

Winter 2024

BIG SKY 55+ UPDATE



SOLUTIONS THROUGH CONNECTION

by Terry Minow,
Big Sky 55+ Board Chair

"Big Sky 55+ is an organization of Montanans 55 and over bringing people together to work for solutions that make life better for Montanans of all ages."

That's the new and improved Big Sky 55+ mission statement our board put together this summer.

After the election results came in, some were angry, confused, or depressed. It's understandable to have those feelings, while also celebrating our successes – 16 of the 20 contested legislative candidates that we endorsed won their races. Plus, Katherine Bidegaray won her seat on the Montana Supreme Court! And now, **how do we move on to build for the future?**

To organize for “solutions that make life better for Montanans of all ages,” we need community, “bringing people together”. In hard times like these, it is community that sustains and supports us.

Jon Tester, speaking this fall at our ranch in the Boulder Valley, told the story of his family's barn. It was built in the 1880s, a big beautiful barn. Later that year, shockingly, a tornado tore it to the ground. The next year, his grandparents rebuilt the barn. But they didn't do it by themselves...they did it with their neighbors.

I can see the neighbors working together, the sights and sounds of hammering and sawing and lifting beams, the tempting smells of long tables loaded with delicious food for all to share. When they finished, the barn was a testament to community. When the neighbors drove by, they looked with pride on what they had done...together. That barn still stands today, over 100 years later.

Reaching out to friends and neighbors, doing all we can to build communities of caring and trust, is vital to building a strong Montana that shares our values and nourishes our people. There are dangers ahead in the new political reality, but to fight the tornadoes of discrimination and division, we need to rely on each other.

This is the time for each of us to use our super powers to reach out to build community. By serving on a local board, showing up for a fundraiser, or having people over for dinner, we strengthen those connections that make Montana stronger and safer for us all. Take some time to savor friendships and make new ones. Invite your friends and neighbors to join Big Sky 55+, a statewide community that works “for solutions that make life better for Montanans of all ages.”



All of us at Big Sky 55+ wish you the very best this holiday season and into the new year. Thank you so much for your ongoing support of our work.

Unpaid Caregivers & Medicaid

YOUR STORY CAN SHAPE POLICY

Big Sky 55+ believes in the power of storytelling to ignite change. As we prepare for the upcoming legislative session, we're calling on you – our incredible members – to share your personal experiences as unpaid caregivers or Medicaid recipients. These stories are not just words; they are catalysts for meaningful policy development.

Every day, countless Montanans step into the role of unpaid caregiver, providing emotional, physical, and financial support to loved ones. Similarly, Medicaid offers a critical safety net, helping individuals access essential care they might otherwise go without. Over 6,000 Montana unpaid caretakers qualify for health care through Montana's Medicaid program. But behind every statistic, there's a story – your story.

Your experiences reveal the real-life impact of policies, gaps in services, and areas for improvement. By sharing your journey, you can empower lawmakers with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions that reflect the needs of our communities.

Are you an unpaid caregiver juggling work, family, and the responsibility of caring for a loved one? Are you or someone you know a Medicaid recipient whose life has been transformed – or challenged – by the program? If so, we need your voice.

Send your story to Jeannie@bigsky55.org. You can also reach out if you need help writing about your experience. Whether it's a brief story or a detailed narrative, every contribution matters. Your words can help drive policy changes that support caregivers, strengthen Medicaid, and improve the lives of countless Montanans.

Let's harness the collective strength of our Big Sky 55+ community. Together, we can ensure our voices are heard. Be the spark for change.

Share your story today.



Big Sky 55+ is thrilled to welcome Kristen Stewart as our organizer in Billings! Kristen is a natural for joining our team.

Welcome!

"I was born and raised in Billings, then spent 20+ years away. First in Hawai'i where I met my husband and then in South Korea where our two boys were born and raised. I've moved back to Billings to help my extended family as they enjoy their retirements and navigate aging in place. We are a fortunate family as we have four generations living near each other. I feel eternally grateful that our children get to experience a real relationship with their great-grandmother. Personally, we're doing what we can to support dignity and access for the 55+ people in our lives and it's an honor to advocate on those same issues for the entire Billings and Montana community."



January 2, 6pm
**LEGISLATIVE
 TOWN HALL**
 What to Expect in
 the 2025 Session



Mary Sheehy Moe

Join Big Sky 55+ Chair Terry Minow; Vice Chair Jon Ellingson; Lobbyist Margie MacDonald, and special guests Mary Sheehy Moe and Sen. Emma Kerr-Carpenter for our first Virtual Town Hall of the 2025 Legislative Session. This will be a fast-paced and informative overview of the issues and the political landscape.

