



2024

Evaluation & Learning Data Book

Last Updated: May 2025

OVERVIEW & PURPOSE OF EVALUATION

3

EVALUATION FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

5

- *Living Into our Values* 6
- *Achieving our Goals* 12

EVALUATION FOR LEARNING

13

- *Theory of Change Outcomes* 15
- *Increased Capacity and Leadership* 16
- *Service Availability* 18
- *Multi-Sector Collaboration* 19
- *Narrative Shift* 20
- *Underrepresented Voices Engage in Policy Advocacy* 21
- *Better Policy Environment* 22
- *Funding for Reducing Social and Economic Barriers to Health* 23
- *Trust Based Philanthropy* 25

TRACKING LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

26

In conventional philanthropy, funders define success and require grantees to prove that their work is meeting those goals – often through time-consuming reports, even when conditions on the ground have changed. The process can feel one-sided, with grantees held accountable to the foundation, and no guarantee their insights will be heard.

At Headwaters, we do things differently.

We believe the communities and partners doing the work should define what success looks like. That's why we've built a reporting process focused on shared learning. Our approach positions grantees as true partners and holds us accountable to the people we serve. **We evaluate for three key reasons:**

- 1) Accountability** – To ensure our actions align with our mission, our commitments, and the needs of our partners and communities.
- 2) Learning** – To reflect on our progress toward the outcomes in our Theory of Change, as defined by our partners, and to learn and adapt along the way.
- 3) Long-Term Trends** – To track broader shifts in population-level data and understand whether the strategies we support are contributing to lasting change.

Evaluation Purposes

How We Measure Impact

EVALUATION PURPOSES

Learning

Looking through the prism of learning offers a different view of evaluation. Rather than an accountability exercise, it becomes a powerful tool for improvement. Rather than a function “outside” an organization, evaluation is a part of every staff and board member’s job. It enhances the capacity of grantmakers and their grantees, as well as governments and communities, to understand and solve problems more effectively.

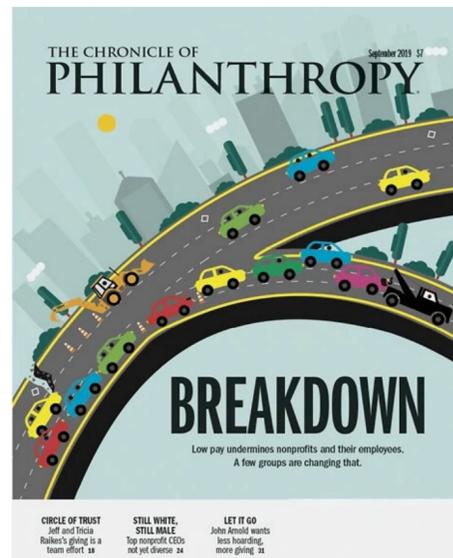
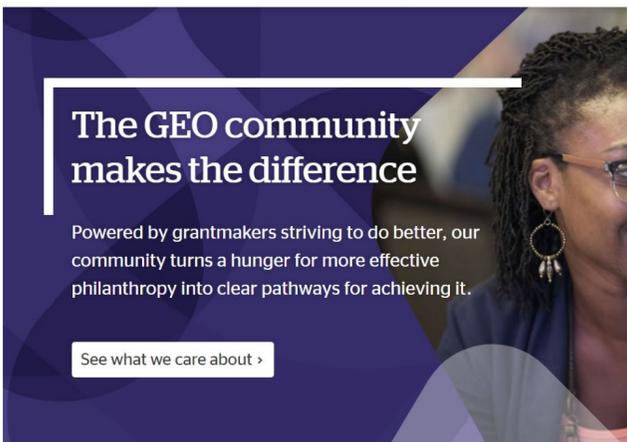
Accountability

When someone has a mission-based job, it is often harder to measure and hold them accountable. Evaluation standards should be based on specific goals, something measurable, attainable, and easily understood by both the employee and the manager.

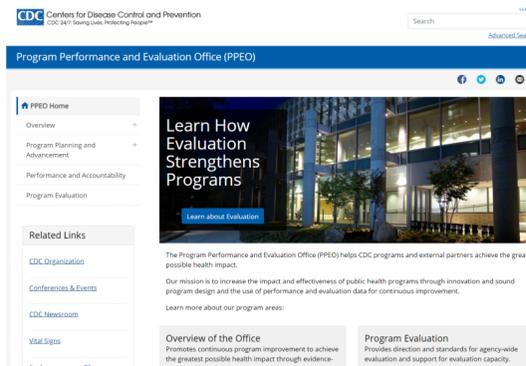
Long-Term Outcome Indicators

This data helps us measure whether the program is achieving expected effects/changes in the long-term. Some programs refer to their longest-term/most distal outcome indicators as impact indicators. Because outcome indicators measure the changes that occur over time, indicators should be measured at least at baseline (before the program/project begins) and at the end of the project. Long-term outcomes are often difficult to measure and attribute to a single program. However, that does not mean a program should not try to determine how they are contributing to the health impact of interest (e.g., decrease in morbidity related to a particular health issue).

“Evaluation in Philanthropy”; Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2010



“Performance Evaluations Can Help Workers Improve and Reach Their Goals”; The Chronicle of Philanthropy, April 22, 2004



From the CDC Program Performance and Evaluation Office

EVALUATION FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

This section captures data about our work and accountability measures.



LIVING OUR VALUES



Honor and build **community power**.

Elevate equity in a trust-based way.

Build trusting **relationships**.

Be **transparent** in all we do.

Be **accountable** to our communities.

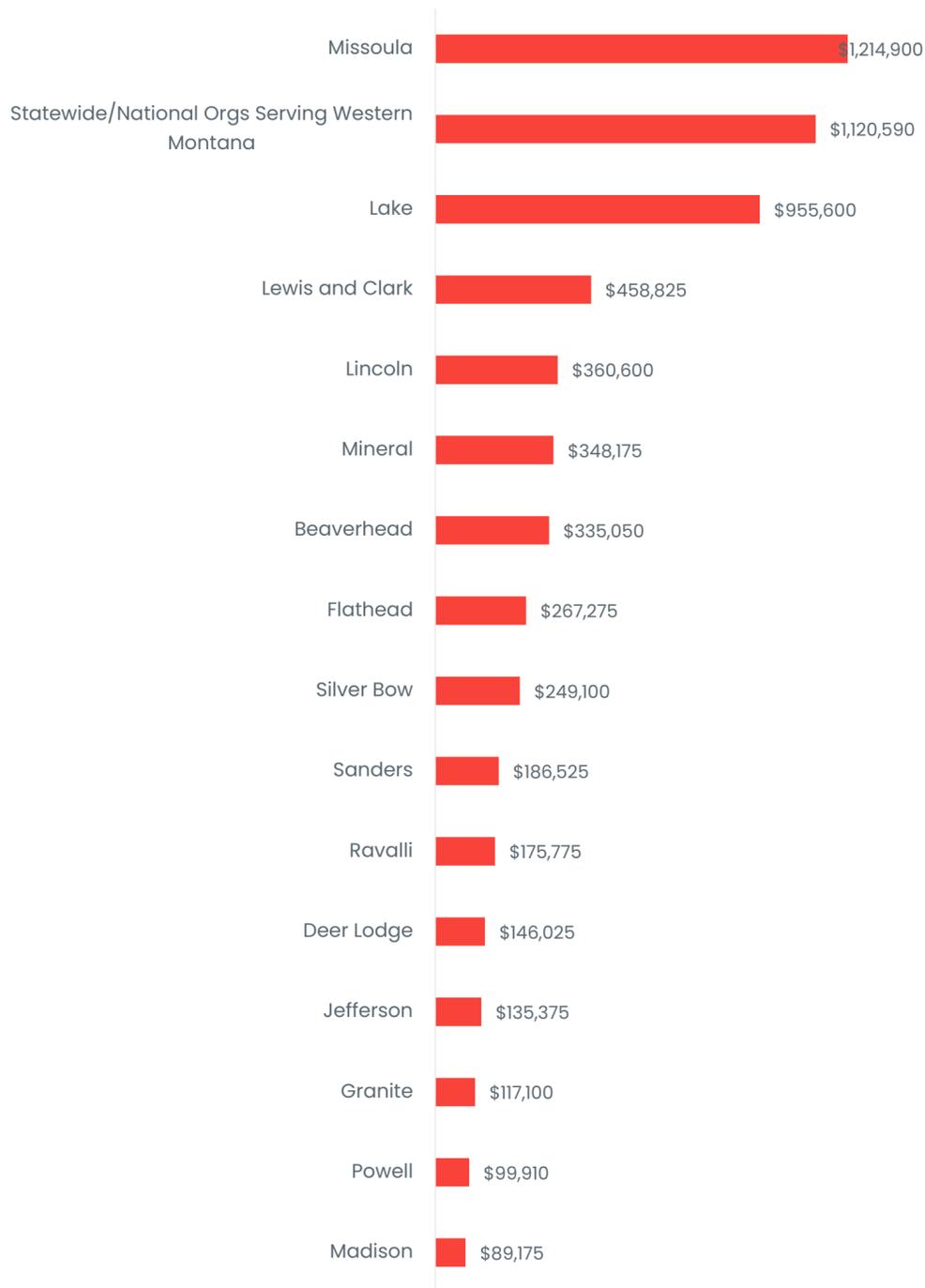
Honor Tribal **sovereignty**.

Learn as we go.

