteers who work with children receive very little recognition or remuneration for their efforts in this modern society. Article 6.2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states: "State Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child." Looking at the funding and support systems established to ensure this right for children, can we honestly claim, as a society that we are doing all we can to fortify our children's future? I would hope this year we can emphatically reply: "Yes!"

Please support the Children's Mental Health of DPHHS and do not make any cuts to provider rates. I also ask that you continue to support the Direct Care Wage increase that supports wages for employees like me. The decision to support these budget items not only effects services for children and families, but also impacts employees like me. Thank you for hearing me.

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