

February 4, 2011

**Testimony before Health & Human Services Subcommittee
Re: Child & Family Services Budget**

Mister Chair and Members of the subcommittee:

My name is Kimberly Gardner and I am the Manager of the School Based Mental Health Services program with Intermountain. School Based Mental Health Services provide mental health services to children who attend public schools and live in the community. I have worked at Intermountain for 3 years and in the children's mental health field in a variety of roles for 30 years. I am also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (Therapist) and Licensed Addictions Counselor. My husband and I are also a foster care respite family.

Intermountain is one of many provider members of the Montana Children's Initiative (MCI) association. Our association not only represents providers, but also those children and families we work with in communities across Montana as well as the thousands of employees we have in a variety of communities. Intermountain has been providing services for over a 100 years and as of 2010, we served over 1000 children and their families in a variety of inpatient and outpatient settings in Montana. Intermountain employees 180 people across Montana to serve these 1000 children.

Several years ago at Intermountain we started greeting each other with the question: "How are the children?" That's a bit different than how we greet each other socially in other places which is usually with a hand shake and a "Hello." We may even add "How are you?"

Instead, we're careful to ask "How are the children?" We take the tradition from a culture in some African villages. Their belief is if the children are well, then their society is well. Is this the case here in our community, in our state, in our country? Do we believe in this value that if the children are well, then our society is well? I am here to testify before and emphatically state that we do not take into account if the children of this state are well as a marker for the health of our society, for if we did, we would all be terrified at how un-well our society is based on children's health and well being.

Our state continues to underfund the critical service of foster care. I want to recognize and applaud your efforts to move some funds from other areas of the DPHHS budget to restore funding for foster care for things like diapers, etc. and also to support funding for children aging out of the system. This was needed and you responded. But I am here to testify that while this is a start, it is not enough. Children's needs are not a priority in Montana. This is apparent in a number of ways. Game Wardens in Montana out number case workers in Child and Family Services Departments. It is more important to protect wild animals, hunting rights, and wildlife's ecosystem than it is to assure the State of Montana has an adequate number of case workers to be the front line defense and support for families in crisis. Our case workers in every region work extraordinarily hard to meet the needs that face them on a daily basis. They do the absolute best with what little resources and support they have to meet this need; but many areas are perpetually understaffed--most often not due to a lack of ability to recruit employees, but due to required vacancy savings in budgets. When a case worker role is open, there are many times it can't be filled in order for the Child and Family Services to meet vacancy savings demanded in their budget. This case load is then taken by other case workers and supervisors who are already overworked.

Why is it that we allow this to happen in such a critical role? Again our state has answered with examples of this role not being important enough...Game warden positions are statutorily exempt from vacancy savings (MC17-7-161). Again, in Montana we value wildlife more than we value children and families. Funding for foster families is much too low for the critical role they play in shaping the future of children in Montana. You actually pay more to kennel your dog when you go on vacation than the state pays foster families to care for a child who has often suffered abuse and neglect. The average daily rate in MT at a kennel is \$24. The daily rate for foster care or children ages 0-12 is \$15.03/day; and for ages 13 and older it is \$18.09/day.

Adding to these examples of how children are not the most important value is the number of foster families in Montana. As of June 2010, DPHHS reports that there were 1638 children in foster care in Montana. There are never enough foster families to meet the need in the state and Children's Crisis Shelters often answer this unmet need across the state providing a place for children to stay and receive critical care and nurture they need after the trauma many have been through. It is very difficult to recruit and retain foster parents, but the department does the best it can with what resources they have available, but it isn't enough. To do more would cost more.

The CFS budget put forth by the Governor estimates caseload for foster care very conservatively and in many providers opinion is estimated too low. It is a known fact that child abuse reports and removals increase during times of economic downturns. If the rate isn't estimated correctly and the case rate is higher than the budget estimates, CFS will be faced with the extremely difficult decision of where else to cut money to meet the case load rise costs. Often this comes out of things like cutting diaper and clothing funds for foster care such that they can then meet budget targets. Why not increase the case load anticipated amount in the budget now so that CFS leadership don't have to make a decision like this?

I ask as you examine this budget that you consider how important children are to all of us and our future. Please work to find a way to support and strengthen this budget. Help us shift from a society in Montana that holds wildlife at a more important level than children. Help us be able to greet one another in the future with, "How are the children?"..."The children are well." Thank you.



Kimberly Gardner, LCSW, LAC
Manager of Intermountain School Based Mental Health Services
Intermountain
500 S. Lamborn
Helena, MT 59601
king@intermountain.org

Montana Code Annotated 2009

[Previous Section](#) [MCA Contents](#) [Part Contents](#) [Search](#) [Help](#) [Next Section](#)

17-7-161. Game warden positions exempt from vacancy savings -- report to audit committee.

(1) Vacancy savings may not be imposed on authorized game warden positions in the department.

(2) For purposes of this section:

(a) "authorized game warden positions" means those game warden positions included in the list of current authorized positions that the department is required to maintain under [2-18-206](#);

(b) "department" means the department of fish, wildlife, and parks established in [2-15-3401](#); and

(c) "vacancy savings" means the difference between the cost of fully funding authorized positions for an entire fiscal year and the actual cost of funding those authorized positions during that fiscal year.

(3) Each fiscal year, the department shall provide to the legislative audit committee provided for in [5-13-201](#) a detailed report on all authorized game warden positions in the department. At a minimum, the report must include the following information:

(a) the number of authorized game warden positions that were filled during the year and the average salary paid at hire;

(b) the total number of vacancies incurred during the year broken out by position title, the cause of each vacancy, and the length of time the authorized game warden position remained vacant;

(c) the total number of hours worked in authorized game warden positions during the year broken out by enforcement activity and position title.

History: En. Sec. 1, Ch. 519, L. 2007.

Provided by Montana Legislative Services