LIVING OUR VALUES

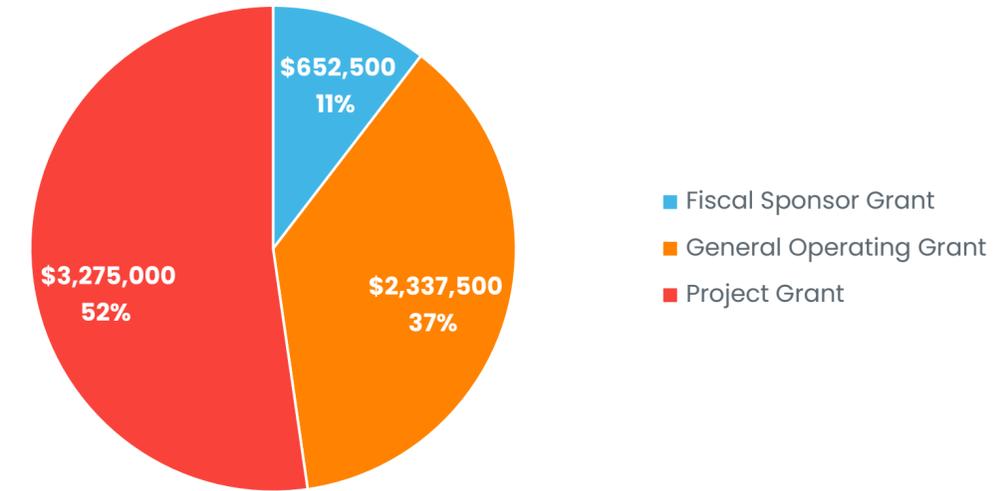
Aligned Value: Be Transparent in All We Do

COUNTIES SERVED BY ORGANIZATIONS FUNDED IN 2024

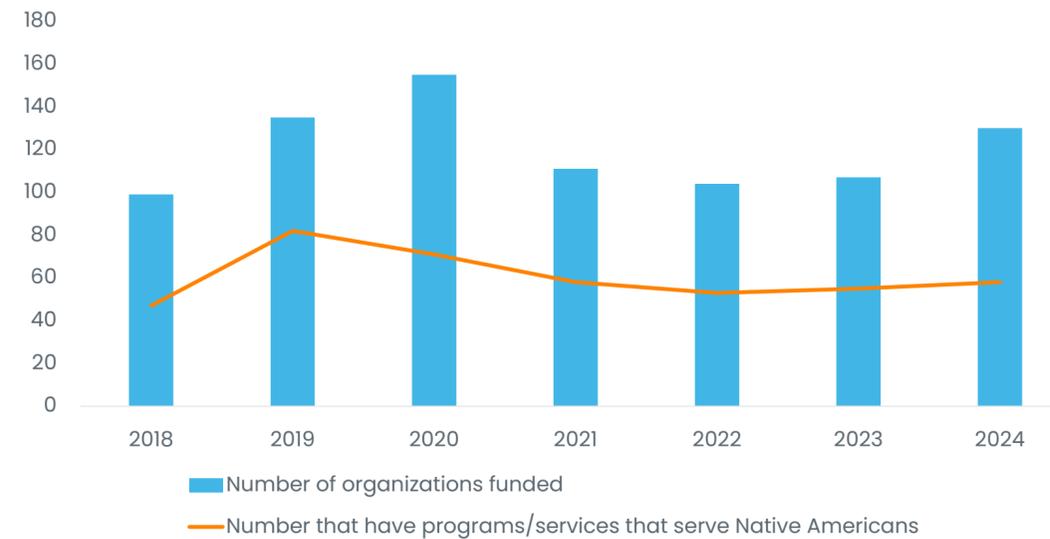


\$6,265,000
granted in 2024 (151 grants)
 *in 2024, 26 organizations received their first grant from Headwaters

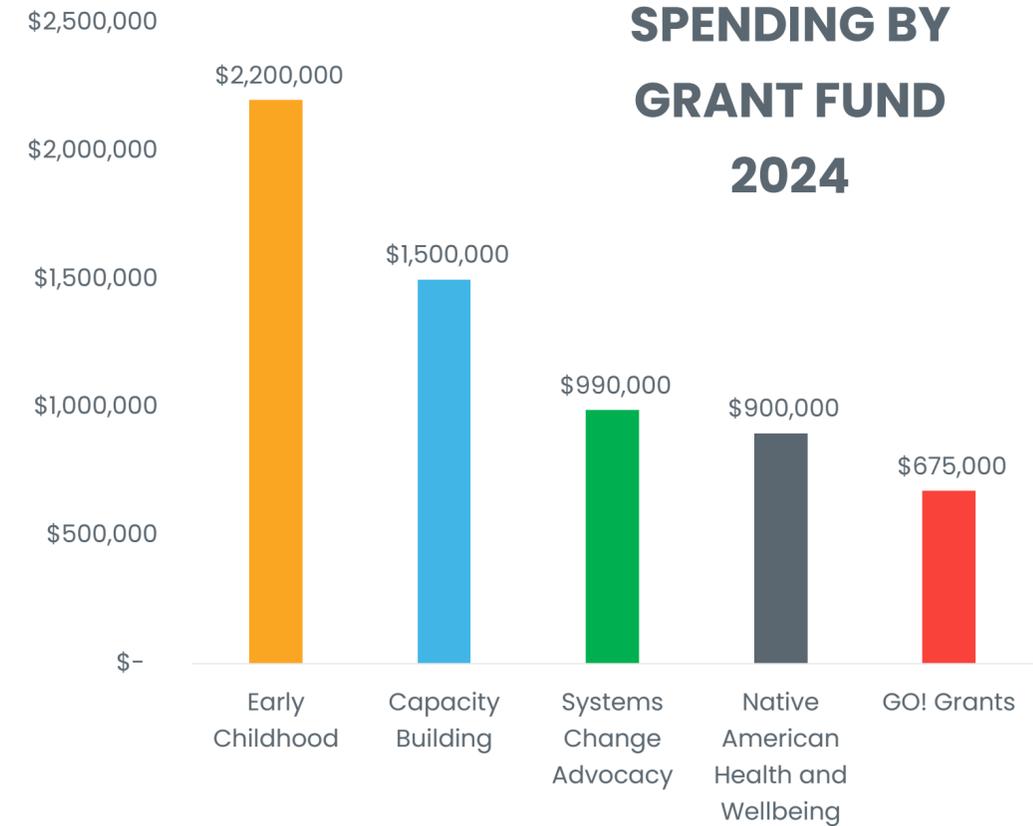
SPENDING BY GRANT TYPE 2024



NUMBER OF ORGANIZATIONS FUNDED



SPENDING BY GRANT FUND 2024



LIVING OUR VALUES

Aligned Value: Build Trusting Relationships

Soliciting and Acting on Feedback

As a trust-based funder and learning organization, feedback from our partners is essential. But we also recognize that power dynamics in philanthropy can make it hard for grantees to offer honest feedback. That's why **we take several approaches to listening and learning.**

After each grant is paid, we send **a short survey** asking grantees to reflect on their experience. The responses are overwhelmingly positive – see a few highlights from 2024 to the right.

To gain deeper insights, we also partnered with the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) in 2022 to conduct a **Grantee Perception Report (GPR)**. This anonymous, third-party survey compares our results with similar foundations, helping us see where we're doing well and where we can improve. You can read about the results [here](#). We plan to repeat the GPR every 3-5 years.

We also encourage grantees to use **tools like Grant Advisor** to anonymously review their funders at any time.

2024 Grantee Survey Responses

Elevate Equity in a Trust-Based Way

"Headwaters has been a huge support and asset empowering the American Indian and Alaska Native voice here in Missoula. Without these needed funds, we would not have the capacity to do the social justice work needed to have health equity and positive health outcomes."

-All Nations Health Center, October 2024

Honor and Build Community Power

"Headwaters is doing amazing work, and our little community has benefited in numerous ways big and small due to the generous grant opportunities provided. The set up of these funds allows agency and empowers communities to focus on areas of need and growth unique to them. Thank you for these wonderful opportunities to help Western Montana grow and bloom in beautiful ways!"

-Montana Congress of Parents, Teachers, and Students, September 2024

Build Trusting Relationships

"The ability to call on Ashley and get a speedy response for a one-off ask is so valuable. Montana will have data that we've never had before, to help us guide policy and resource investment to improve child and family outcomes."

-Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, December 2024

Learning As We Go

Grantees told us that reporting on gender and ethnicity data for the populations they serve was burdensome and often confusing. We listened. Starting in 2025, we will no longer ask for that data in our reporting. Instead, we're shifting to [Demographics via Candid](#) – a centralized platform where nonprofits can share demographic information about their staff, board, and leadership just once, and make it available to all funders. This change not only reduces duplication and saves time; it also supports greater consistency across the field. We're encouraging other funders to use Candid, too, so nonprofits can spend less time on paperwork and more time on their mission.

LIVING OUR VALUES

Aligned Values: Elevate Equity in a Trust-Based Way
Build Trusting Relationships

Confluence Center

We opened Confluence Center in early 2023 as a welcoming, accessible space for nonprofit leaders to connect and spark change in their communities. **Here's what we learned from its use in 2024 – and how it's helping power collaboration across Western Montana.**

In 2024...

- **470** events were hosted
- **118** nonprofit organization used the space; **78%** had never received a Headwaters grant
- **Over 9,000 attendees** came through the doors
- Events included board meetings, planning sessions, trainings, retreats, public presentations, fundraisers, and more.



