

WOMEN'S FOUNDATION of MONTANA ***CONVENING***

Hosted by the *Women's Foundation of Montana*
and Chambers Family Fund

Chico Hot Springs, Montana

April 26 & 27, 2002

The Women's Foundation of Montana (WFM) was established in 1999 with a mission to improve the economic status of women and girls, and to create a brighter future for girls and women in Montana. In addition to its endowment building and grantmaking efforts in support of women's economic self-sufficiency, a major goal of the WFM is to promote a more efficient network of organizations that serve women and girls.

In 2001, the WFM conducted a needs assessment of Montana women's organizations entitled Building the Economic Security of Women and Girls in Montana. The study indicated that – in addition to increased levels of financial resources – organizations' greatest needs were for attitudinal shifts regarding the role of women in society and the workplace, and for additional sharing of information and expertise among organizations. The Convening represented the desire of the WFM to expand the capacity of organizations serving women and girls by creating an opportunity for exchanges of knowledge, experience and expertise – particularly between larger, urban-based organizations and those operating with far fewer resources in isolated rural areas of our state.

Building a Foundation

In its efforts to promote systemic change to improve women's and girls' lives, the *WFM* is aware that its resources are limited and that it can achieve progress only through strategic efforts. The *WFM's* experience has shown that:

- Tremendous talent and potential exist within women's organizations that share the *WFM* mission;
- Effective efforts and best practices are often carried out in isolated areas of rural Montana; and
- Building the capacity of good organizations enables them, in turn, to assist in building the capacity of other organizations.

With this knowledge serving as a background, the *WFM* invited 39 organizations to its first-ever Convening, which was held at Chico Hot Springs Resort, south of Livingston, Montana. These organizations were selected based on their response to the 2001 needs assessment, as well as the fact that they were members of the *WFM's* pool of potential grantee organizations. A total of 37 individuals representing 22 organizations attended in the Convening, the objectives of which were to:

- Bring together representatives of organizations that serve women and girls
- Develop new networks and strengthen existing ones
- Discuss with colleagues the range of issues that impact women and girls
- Learn more about the *WFM*
- Share information about organizations – missions, lessons, and what is working

A Straightforward Approach

The *WFM* took a straightforward approach in asking Convening participants to address a range of issues that affect women and girls and the organizations that serve them. Following introductory remarks from *WFM* Advisory Council Chair Carolyn Stamy, participants joined for a luncheon and heard keynote remarks from Jen Ray, Director of Leadership, Center for Policy Alternatives, Washington, D.C.

Jen's remarks – which set the stage for the Convening's issues-oriented agenda – focused on economic empowerment for Montana women and girls. Drawing on experience gained at both the national and state levels (before joining the Center for Policy Alternatives, Jen advocated for progressive women's policies in Idaho), she discussed various forms of progress that have improved the lives and futures of women.

Regardless of what has been achieved, Jen stressed that much more needs to be done – particularly in states like Montana where low wages in general, combined with a significant wage gap, translate into extreme economic hardships and perpetuate a cycle of poverty.

Strengths and Challenges for Overcoming Barriers to Economic Self-Sufficiency

Following Jen's presentation, Facilitator Kathy Van Hook briefly reviewed the *WFM* needs assessment, emphasizing the study's findings in terms of barriers organizations must overcome in achieving economic security for women. The following barriers were addressed by Convening participants in small group sessions:

- Advocacy
- Education and Training
- Jobs, Benefits, and Economic Development
- Child Care
- Funding
- Attitudes
- Networking

Hour-long small group sessions were conducted for the remainder of the afternoon, offering each participant the opportunity for in-depth discussions with colleagues to further clarify barriers to economic self-sufficiency, as well as consider strategies for overcoming them.

The *WFM* and its Grantees

Following an afternoon of in-depth discussions, Convening participants spent a relaxing evening learning more about the *WFM* granting. Representatives from each of the eight organizations to receive funding in the latest grant cycle discussed their efforts being carried out with *WFM* support.

1 Small Group Session Reports

The second day of the Convening opened with reports from the Small Group Sessions. Group leaders shared information and conclusions regarding challenges and strengths in overcoming barriers to economic self-sufficiency. (The essence of these reports is included in the "Outcomes" section below.)

Sustaining Organizations: Small Group Discussions with Similar Organizations

Evaluations provided by all Convening participants indicated that perhaps the most valuable sessions held during the event were the Small Group Discussions with representatives from similar organizations. Participants were asked to:

- Share the mission of their organization
- Discuss important lessons their organizations have learned that may be beneficial to other organizations
- Discuss what works – particularly programs and organizational structures that help their organizations to meet their goals?

