

Dear Committee Members of The Interim Budget Committee Section A of General Government

My name is Ruth Burke, I am the Executive Director of the nonprofit, District XI Human Resource Council. I have worked for District XI HRC for almost 30 years, most of my time as the senior financial officer. District XI operates the Region 9 Pathways program that helps TANF eligible customers in Ravalli County get off TANF through Personalized Case Management, Employment and Training Opportunities. District XI HRC also provides a wide range of services that braid in to help low-income customers to become more self-sufficient or to live in safe, affordable, housing in the three-county service delivery area of Mineral, Missoula, and Ravalli counties. And we have been assisting people to become more self-sufficient for 58 years. We have offices in each of Mineral, Missoula, and Ravalli Counties which allows our disadvantaged customers local access to services that impact their lives. We typically serve approximately 8,000 customers, annually.

On August 29, 2023, a meeting was called by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families state staff from the Department of Public Health and Human Services with a one day notice. In the email announcement and at the meeting we learned the Department of Health and Human Services intends to put out a request for proposal to provide Pathways services, limiting the potential respondents to non-local provider(s) that have the capacity to offer the combined TANF Pathways and SNAP Employment and Training programs, statewide. It is the Department's intention to award only one contract, statewide.

At first look, this might seem to be an efficiency improvement, to move from 12 local contractors to one statewide provider. But consider that the cost to the State wouldn't likely reduce. The State will still have to perform the same administrative and monitoring functions, for all the local areas, even though now under one contract. I am concerned that our customers that are coached to become self-sufficient, will no longer have a local option for quality services. I am concerned that the number of customers receiving a positive outcome will reduce given that the face-to-face services we provide today may discontinue. And I am concerned that the cost per outcome will increase given the possibility of out of state providers.

I understand the Behavioral Health Commission on Friday spoke to the need for local services. The Commission talked about how one size does not fit all and that quality services require local providers. Local providers understand the lay of the land, the necessary partnerships (especially with local employers, educational institutions, and others), and most importantly local providers understand how to get the work done in their particular community. I hardly agree with the State of Montana Behavioral Health Commission that a local service provider approach for services for disadvantaged persons is the gold star within service provision. The TANF Pathways Self-Sufficiency Providers tailor services to the local community and that's what makes us successful.

Please consider whether one single Statewide Provider for barriered and disadvantaged customers trying to work their way out of poverty, is the policy direction we in the great State of Montana want to pursue. I hope that providing a process whereby local expert providers can submit for provision of the services that they excel at, in their local community, would be a better policy direction.

Respectfully,

Ruth Burke
Executive Director

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