Missoula-based nonprofit Ecology Project International gathered at Confluence Center for a staff holiday party.

"We are FOREVER GRATEFUL for this amazing space. We pinch ourselves every time we are able to use it and so grateful it is free. Thank you to all who make this accessible and open to non-profits. It is really a gift."

A scan of comparable Missoula venues found that nonprofits typically pay around \$50/hour to rent meeting space. In 2024, Confluence Center hosted 2100 hours of events – **saving nonprofits an estimated \$105,000 in rental fees.**

On average, each nonprofit booked the space four times for three-hour events, resulting in an estimated **\$600 in savings per organization.**

Lessons from our first two years:

As usage grew and feedback rolled in, **key takeaways** emerged:

- **Many nonprofits lack access to meeting space.** Some don't have office space, or they lack the tools to host effective gatherings. A consistent, reliable venue has led to many repeat users.
- **Affordable, accessible space matters.** Organizations need places to gather, learn, and connect without financial or logistical barriers.
- **Technology and accessibility features boost participation.** User-friendly tech and ADA-compliant amenities have made events more inclusive and efficient.
- **A simple reservation system makes a big difference.** Our streamlined booking system has driven high usage – each reservation includes a touchpoint with Headwaters staff, deepening relationships.
- **Clear guides improve the experience.** User manuals and short tutorial videos help guests navigate the space with ease and confidence.
- **There's demand beyond Missoula.** High usage has us wondering: how many other communities in Western Montana could benefit from a space like this?

Leading by Example

At Confluence Center, we aim to model the values we share with our partners by creating a space that is:

- **Low waste and sustainable** – We encourage the use of reusable and compostable wares and provide on-site recycling and compost options.
- **Inclusive and accessible** – The space features all-gender restrooms, clear walkways, and visible information about ADA-accessible features.
- **Collaborative** – We partner with local nonprofits, community groups, and small businesses to host public events and trainings.

LIVING OUR VALUES

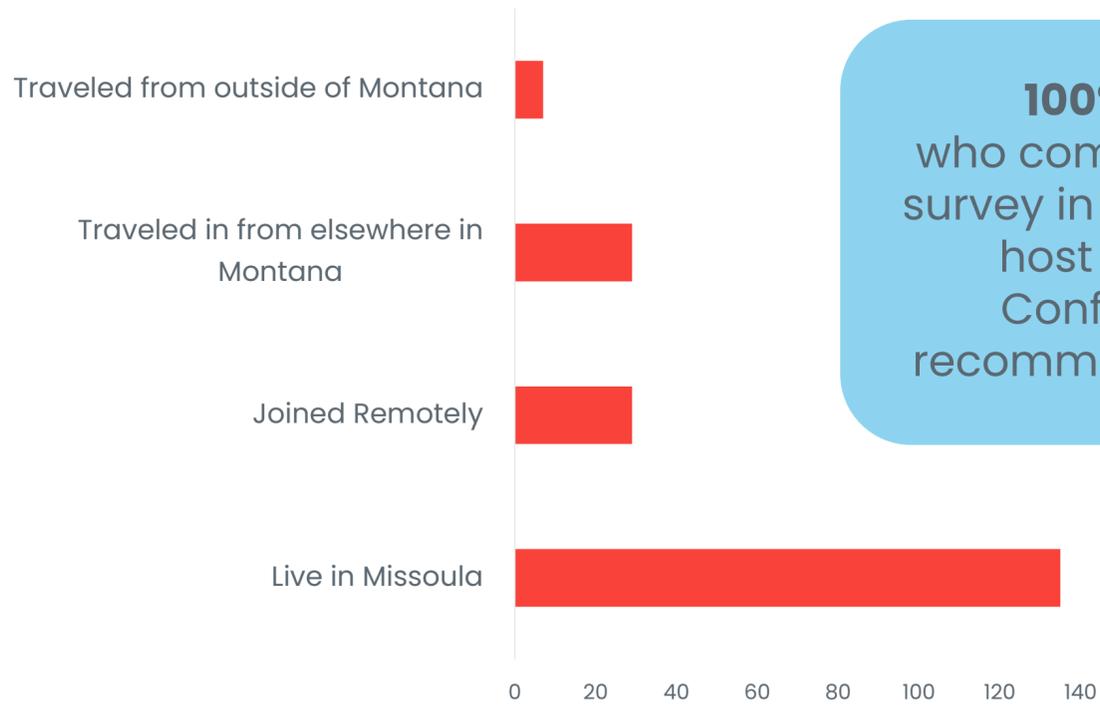
Aligned Value: Build Trusting Relationships

Confluence Center

These charts reflect self-reported data from event hosts, gathered through an optional post-event survey.

Who's Using the Space

Most of the groups using Confluence Center are **Missoula-based nonprofits**, but our built-in technology makes it easy for remote participants to join via Zoom – helping connect people across Western Montana.



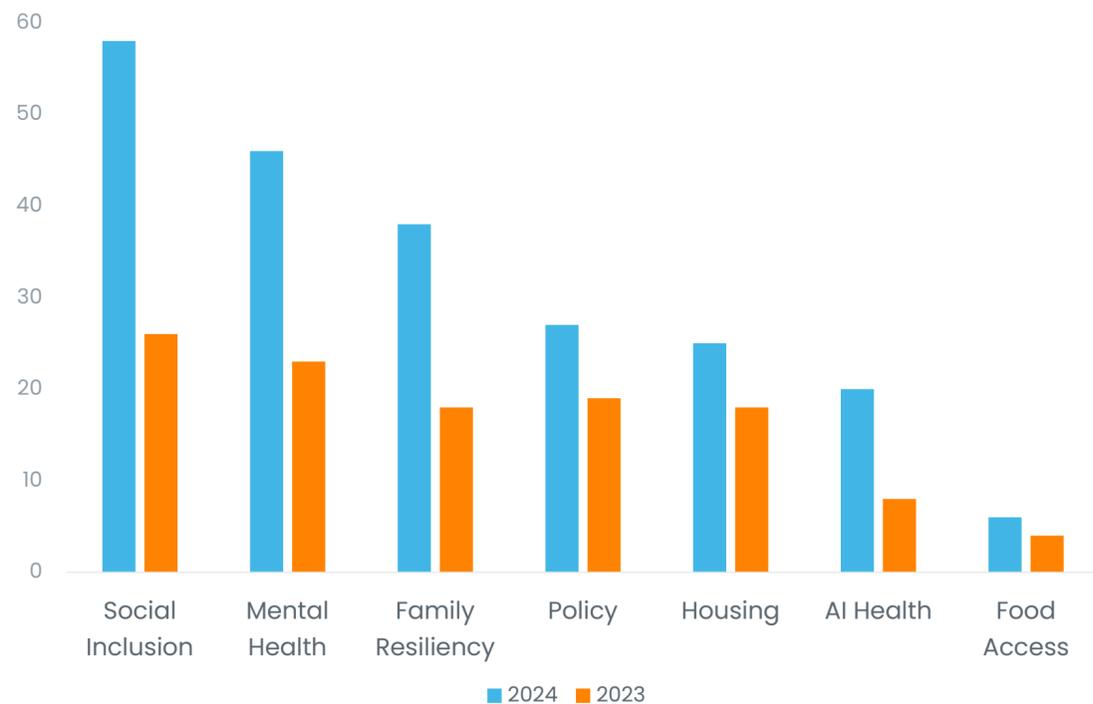
100% of (155) hosts who completed a post-event survey in 2024 said they would host another event at Confluence Center or recommend it to a colleague.



A speaker presents to a crowd in Confluence Center at "Change a Child's Story: A Night of Storytelling with CASA," a volunteer recruitment event.

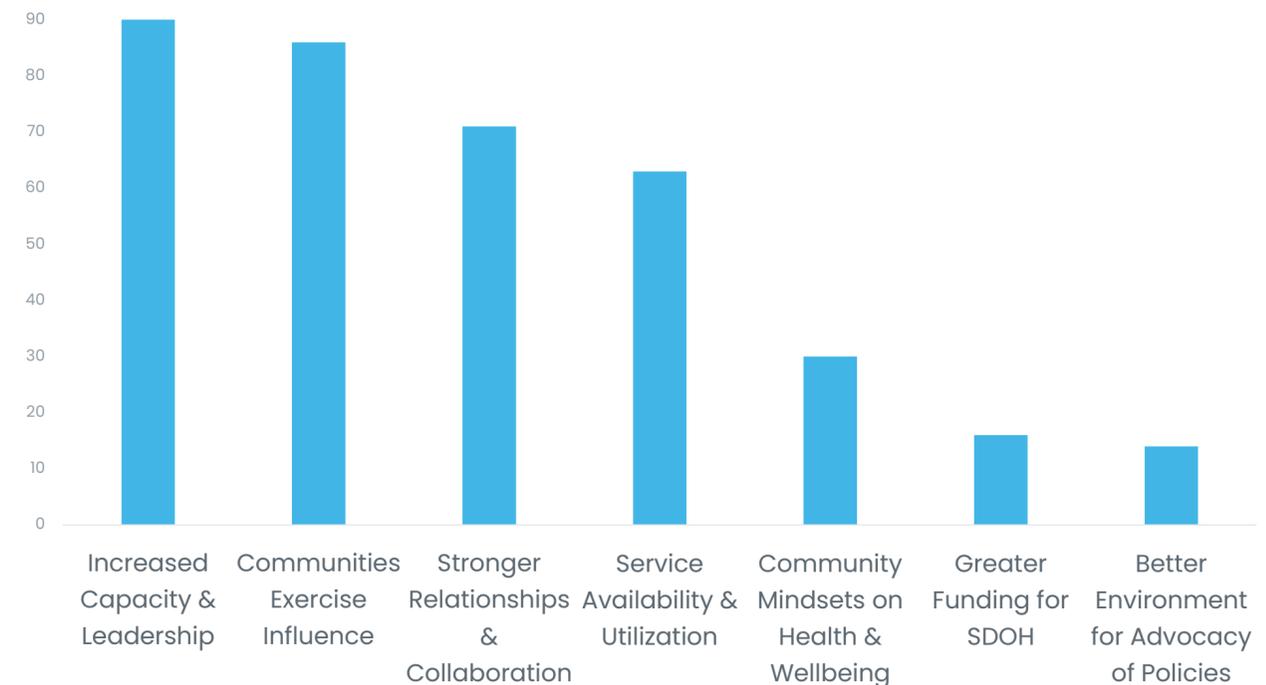
ISSUE AREAS

Groups used the space to support a **wide range of programmatic efforts** – many of which align with Headwaters' mission to improve the health of our communities.



