

The MONTANA MINUTE

Highlights from the Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development



Forging a New Path: How Montana Is Growing Its Own Behavioral Health Workforce

There are young people in rural Montana who may want to pursue a career in behavioral health. They just don't have a path to get there yet.

That's the gap the Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development is trying to close — and the reason behind the Youth Behavioral Health Pathways program. This project is a three-year effort to build behavioral health career pathways for high school students in Livingston, Helena and Kalispell, with the goal to expand to additional communities across Montana.

The need is clear. More than 90% of Montana's counties are designated Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas. Health care is one of the state's largest employment sectors, with nearly 1,800 openings every month. And research is consistent on one thing: the people most likely to stay and serve in rural communities are the ones who grew up there.

But first, they need something to grow into.

Starting Early, on Purpose

A youth behavioral health pathway is a structured program — starting in high school — that introduces young people to careers in mental health, substance use prevention and community health. Think of it less as a traditional class and more like an on-ramp: foundational knowledge, real-world experience, credentials that count toward college credit, and connections to local professionals working in careers that already exist in the community.

Funded by a [HRSA RCORP-Pathways grant](#), the Montana Youth Behavioral Health Pathways program is building three components::

1. The **Foundations for Community and Behavioral Health** online course will consist of **20 lessons** focused on building durable skills in community and behavioral health. It will be offered through dual enrollment with Highlands College and can be applied toward either a 30-credit **Behavioral Health Certificate** or a 15-credit **Foundations in Healthcare Certificate**, the latter of which includes an option to earn a **Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) license**.
2. **Experiential learning opportunities** that get students into the field. This includes structured observations and supervised tasks. These experiences help the student connect back to the course learning. Participating students have the option of receiving high school work-based learning credit.
3. **A Youth Advisory Council**, a statewide youth board of Montana youth ages 16-24 who are building leadership skills to advocate for changes they want to see to Montana's behavioral health systems. This work is led by Empower Montana in partnership with Reach Higher Montana, HRDC Bozeman and the Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development.

More Than a Career Pipeline

In addition to filling a great need in Montana, behavioral health education helps young people understand their own stress and emotions, build coping skills that last a lifetime, develop empathy and see mental health as something to tend to — not be ashamed of. Youth who engage with this pathway program aren't only preparing for careers; they are becoming more resilient, more self-aware and better equipped to support the people around them.

Get Involved

If you work in behavioral health, education or community health in rural Montana, the Youth Behavioral Health Pathways program needs you — as a workplace learning site, a community partner or simply a champion for young people who have an interest in pursuing this path forward.

To learn more, email Kate Chapin at kate.chapin@umt.edu and visit our website: [Youth Behavioral Health Pathways](#).



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