



Big Sky 55+
P.O. 1462
Helena, MT 59624

© 2023 Big Sky 55+ 2

NON-PROFIT
US POSTAGE
PAID
BILLINGS, MT
PERMIT #88

Welcome COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR



Lila Cleminshaw joined the staff of Big Sky 55+ in January, focusing on communications for the 2023 Montana Legislative Session. Lila's background includes community organizing around energy and mining policy for the Montana Environmental Information Center, as well as

serving on multiple non-profit environmental, arts, and community foundation boards.

She owned a music studio and taught singing lessons for 10 years and worked for the Missoula County Health Department educating the public about COVID-19. Lila is excited to be back in the nonprofit advocacy world. She lives in Missoula with her husband, Keith, and enjoys singing, canoeing, and exploring the wilds of Montana.

“ I'm honored to be working with such an amazing team here at Big Sky 55+. The staff are knowledgeable, caring, high energy and effective, and the board has such a rich depth of knowledge and experience. And our members are engaged and speaking out, making a difference in our legislative efforts! ”

BIG SKY 55+ BOARD MEMBERS

CHAIR

Terry Minow, *Boulder*

VICE CHAIR

Jon Ellingson, *Missoula*

TREASURER

Pat Sweeney, *Billings*

SECRETARY

Elizabeth Marum, *Belgrade*

LOBBYIST

Margie MacDonald, *Billings*

Barbara Archer, *Billings*

Pam Carroll, *Great Falls*

Sanna Porte, *Helena*

Ken Toole, *Cascade*

Sharon Stewart Peregoy,
Crow Nation

Alma McCormick, *Crow Nation*

BIG SKY 55+ STAFF

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Tully Olson

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Jacob Bachmeier

POLITICAL & ADVOCACY COORDINATOR

Jeannie Reeves-Hansen

COMMUNICATIONS

Lila Cleminshaw



Senior Long-term Care THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW

by Dolores Plumage

Emily Schabacker¹ of the Lee Newspapers and Keila Szpaller² of The Daily Montanan have both reported valiantly on the profound crisis in senior services and care across the entire state of Montana. Thank you to our journalists for their efforts to shine a light on an issue most Montanans care deeply about. Please keep two important points in mind as Montana's 2023 legislature nears its conclusion.

First, making sure that we have community based services for seniors will not eliminate the needs of those who require a higher level of care like assisted living or skilled nursing care.

Despite a once in a generation surplus, Governor Gianforte has failed to propose additional investments in services that would help older Montanans age at home. Without these services, many in their 80's and 90's will lose their self sufficiency and independence much sooner than they otherwise might. To support elders in their homes, Montana needs to up its investments in the communities!

These elders will need moderate caregiving assistance, many will need help with housekeeping and yard work, they will need help with medication management, they will need help with transportation, nutrition and exercise or physical therapy. All of these needs will necessitate case management. And we will need to be able to pay a workforce competitive wages or there won't be any help or respite for family caregivers who may be themselves stressed and frail and aged.

Second, this is not an either-or choice between supporting the needs of Montanans who want to age at home and the desperate need to fully fund providers of senior long term care. Imagine a 200 lb. gentleman with advancing dementia, mildly combative, who struggles with mobility and incontinence. This is no longer going to be manageable for the gentleman's 100 lb, increasingly frail wife.

Montana needs to boost ALL levels of support for a rapidly growing cohort of our neighbors. In less than 3 years, the first group of Montana's baby boomers will turn 80. We need leadership and not foot dragging and finger pointing in Helena. Montana lost 11 nursing homes last year and dozens more sit on the brink of insolvency as things stand.

Call your Senators and Representatives at 406.444.4800 and leave a message to fully fund Senior Long-Term Care by adding the necessary \$25 million to HB 2 or HB 649 to fully fund provider rates across the board for both nursing homes and community-based caregivers.

Legislators passed and the Governor signed bills to spend \$1 billion, most of it going into the pockets of our wealthiest citizens who earn over \$500,000 a year. We can certainly afford to do the right thing for our seniors.

Sincerely,
Delores Plumage
PO Box 484, Harlem, MT 59526 • (406) 945-5957

1. "The future of in-home care uncertain" Emily Schabacker, Billings Gazette, March 18, 2023
2. "Who puts you guys to bed?" Keila Szpaller, Daily Montanan, March 20, 2023

GREAT FALLS MEMBER UPDATE

Beginning last year the Great Falls members resumed monthly meetings focusing on local community issues. One concern that has repeatedly come to the forefront is the news desert in Great Falls, and the lack of community commentary/opinion sources.

We invited Darrell Ehrlick, Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Montanan, a nonprofit news source providing statewide coverage, to Great Falls to meet with our members, key stakeholders, and leadership alumni. Below, Darrell captures what followed from those discussions.



"October Hike on Iceberg Lake Trail" by Megan Niklasen, Great Falls First place winner of the Wild Montana 2023 Photo Contest

FINDING HOPE IN THE DESERT

by Darrell Ehrlick

"Well," I asked, "how'd it go?"

The question was aimed at Jacob Bachmeier. The subject was several meetings held by Big Sky 55+ to discuss the concept of news deserts in Great Falls.

"That was the most hopeful meeting we've had in three years," he said.

"Really?" I asked.