OUTCOMES

Confluence Center supports the **outcomes outlined in our Theory of Change** by providing space for connection, collaboration, and learning.



LIVING OUR VALUES

Aligned Value: Be Accountable to Our Communities

2024 Beyond the Check Highlights

At Headwaters, we believe support should go beyond grant dollars. Here are a few ways we showed up beyond the check in 2024:

Tools Provided:

Headwaters coordinated and covered the cost of **video production** for several grantees, as well as **legal counsel** to help a grantee navigate fiscal sponsorship.

Articles and Podcasts:

Headwaters staff authored or were featured in **16 articles or podcasts**, including coverage of our *Supporting Our Neighbors* report on public assistance and a *Grantmakers in Health* feature on our early childhood initiative. Learn more [here](#).

Conference and Webinar Presentations:

Five staff members **presented at nine national and regional conferences and convenings**, including Philanthropy Northwest, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO), SmartSimple, Montana Nonprofit Association, Grantmakers in Health Equity Series, and funder networks in Maine and Australia

Funder Collaboration:

We participated in **statewide and national funder networks** to strengthen collective impact, including Funders for Thriving Communities (youth mental health focus), Funders for Montana's Children (early childhood focus) and Strengthening the Circle (Native American health focus).



43 partners joined our first **Grantee Input Session** to share their vision for health equity, offer feedback on our new strategic plan, and discuss how they'd like to engage with us going forward.



Housing advocates convened at **'Action Lab: Messaging for Impact'** to unpack the concept of narrative change and develop a more strategic approach to telling the stories that shape public understanding of housing issues.



At the **Philanthropy Northwest conference in Missoula**, our team and grantee partners shared how GO! Grants help nonprofits build trust in their communities, respond to changing needs, and better serve their neighbors.

ACHIEVING OUR GOALS

This section captures progress toward our 2024 goals.

Staff Goals & Organizational Learning

Each year, Headwaters staff collaboratively develop an **organizational goals dashboard** that outlines high-level priorities across key areas: grantmaking and technical assistance, collaboration and convening, Confluence Center, strategic communications and public influence, program, knowledge management and learning, internal culture, operations, finance and impact investing, and board engagement. These goals serve as the foundation for each team member's **annual deliverables dashboard**, which is used to track progress and guide performance reviews.

What We're Learning

The goals dashboard is a dynamic tool – and a work in progress. In 2024, we realized many of our organizational goals looked more like task lists than big-picture objectives. That insight helped us **step back and refocus on the broader outcomes** we're trying to achieve as a foundation.

One of our strengths has been **flexibility**: we've embraced the reality that goals may shift as context changes, and we're learning to prioritize adaptability while staying mission-aligned.

A Year of Transition

2024 was a year of change at Headwaters Foundation. Our first CEO announced her departure in March, and much of the year was shaped by leadership transition planning. In December, we proudly welcomed Carly Hare as our new CEO. We also grew our team, bringing on two new Resource Partners, and an Operations Associate to support Confluence Center.

2024 Highlights

- **Publicly announced our new strategic framework**, developed new grantmaking criteria, and updated our learning and evaluation framework
- **Launched a new staffing structure** to support our ten-year strategic framework
- **Introduced a staff respite protocol** to promote wellness and prevent burnout
- **Exceeded Confluence Center goals**, reaching over 75% occupancy and 80% event host satisfaction
- **Released a statewide [report on public assistance](#)**, caregivers, and families – earning significant media coverage
- **Held our first [grantee learning and input session](#)**, with 43 grantees from 17 communities
- **Awarded 18 equity-focused grants**, totaling \$435,000, to organizations advancing community-led solutions

EVALUATION FOR LEARNING

This section shared data and insights related to the seven outcomes in our Theory of Change. The findings are intended to guide future decisions – helping Headwaters' board, staff, and grantees reflect, adapt, and stay focused on what's making a difference.

The basis of our learning and evaluation framework is our **Theory of Change** (see page 13), which was shaped not by us, but by the voices of our grantee partners. An external consultant led the process, interviewing dozens of organizations across our program areas. Instead of starting with a funder-defined idea of success, they asked a different question: How do you measure success in your work, and what does success look like to you?

What we heard was both powerful and consistent. Many organizations are working to **shift deeply-held beliefs** in their communities about what shapes health – and who holds the power to improve it. They are intentionally **creating space for community members most affected by health disparities to lead in decisions that impact their lives**, whether it's a parent navigating the high cost of childcare or someone experiencing housing instability.

Grantees described the importance of **sharing research and stories that help policymakers** make informed decisions. They emphasized that **strong, meaningful relationships** – especially across sectors – are essential to long-term change. Many also spoke about the **challenge of visibility**: too often, people don't know that services exist until they're in crisis.

Another common theme was the urgent need for **more investment in prevention** – programs that address root causes before they become emergencies. Universally, organizations said their ability to achieve these outcomes depends on the strength of their own **leadership and capacity**. Investing in people, not just programs, is what moves the work forward.

This feedback shaped our Theory of Change – and it continues to shape how we learn, evaluate, and support our partners.

Community-Designed Theory of Change

How We Measure Impact

Headwaters Foundation Theory of Change

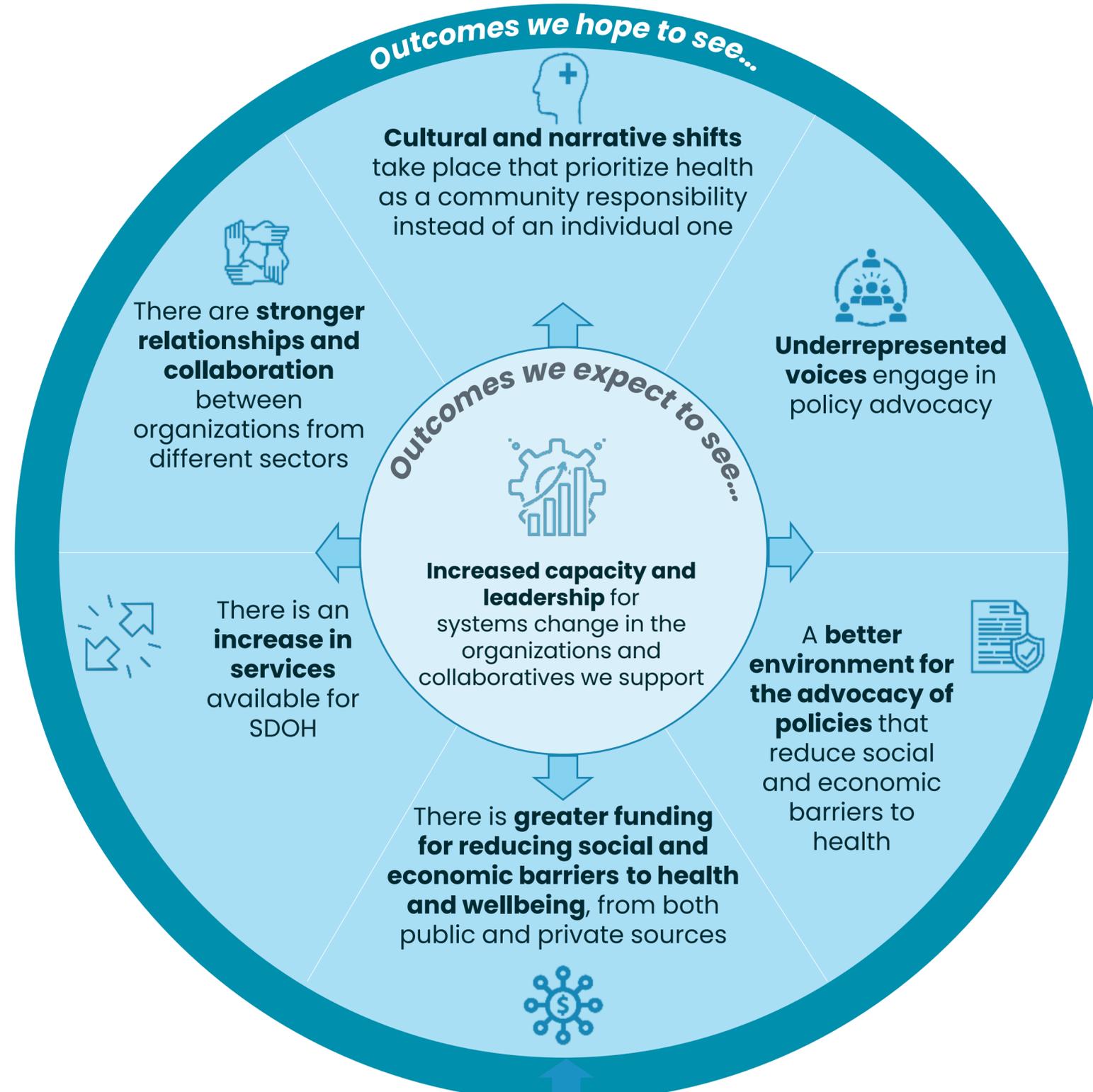
Our purpose

Why we do our work: Western Montanans face high social and economic barriers to health and wellbeing, particularly families living in poverty and American Indians.