Outcomes

In addressing organizational challenges and strengths, Convening participants achieved consensus on the following issues:

- 1) *ADVOCACY* At the local, state and national levels, women and their organizations must be strong advocates for change. Through training, mentoring and leadership development, women must strive to become effective advocates on behalf of their organizations and causes.
- 2) *EDUCATION AND TRAINING* The clearest path to economic self-sufficiency is through good jobs. For women to achieve high-paying positions, organizations must place a strong emphasis on quality education and training. Beginning with secondary and elementary education that promotes math and science for girls, through technical training and higher education that prepares women for the best job opportunities, organizations must advocate for a system - as well as the resources - that ensure the potential of women and girls is realized.
- 3) *JOBS, BENEFITS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT* As with education and training, organizations must be involved in the broad range of issues associated with building an economic environment in which women can succeed. Women must advocate for programs and systems that guarantee a fair and equitable workplace and economy.
- 4) *CHILD CARE* Quality child care is essential to the success of women and families. While Montana has demonstrated leadership in child care issues, organizations must remain focused on issues relative to expanding the availability of affordable, quality care. (Participants noted that a range of issues similar to those associated with child care also apply to elder care.)
- 5) *FUNDING* Like all nonprofits, organizations serving women and girls face continuing struggles in generating sufficient funding to conduct operations and provide services. Sharing information about potential funding sources, methods of streamlining operations and processes, and endowment development were cited as possibilities for building new financial resources or making existing dollars go farther.
- 6) *ATTITUDES* Among the most difficult barriers women face is attitudes - about their place in society and their role in the workplace. These issues involve not only how men view the evolving role of women, but also how women see themselves. Women and their organizations must develop an awareness of various attitudes and ensure that programs and efforts work to overcome them.
- 7) *NETWORKING* Sharing experience and expertise between organizations is an effective means of overcoming the lack of other resources - notably funding. Focus on building networks that facilitate ongoing exchanges of knowledge and information. Further, events like the Convening offer significant opportunities for women and organizations to share and grow. Work to ensure that such opportunities become more available.

1 Convening Participants

Joyce Schriver, Action for Eastern Montana, Glendive

Norma Kay Irish and **Corky Bush**, American Association of University Women of Montana

Judy Barber and **Donna Thompson**, Anaconda PCA Family Resource Center, Anaconda

Patty Nordlund and **Diane Lehm**, Big Sky Economic Development Authority, Billings

Sharon Kearnes and **Carol Stoltz**, Career Development Workforce Center, Miles Community College, Miles City

Maureen Garrity and **Jasyn Harrington**, Career Training Institute, Helena

Darla Joyner and **Jane Arntzen Schumacher**,
Career Transitions, Inc., Belgrade

Sharon Small, Four Directions, Lame Deer

Beth Bondy, Hill County Mentoring, District IV HRDC, Havre

Stephanie Gray and **Kristin Hamburg**, District IX HRDC, Bozeman

Darlene Siedschlaw and **Jamie Cornish, Ph.D.**,
Montana Business Professional Women

June Hermanson and **Marsha Sampson**, Montana Center on Disabilities, Billings

Donetta Klein and **Connie Huffman**, Montana Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence

TamiJo Ruether-Affor, Montana Contractors Association, Helena

Melissa Case, Montana People's Action, Missoula

Larry Robertson, North Central Montana RC&D, Shelby

Kate Kahan and **Naomi Demarinis**, WEEL, Missoula

Betsy Danforth and **Shelly Videon**, Women's Center, MSU, Bozeman

Terry Kendrick and **Judy Smith**, WORD, Missoula

Gayle Tompkins and **Suzanne McKiernan**, YWCA of Billings

Lee Niebuhr, YWCA of Great Falls

Cindy Weese and **Tracy Lakatua**, YWCA of Missoula

Women's Foundation of Montana Advisory Council

Carolyn Stamy, Chair, Libby

Merle Chambers, Denver

Ellen Alweis, Billings

Dorothy Eck, Bozeman

Jean Kahn, Bozeman

Diane Sands, Missoula

Suzanne Small Trusler, Lame Deer

Facilitator

Kathy Van Hook, Helena

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Letty Bass, Chambers Family Fund, Denver

Ralph Yaeger, Montana Community Foundation, Helena