Of all the emotions that I had been feeling during two days of talking about what is happening in the media, on a local, state and national level, hopeful was far from what I had initially felt. I have worked in the media for more than a quarter century, and so I'll be honest: It's hard to hear about the erosion and implosion of the media, especially newspapers, without feeling dejected and somewhat responsible. I think back to all those hardworking men and women – some of them literally stained by ink – and not feel as if my generation of journalists has somehow failed to keep such venerable institutions alive and thriving. Maybe buggy-whip manufacturers felt the same way.

What I was initially keyed into – the heartbreak of losing reporters, coverage and a sense of the community – was something that was hard to hear. As much as I have spent several decades immersed in the media, it was beyond sobering as a reminder of the very real impact journalists and journalism has on communities. When reporters leave, when

news coverage shrinks, it causes pain in the entire community.

I was, for a moment, only focused on half the story. The other part of this came to me slowly; maybe it was on the drive home. There was a separate and equal story of the deep and abiding love that folks have for their community – and for wanting to bring people together, to hold leaders accountable, and to be involved in discussions. That is the kind of community spirit and public buy-in that more leaders need to see – a deep and profound sense of place and the courage to believe that more is possible.

Great Falls, Cascade County, central Montana and really the state are hungry for more. That means the next steps are looking at what models exist so that the area doesn't have to re-invent the wheel. It's not about replacing any particular media, rather adding complementary coverage to help add back some of the elements necessary to be an engaged, thriving community. In the coming days, I've already begun asking some questions, seeking some answers. When those become more clear, I'll look forward to sharing them with you.

I have always thought that what journalism does is vitally important to communities. But listening to the words and deep sense of loss of community that came from our conversations last week, it's clear that **good reliable information in the form of journalism is essential and meaningful.**

As the 2023 is drawing to a close we can start to see the contours of the world that the Republican supermajority would have us become.

It's a world where the caviar class of Montanans will have an extra \$9,000 a year to support their lifestyle. Caviar appetizers at Big Sky go for \$364 an order and it's hard to get enough of them when you're only making \$655,000 a year. Governor Gianforte gave them a big tax cut. It's supposed to trickle down. But if you're like most of the rest of us, maybe you'll get enough of a tax cut to buy a few pizzas and afford a tank of gas.

THE CAVIAR CLASS

by Jon Ellingson

It's a world where we have a huge surplus in the state account, but the Governor can't find the money to make sure that Grandpa or Grandma won't be moved from the local nursing home that they like. Last session the state approved funding for a \$2 million study by the Guidehouse organization to determine the reimbursement rate to nursing homes that is necessary to provide decent care for our elders who live there. The issue is so important because nursing homes throughout the state are closing due to inadequate funding; eleven in the last year. The implications of these closures were heartbreaking as loved ones had to be transferred far from family and friends when a facility closed. The study concluded that providers required a minimum daily reimbursement rate of \$278 to cover the cost of caring for the residents and adequate compensation for the caregivers. Thus far the funding has fallen short of the minimum level recommended by the study.



PROTECTING THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

by Sen. Jon Tester

On March 23, we celebrated the 13th anniversary of the passage of the Affordable Care Act. I was proud to support the ACA back in 2010 to make health care more accessible and provide critical protections for thousands of folks across Montana with pre-existing conditions. This year, we saw record-breaking enrollment numbers during the 2023 Marketplace Open Enrollment Period, and lower health care costs because of my American Rescue Plan Act and Inflation Reduction Act.

Since 2010, politicians in Washington have tried to repeal this critical law and deprive folks of affordable,

It's a world where the "Freedom Caucus" wants to put our individual right to control our own bodies under restrictions by the state. So much for "freedom." It's something out of Orwell's 1984. No right to make end of life decisions. No right to control our own reproductive lives. No right to make the most intimate decisions about who we are and who we want to be. The State knows better than we do.

And lest I forget, the Governor has failed to suggest any long-term solutions to the burden of property taxes or affordable housing crisis. Montana's affordable housing crisis requires more than regulatory tweaks. We can't count on the market to fix the problem. We need financial tools, direct investment, public/private partnerships, and incentives to move the needle on housing now. The Governor had one bill investing in housing related infrastructure, which was killed in the House. The tools that have been used by many, many states to partner with private sector investors to build an affordable workforce and senior housing have gotten nowhere. Lawmakers have a couple of bills still moving that utilize a small slice of our coal trust dollars to finance (via a revolving loan fund) much needed affordable housing, as opposed to investing those dollars in large out of state equity and bond funds. Those investments work doubly for Montanans - building much needed housing and generating a return on our investment. We hope he will see the sense in putting real money into our housing crisis.

Finally, the Republicans want to politicize the judiciary in the hope that they can bend it to their political will, compromising its sacred independence.

This is quite a vision that the Republicans have for Montana. Craven to the rich and powerful; callous to our dear elders; and disrespectful to the dignity of all Montanans. Does this record really reflect the hopes that we have for our state and for the lives of ourselves and our neighbors? It doesn't reflect mine. I hope for much better. **Let your legislators know how you feel.**

life-saving care. That would be a disaster for Montanans, and would jack up costs and strip folks of the critical protections they rely on to get the health care they need.

The truth is that we should be taking action to make health care more affordable, not less. We can do that by building on the ACA instead of tearing it down. That's why I supported the Inflation Reduction Act last Congress to cut health care costs for seniors on Medicare and extend ACA subsidies to expand access to health care for the folks who need it most. And it's why I've been calling for the massive Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBM) to be held accountable for price gouging rural pharmacies and the Montanans who rely on them.

I don't have to tell you all at Big Sky 55+ how important it is that we keep up this fight. Just know **I'll keep fighting alongside you to ensure all Americans' health care is affordable.**