How we do our work: Headwaters Foundation was born from community and believes in democratizing philanthropy. We strive to be humble, mindful, and accountable to the people of Western Montana. We believe community-driven efforts will create positive changes upstream in the lives of Western Montanans, reducing the social and economic barriers to their health and wellbeing.

Our strategies

Strategic Initiatives
Policy and Influence
GO! Grants
Sponsorship
Strategic Communications
Capacity Building
Philanthropic Engagement



Impacts to which we contribute

Reduced social and economic barriers to Western Montanans' health and wellbeing, particularly for families living in poverty and American Indians

An increase in **health equity in Western Montana** where all, especially communities who face high barriers to health and wellbeing, are **healthy and thriving**

Our work is built on a bedrock of trust-based philanthropy and partnerships



Increased capacity and leadership for systems change in the organizations and collaboratives we support.

- ❖ To what extent and in what ways is the **capacity and leadership of organizations and collaboratives** with whom we partner changing?
- ❖ How is our support contributing to changes in capacity and leadership and what types of support do they still need?

73 grants closed in 2024 demonstrated this outcome in their work.

Strong organizations are the glue that hold our Theory of Change together. In 2024, we invested **\$1,480,000** through our Capacity Building Fund to support nonprofit leaders and organizations across Western Montana. But capacity building isn't confined to a single fund – it's embedded in everything we do. Headwaters staff completed 80 grant reports across all funding streams where they observed meaningful growth in organizational capacity and leadership for systems change. These grants represented a combined \$13,035,000 in funding.

What We're Seeing: Staffing & Capacity Themes

- In 2024, many organizations continued **rebuilding from the pandemic and expanding their capacity and reach**. We saw grantees grow their boards – often adding members with lived experience – launch new programs, broaden staff skill sets, and bring in support through Americorps VISTA roles.
- Staffing is central to an organization's long-term success. Some groups **restructured or added roles** to ensure key areas like grant writing, communications, and community engagement were adequately staffed. We also saw **intentional hiring of individuals with personal experience of the issues at hand**, such as parenting, housing instability, or food insecurity.
- **Staff retention** came up frequently as a critical factor for building community trust and sustaining relationships. While many organizations added new hires, we also noticed **a trend toward part-time or contract roles**. This could reflect funding instability or a preference for short-term, project-specific staffing – something we aim to explore more deeply with our partners going forward.

Capacity Expansion in the Field

Many grantees are **going beyond strengthening their own organizations** – they're building capacity across their entire fields. Local leadership is growing stronger, and that momentum is creating ripple effects across the state.

- In Lincoln County, local leaders are **training both community members and professionals statewide**.
- Local news organizations are **sharing tools and resources to strengthen community journalism** throughout Montana.
- One pilot Community School Initiative has grown into **a model that's now spreading** to other school districts.
- Grantees are deepening their impact in Native communities by **co-creating messaging strategies** with Tribal partners that better reflect and support community needs. At the same time, **training in secondary trauma** is equipping organizations to care for their staff and provide more responsive support to Native community members.

Capacity-Building Partners

Organizations – especially local Zero to Five collaboratives – are strengthening their internal capacity by working with trusted support providers. Two of these partners, funded by Headwaters for this purpose, are playing an important role:

- **Montana Nonprofit Association (MNA)** is helping nonprofits navigate leadership transitions by developing a toolkit that captures lessons from their own recent experience. They are also expanding their Rural Community Ambassador Program to reach more nonprofits in Montana's rural communities.
- **The University of Montana Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development** continues to provide targeted capacity-building support to our grantee partners. This includes skill-building in marketing, grant writing, strategic planning, and organizational development.

As we look to the future, we see **opportunities to connect more of our partners** – especially those working in silos – for shared learning and collective growth, with the help of capacity-building leaders like MNA and The Center.

INCREASED CAPACITY & LEADERSHIP FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE



Increased capacity and leadership for systems change in the organizations and collaboratives we support.

- ❖ To what extent and in what ways is the **capacity and leadership of organizations and collaboratives** with whom we partner changing?
- ❖ How is our support contributing to changes in capacity and leadership and what types of support do they still need?

Organizations are facing capacity struggles including staffing and leadership transitions, state budget and contract shifts, and a need for volunteers. Our GO! Grantee partners—smaller, rural organizations—especially **need board members and volunteers.**

Continued investment in leadership pathways for youth and emerging leaders, including training and mentorship, would help sustain long-term growth.

Coalitions face unique challenges:

- Need for long-term coordination to track policy implementation, build institutional knowledge, and sustain grassroots relationships
- Need for stable, supported anchor organizations

As fiscally sponsored groups become 501c3s, they often need:

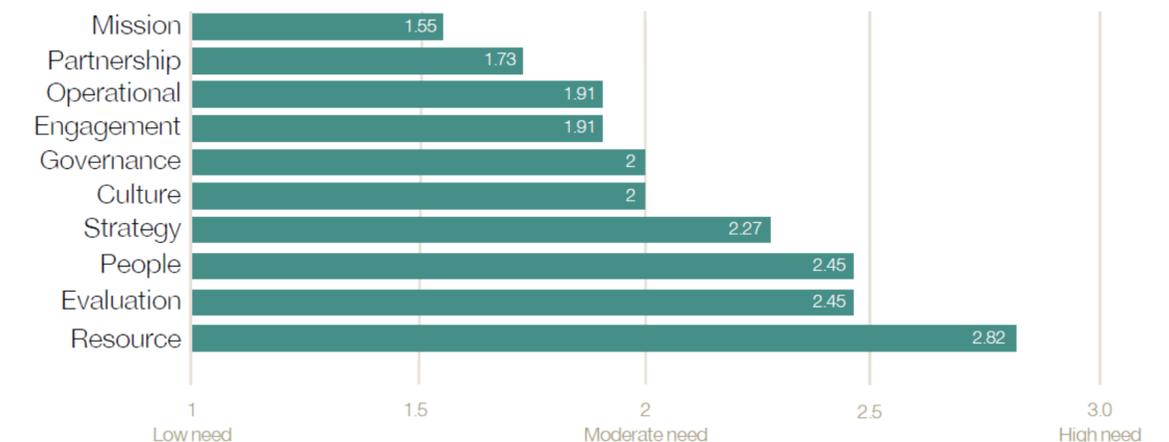
- Board recruitment and development support
- Guidance on nonprofit operations
- Financial planning and sustainability strategies

Data from the Field

[A 2024 survey of 185 Montana nonprofit leaders conducted by Montana Nonprofit Association](#) found:

- Mission and culture are nonprofits' greatest strengths
- Diverse and adequate funding remains a significant need
- Leadership development and succession planning are key capacity needs – along with recruiting, training, and engaging volunteers
- Other major needs include impact evaluation, community mobilization, and multi-sector collaboration
- Small, early stage, and culturally-specific nonprofits reported the greatest capacity needs
- Nonprofits that engaged with programs and services from state associations reported higher overall capacity

Need for capacity building, as reported to Montana Nonprofit Association, 2024



SERVICE AVAILABILITY



There is an increase in services available for social determinants of health.

- ❖ To what extent and in what ways are organizations **offering new or different services** to benefit their communities?
- ❖ To what extent are these services **reaching those who need them most?**

80 grants closed in 2024 demonstrated this outcome in their work.

We've seen that **in rural communities like Beaverhead County, programs often need to be built from the ground up** before there's enough visibility and engagement to support broader systems change efforts.

Organizations are rising to meet their communities' needs – often in creative ways, especially in rural areas. This includes:

- Using a **mobile van** to build community connections and increase awareness of services
- Expanding access through **virtual trainings**
- Adding **in-community support roles**
- Mailing a **mental health magazine** to key legislators, policy experts and advocates
- Creating **Family Liaison positions** to connect with parents of young children
- Implementing **wrap-around supports** to address families' needs more holistically

Organizations are also **expanding their reach through collaboration, co-location and expansion.** For example:

- Montana Land to Hand, a Columbia Falls-based GO! Grantee, **shares space** with food access and development partners, making it easier for families to get **multiple services in one place,** and **reducing administrative costs.**
- Center for Restorative Youth Justice, another GO! Grantee, is **expanding from Flathead to Missoula County** to meet growing demand for their work.

When it comes to services, **culturally-grounded and community-led approaches are essential,** with peer support models proving particularly effective in some cases.