The Super Majority is gone and Democrats have gained 12 seats in the chambers. What is possible?

Can Montanan's keep their much-valued affordable health care access? Can we maintain our proud tradition of strong public education? Can we protect our courts from a thousand cuts to undermine and dismantle their independence and impartiality? What about a fair tax system, affordable housing, and access to senior services and residential care?

Join us to learn more! **You can pre-register for the event at bigskyfiftyfive.org/events.**



Emma Kerr-Carpenter

Big Sky 55+ will be well-staffed at the Montana Legislature with former state lawmaker Margie MacDonald again serving as our lead lobbyist. Margie will be joined by our Political Director Faith Scow, who cut her teeth in 2023 staffing the House Democrats on the Appropriations Committee and tracking the state budget.

WE MAKE IT EASY FOR YOU TO BE INVOLVED, TOO:

Weekly email bulletins with timely, accurate and relevant information to help mobilize and amplify your voices on behalf of the Montana we love and celebrate!

Four **virtual town halls**, beginning on January 2.

An easy and user-friendly advocacy and **alerts tool** that you can use to quickly weigh in on the issues that matter most.

Community events to rally our members and their networks, and build solidarity and community around our issues.

**SUPERPOWER
 OPPORTUNITY**

**Consider running
 for your local
 School Board!**



School boards are so important in setting the stage for the excellent public education of our Montana students.

Please consider running for your local school board, or if you know of someone who would be a good candidate, encourage them to run!

Candidate filing for school board elections opens soon!

The filing window varies by town, so you should contact your local elections office for more information about deadlines.

For example, in Missoula and Billings, filing opens December 12 and closes March 27, 2025. In Bozeman, filing opens December 12 and closes February 10.

Elections are held the first Tuesday in May.



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bigskyfiftyfive.org/join-now

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for important updates.



NEW BOARD MEMBER

Dennis Taylor is the newest member of the Big Sky 55+ Board of Directors, and we are so lucky to have him as part of that body.

Dennis is a retired city manager and is proud of his over 46 years of public service. He is a longtime Montana state government administrator, a former deputy director of the Montana Dept. of Justice and chief of staff for Atty. Gen. Joe Mazurek. Dennis studied political science and American studies at the University of Kansas and public administration at the University of Montana, served in the U.S. Marine Corps, is a Vietnam combat infantry veteran, and a former VISTA volunteer with the Montana State Low-Income Organization. He served as a trustee for the Helena Public Schools Board, the chair of the Montana Human Rights Commission, and a member of the Montana advisory committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

He is married to Joan South Taylor, a longtime social worker, and has two adult daughters who live and work in Helena.



Above: Vai (center) with canvassers Cindy Beus and Sueann Johnson.

Following the election we gathered with our Great Falls members and our team to say thank you, celebrate some wins, and honor their good work. We said goodbye to Vai Mouna, our ace organizer and canvass director on loan from SEIU Local #775. Vai is back in Tacoma enjoying her family and doing great work.

Our canvass team was honored as well: Kent Stubbs, Tyler Stubbs, Cindy Beus, Becky Beus-Friese, Sueann Johnson, Demian Kotynski, John Stanley and our Regional Great Falls Organizer Dale Moore.

BIG SKY 55+ BOARD MEMBERS

CHAIR Terry Minow, <i>Boulder</i>	Barbara Archer, <i>Billings</i>
VICE CHAIR Jon Ellingson, <i>Missoula</i>	Bill Bronson, <i>Great Falls</i>
TREASURER Pat Sweeney, <i>Billings</i>	Elizabeth Marum, <i>Belgrade</i>
SECRETARY Pam Carroll, <i>Great Falls</i>	Sanna Porte, <i>Helena</i>
	Sharon Stewart Peregoy, <i>Crow Nation</i>
	Dennis Taylor, <i>Helena</i>

BIG SKY 55+ STAFF

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR Margie MacDonald	POLITICAL DIRECTOR Faith Scow
MEMBERSHIP & SPECIAL PROJECTS COORDINATOR Jeannie Reeves-Hansen	BILLINGS ORGANIZER Kristen Stewart
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR Lila Cleminshaw	GREAT FALLS ORGANIZER Dale Moore