Demand often exceeds capacity, especially in under-resourced areas – leading to burnout and staff turnover. When organizations can expand services, communities tend to use them readily. But as temporary American Rescue Plan Act (**ARPA**) **funds phase out,** many organizations will face tough choices about how to sustain or scale back their programs, which could have real consequences for the people who rely on them.



There is stronger collaboration between organizations from different sectors.

- ❖ How are communities **coming together** to address social and economic barriers to health and wellbeing?
- ❖ To what extent are communities **aligned** on the problem they are working to address and the strategies to address the challenge? What facilitated their development? Where are there still tensions?

62 grants closed in 2024 demonstrated this outcome in their work.

Across Montana, communities are **increasingly coming together** around priorities like childcare or healthcare. When families are supported in meeting their basic needs, we often see a ripple effect: individuals feel more connected, more trusted – and more willing to step into leadership roles. Similarly, working together on smaller, tangible goals often serves as a catalyst for addressing larger systemic challenges.

Trust and collaboration are foundational. Stronger relationships between researchers, service providers, and government entities – such as Tribal governments, child protection agencies, and legislative partners – help streamline efforts and create new pathways for information-sharing and advocacy while building allies within key government entities. Coalitions are seeing success when they include diverse and influential stakeholders, such as private health insurers, in collaborative efforts like protecting Medicaid. These partnerships draw on each participant’s strengths – **combining knowledge, resources, and networks to achieve far more than any one group can alone.**

Communities are also investing in intentional coordination. This can take the work of coordinator positions, advisory groups, initiatives, or formal networks designed to prioritize and sustain collaborative work. To keep coalitions strong even through staff turnover, some organizations have begun embedding participation directly into job descriptions.

Expanding leadership opportunities – especially for youth and caregivers from diverse backgrounds – has opened the door to broader collaboration, deeper participation, and more inclusive decision-making.

One **cross-sector partnership** found meaningful overlap between early childhood and elder care, developing **intergenerational solutions** that meet the needs of both age groups in a community with an aging population.

While many coalitions are gaining momentum, **limited funding and capacity can be a barrier to engagement** – especially for local coalitions operating on very small budgets (as low as \$5,000) and staffed by volunteers or part-time positions. These groups often struggle to participate in statewide collaborations due to time and resource constraints. In contrast, coalitions with dedicated staff and stable funding tend to have more capacity to engage in consistent, impactful collaboration – both regionally and statewide.

NARRATIVE SHIFT



Cultural and narrative shifts take place that prioritize health as a community responsibility instead of an individual one.

- ❖ How are **mindsets changing** about how social and economic factors contribute to health and wellbeing?
- ❖ How are our **strategic communications** and complementary activities contributing to this change?

42 grants closed in 2024 demonstrated this outcome in their work.

Momentum is building around narrative change in Montana – but there’s still work to do, especially around how we talk about houselessness, poverty, and systems-level issues. Harmful myths persist, and grantee partners are working to replace them with community-centered stories rooted in dignity and shared responsibility. **In 2024, we saw positive shifts:**

- Early childhood partners are **shifting the conversation from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) toward Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs)** – focusing on proactive, strengths-based support for kids and families. A key part of this is elevating the role of childcare providers and ensuring stronger support for the early childhood system.
- Zero to Five Montana traveled across the state, gathering community input on early childhood needs. Their engagement raised awareness, brought more voices to the table, and reinforced that **people are increasingly seeing childcare as not just a family issue, but a community and economic issue.** Because of this, more business leaders are stepping up to help solve this problem, recognizing that access to childcare directly impacts workforce stability and economic growth.
- Creative efforts like the *State of Mind* theater tour **sparked honest, stigma-breaking conversations about mental health** in communities across the state.

Headwaters’ Narrative Work

- **We released *Supporting Our Neighbors: Understanding Who Uses Public Assistance in Montana, for How Long, and Why*** – a report debunking myths about public assistance. The release was covered by five state outlets, and has since been cited in additional news stories, and by nonprofit leaders on social media and in local op-eds. We hope it will continue to shape the public conversation on these essential programs.
- **We worked to shift narratives about Montana’s housing crisis and proposed solutions** by funding and co-releasing a **mini-documentary** with a grant partner about their cooperative housing model – an innovative response to Montana’s housing crisis – and convening housing advocates for an **'Action Lab,'** a day-long deep dive into narrative change strategies.

UNDERREPRESENTED VOICES ENGAGE IN POLICY ADVOCACY



Underrepresented voices engage in policy advocacy.

- ❖ To what extent and in what ways do our efforts and those of our partners **involve the people we want to serve** (i.e., families living in poverty, parents, American Indians)?
- ❖ How is the leadership landscape changing in Montana as a result of these efforts?
- ❖ How are these efforts contributing to shifts in policy or narrative change at the local, state, or national levels?

26 grants closed in 2024 demonstrated this outcome in their work.

Headwaters grantee partners are **working hard to be in community with the people they serve** – listening closely to understand the barriers they face, the solutions they envision, and how to support progress toward those goals. When historically underrepresented voices are invited to lead, they help shift who holds power in decision-making spaces. And when that happens, the outcome begins to sustain itself.

At its core, this work is about inclusion, engagement, and listening. Organizations are using a variety of approaches to engage underrepresented voices, including:

- Youth serving as **board members**
- A **youth leadership program** where youth design and implement school and community projects, giving them a path to advocate to school leadership
- A Native **youth civic engagement program** that blends standard approaches (like voter registration in high schools) with creative methods, such as theater and popular guest speakers
- A **Native youth legislative training** that included a mock committee meeting using real bills, followed by formal recognition in the Montana legislative chambers (due to their relationship with the Native American Caucus)
- An **Early Childhood Tribal Coalition** focused on improving early childhood systems in reservation communities
- A **theater-based public dialogue campaign** touring rural communities to spark conversations about social and emotional health
- Programs and **trainings that empower parents to become advocates** and leaders
- A **Community Health Needs Assessment** that included early childhood-focused questions
- **Engaging unions**, including organizing among renters and unhoused individuals

This outcome also connects closely with **Multi-Sector Collaboration**. Many partners are coming together – through consortiums, advisory groups, and shared strategies – to center community voice across sectors.

As a result of the efforts listed above, we are seeing **more lived experts testifying or contacting legislators**. We are seeing **students engage with school administration** and **parents lead community meetings and advocacy work**. While 2024 was not a legislative year in Montana, we are eager to see how this momentum contributes to policy and narrative change in 2025 and beyond.

Still, **challenges remain** – especially in rural areas, where **geographic isolation can prevent participation**. To reduce barriers, grant partners are offering **stipends to lived experts, providing travel reimbursement and food**, hosting **events outside typical office hours**, choosing **accessible locations**, and **covering childcare costs**. These efforts are ensuring that more people can show up, be heard, and help shape the future of their communities.

BETTER POLICY ADVOCACY ENVIRONMENT



A better environment for the advocacy of policies that reduce social and economic barriers to health.

- ❖ What does the **health policy environment** look like in Western Montana and how is it changing?
- ❖ How can the Foundation **adapt support offered** to partners to help them operate more effectively in this environment?
- ❖ What strategies deployed by communities / partners have been effective in **mobilizing** Western Montanans to get involved in policy advocacy?

21 grants
closed in 2024
demonstrated
this outcome in
their work.

Quantitative and qualitative **research** – along with thoughtful **storytelling** – continue to play a critical role in shaping health policy in Western Montana. Organizations are using **creativity and collaboration** to strengthen how these tools are used and shared.

- **Data on social determinants of health**, especially related to Native American communities, is helping both nonprofits and government agencies plan, improve services, and report impact.
- For advocacy and service providers without in-house research teams, **access to reliable external data is essential**.
- Headwaters supported **polling to understand how Montanans felt about access to health care through Medicaid**. It was used by organizations to effectively advocate for maintaining this lifeline for Montanans in the 2025 legislative session.
- **Health policy journalism** is influencing policy conversations and raising awareness on under-discussed issues.
- Advocates are seeing more success when **pairing personal stories with data**, creating more compelling communications and policy proposals.

Organizations are mobilizing Western Montanans to engage in policy advocacy by **collaborating, sharing information, and building strong relationships**. Their efforts are supported by:

- Clear, consistent **nonprofit communications** that support collective advocacy and help create an ecosystem where positive change can happen
- **Staff capacity to collaborate** across organizations on shared goals, and **space to strengthen relationships** among advocacy groups
- Stronger **community engagement** through two-way information flow – nonprofits learn from lived experts, and communities gain the tools to engage in policy work

To strengthen this work, Headwaters can:

- **Support research efforts** that inform strong practices and policies, and connect data to implementation and systems improvements – such as our [Supporting Our Neighbors](#) report
- **Encourage collaboration and relationship-building** between researchers, reporters, and advocates to build an ecosystem for long-term policy impact



There is greater funding for reducing social and economic barriers to health and wellbeing, from both public and private sources.

- ❖ How is **public and private funding** for health and wellbeing – in particular, for reducing social and economic barriers – changing in Western Montana?
- ❖ How are we helping to **make connections** for our partners and bring in additional funding for these issues?

In 2023–24, organizations found **creative and effective ways to access public funding**. These successes are worth celebrating – but they came amid a challenging backdrop. State government continued a trend of awarding contracts to out-of-state entities, causing some local organizations to lose funding and, in some cases, close their doors. While public funding remains a crucial resource, it is increasingly marked by **instability and inconsistency**.

Some organizations secured **mission-aligned contracts and grants** from state agencies, often with the help of technical assistance or partnerships that increased access and payment rates.

Advocacy efforts also led to some tangible wins:

- State legislation injecting **\$14 million into childcare access**
- **Redirecting state grants** to local initiatives
- **Local government** funding support and **in-kind contributions**

Organizations continue to face challenges, such as **reimbursement delays** under state contracts that make it difficult to pay staff and maintain operations, and **administrative burdens** straining already limited capacity.

Organizations are leaning into **collaboration, capacity building, and technical assistance** to access additional funding.

- One organization launched a **webpage to share grant opportunities** and partnered with Headwaters to provide grant writing training.
- Hiring or accessing a **grant writer** has helped many organizations secure larger awards or mentor others.
- Growing **visibility at the community and state level** increases access to both funding and in-kind support.
- Organizations are accessing funding from affiliated **national organizations** and forming advocacy partnerships with national organizations in pursuit of greater federal funding.
- Headwaters grants are often used to **match or leverage other funding**, and to collaborate with other organizations to seek larger funding amounts.
- In some cases, **Headwaters funding helped catalyze local government investment** – and in one instance, inspired other communities to explore replicating a successful model.

Special Note:

While this learning book reflects our work in 2024, **it's important to acknowledge the evolving context in 2025**. The creation of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) by the Trump Administration is already having significant impacts on federal funding streams. This shift has introduced deep uncertainty around the sustainability of public funding, which could have far-reaching effects on the communities and organizations we support.

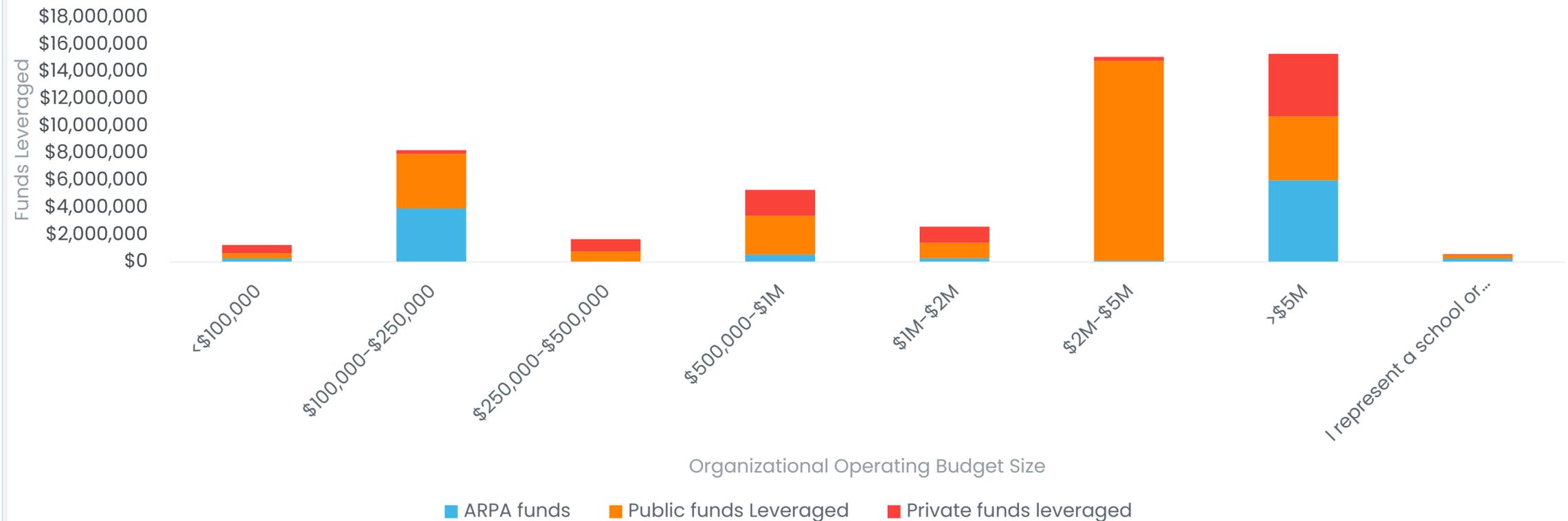
FUNDING FOR REDUCING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS TO HEALTH AND WELLBEING



There is greater funding for reducing social and economic barriers to health and wellbeing, from both public and private sources.

- ❖ How is **public and private funding** for health and wellbeing – in particular, for reducing social and economic barriers – changing in Western Montana?
- ❖ How are we helping to **make connections** for our partners and bring in additional funding for these issues?

Below is a summary of funds leveraged by grantees for completed reports in 2022, 2023, and 2024 – representing 306 grants. While deeper analysis is needed, data suggests that among our grantees, ARPA funds were awarded to either large organizations with budgets of over \$5 million, or small, rural GO! Grantees with budgets between \$100,000 and \$250,000.

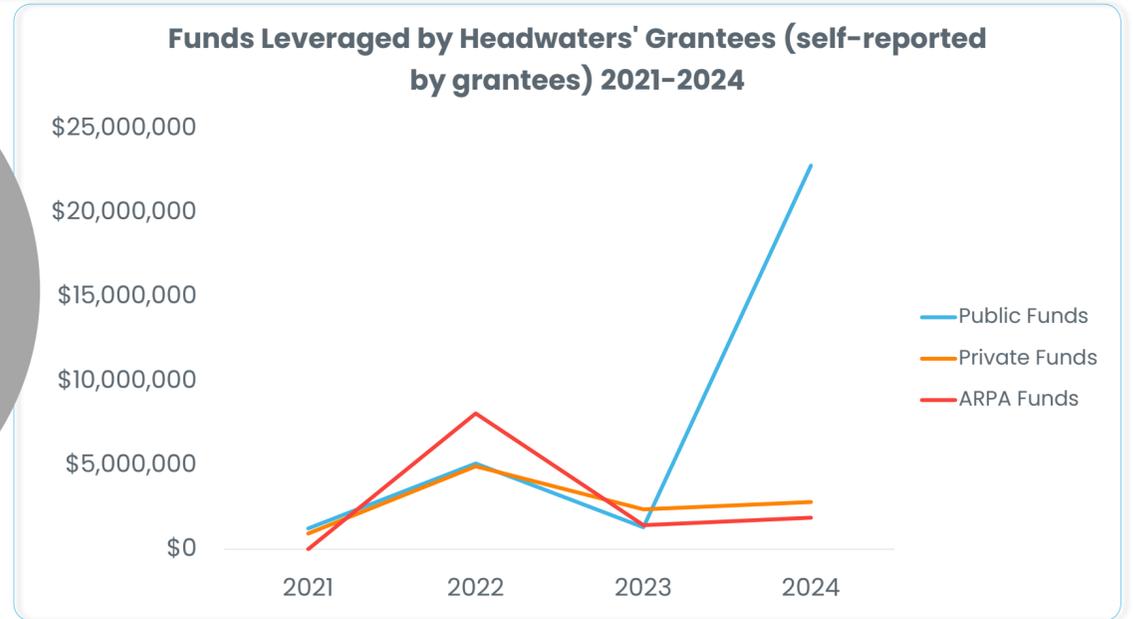


75 grants closed in 2024 demonstrated this outcome in their work.

Our grantees leveraged **\$2,883,055** in **private funds** from our grants in 2024.

Our grantees leveraged **\$17,875,490** in **public funds** from our grants in 2024.

Our grantees leveraged **\$956,131** in **American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds** from our grants in 2024.





Increased trusting, candid relationships among those working to create health equity in Western Montana.

- ❖ To what extent and in what ways are we developing **trust-based relationships** with our partners that support thought partnership and our partners' independence and learning? How are we being responsive to different partners' needs? What could we do differently?
- ❖ To what extent and in what ways is the **landscape of philanthropy changing nationally and within Montana** to be more trust-based? How is this approach changing the nature of relationships between organizations working together on health equity/SDOH in Montana?

Grantees continue to value Headwaters' flexibility and responsiveness. As we move into our next 10-year strategic framework, staff are working intentionally to develop processes that uphold trust-based practices – **centering relationships, transparency, and responsiveness** in every aspect of our work.

Relationship-building through conversation will remain our core approach. We prioritize timely, honest feedback, and create space for shifts in direction as partners adapt to evolving needs. Grantees appreciate when we initiate meetings and do the logistical legwork. They also value **conversation-based reporting**, which allows for deeper dialogue, reflection, and real-time problem-solving.

We also recognize that **trust-based practices are spreading**. Grantees are applying these same principles – trusting community wisdom, building open relationships with partners and staff, and seeking and acting on feedback.

Being aware of context matters. For example, advocacy partners noted that our **low-touch approach during election years** and legislative sessions was both respectful and helpful, allowing them to fully focus on their work without added demands.

At its best, this work is a **two-way relationship** – we connect grantees with additional funding opportunities, offer support beyond the check, and remain responsive to what's needed on the ground.

46 grants
closed in 2024
demonstrated this
outcome in
their work.



We awarded a grant to **MAPS Media Institute** to produce a mini-documentary highlighting the impact of trust-based philanthropy on our grantee partners. **It will serve as a tool for Headwaters to elevate the benefits of trust-based philanthropy in Montana – and beyond.** Each featured organization also received a video tailored to their work.

TRACKING LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

This section captures data on population health in Montana, helping us better understand long-term trends. Over time, our goal is to contribute to measurable improvements in these areas through the work we support.

Like a check engine light, long-term indicators don't tell us exactly *why* something is happening – but they signal where we should look more closely. They prompt us to ask deeper questions, explore root causes, and identify systemic challenges and opportunities.

Headwaters tracks long-term indicators to stay attuned to systems-level change. Unlike accountability or learning measures, these indicators reflect broad, complex systems shaped by many forces beyond any single organization or program. They take time to shift – and once they do, they require ongoing care to maintain.

No single data point can capture the full picture. That's why **we look at a range of interconnected indicators** that offer a high-level view of system functioning and help guide deeper inquiry.

We also approach data with humility. Numbers don't lie, but the way data is collected, interpreted, and reported reflects human decisions – and potential bias. As a foundation that relies on external data and analysis, we strive to be **mindful consumers**: asking who collected the data, how it was gathered, what was left out, and what questions were never asked.

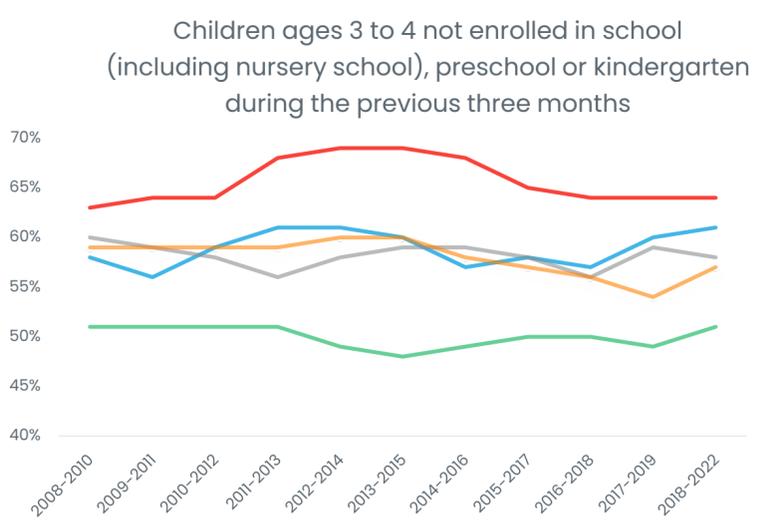
Measuring Progress

How We Use Long-Term
Health Data

LONG TERM INDICATORS

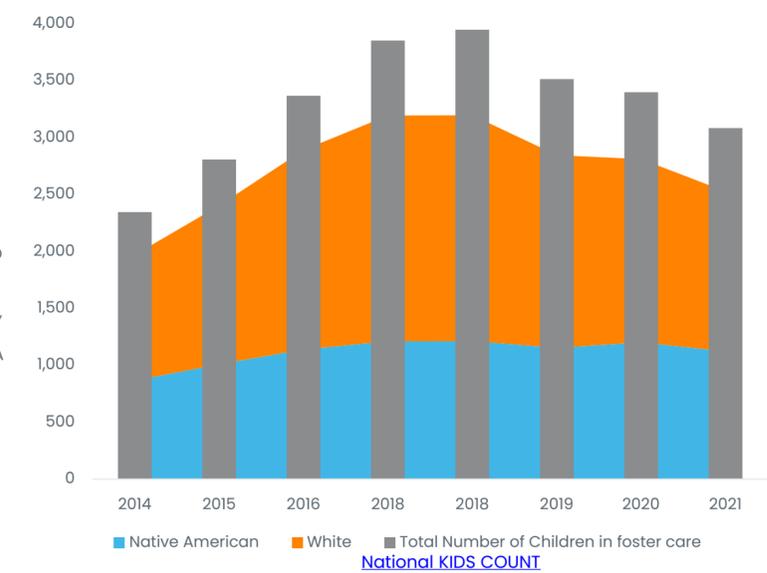
We envision a Western Montana where children and families are healthy and strong, communities are thriving, and the voices of those most impacted by inequity are heard as they actively engage in shaping solutions for their communities.

FAMILY RESILIENCY & EARLY CHILDHOOD



<https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/9010-young-children-not-in-school?loc=28&loc=2#detailed/2/28/false/1757,1687,1652,1564,1491,1443,1218,1049,995,932/any/17975,17976>

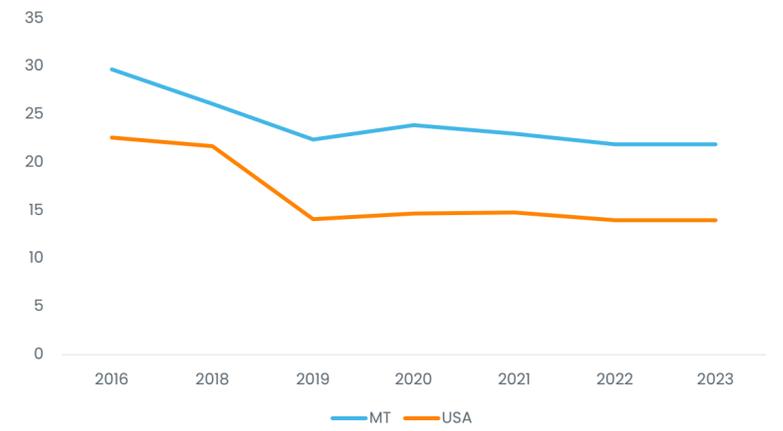
Number of Children in Foster Care by Race in Montana



National KIDS COUNT

Montana ranks at the bottom (48/50) for adverse childhood experiences by state, followed by Wyoming and New Mexico.

% of children experiencing 2 or more ACEs



<https://www.americashealthrankings.org/>

HOUSING SECURITY IN MONTANA

28,830
OR
20%
Renter households that are extremely low income

-16,629
Shortage of rental homes affordable and available for extremely low income renters

\$27,810
Average income limit for 4-person extremely low income household

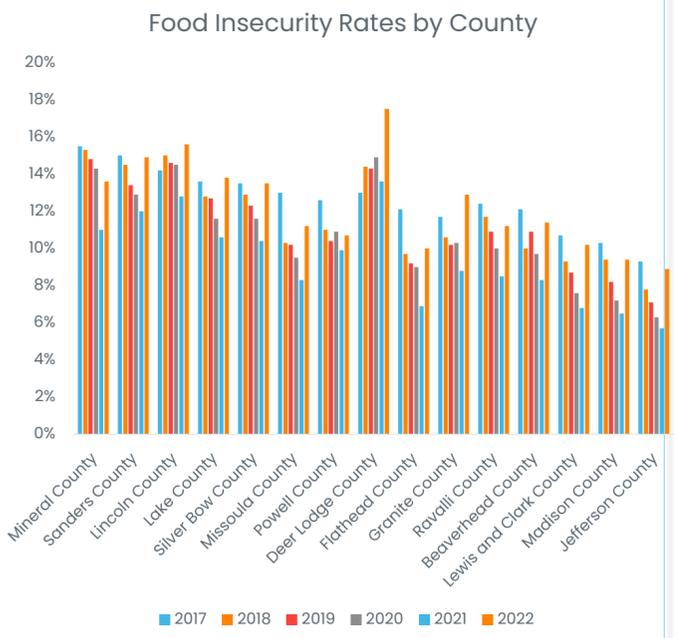
\$43,127
Annual household income needed to afford a two-bedroom rental home at HUD's Fair Market Rent.

69%
Percent of extremely low income renter households with severe cost burden

<https://nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state/montana>

FOOD SECURITY

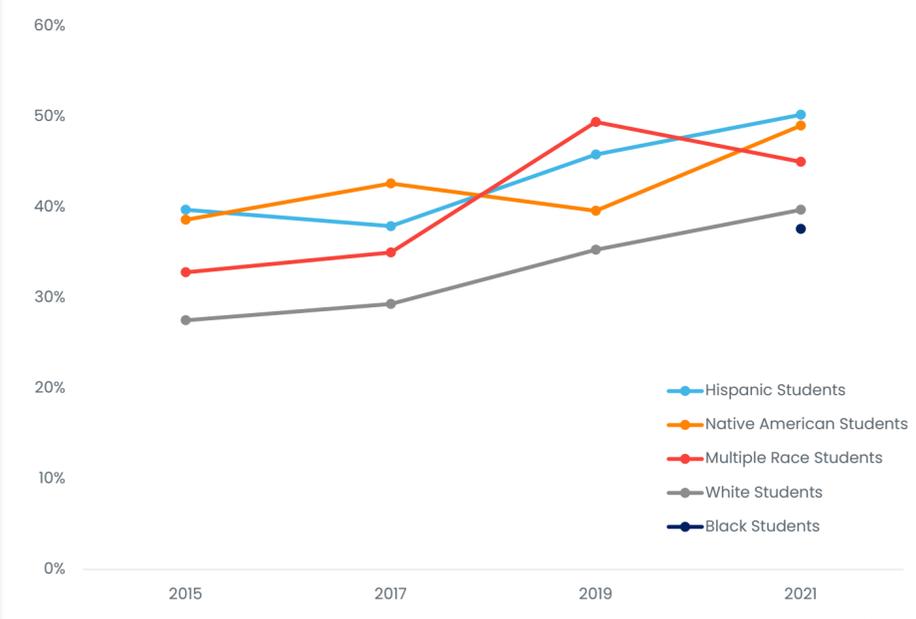
Every county in our service region experienced an increase in food insecurity in 2022 (the most recent year data is available)



Feeding America

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

Montana High School Students Feeling Sad or Hopeless



National KIDS COUNT

Youth ages 14-17 who participated in service or volunteer work at school, church, or in the broader community during the past year

