

# Rural Institute



# 20 23 | IMPACT REPORT

IMPROVING LIFE  
FOR RURAL AMERICANS  
WITH DISABILITIES

## BY THE NUMBERS



The Rural Institute had **64** active projects and programs



We mentored **23** trainees



We provided continuing education and community training to **1,625** people



We published **99** reports, articles, and book chapters



We shared **79** conference presentations and posters



Rural Institute staff participated in **166** committees, councils, and boards



The RIIC leveraged **\$4,065,788** in FY2023 to meet community needs



## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear friends,

It has been an absolute privilege to serve as the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities' (RIIC) Interim Director since April of 2023. In this role, I have gained a deeper understanding of the expansive work carried out by our talented team in support of our mission to build access and opportunities with and for people with disabilities.

I am delighted to present our fiscal year 2023 Impact Report, a testament to the Rural Institute's collective dedication to high-quality research, evaluation, education, and service. This year, we recommitted to our values, which operate

as the compass guiding our work. Together, our Community Advisory Council and staff uphold principles of equity, inclusion, partnership, participation, cooperation, and evidence-based solutions, all aimed at fortifying the inherent strength within our rural communities.

This Impact Report is a showcase of the innovative work carried out across more than 60 diverse programs and projects. It not only celebrates our achievements, but also underscores our commitment to continuous improvement while still facing transition. Enjoy reading about our cross-sector initiatives, the transformative stories of individuals empowered by our services, and the collaborative partnerships that form the foundation of our continued success.

Warmly,

Molly Kimmel

## WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE RURAL COMMUNITY LIVING

# PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The RIIC is committed to enhancing the skills and knowledge of all who support diverse communities. This year, we trained students from the fields of Speech-Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy, Psychology, Public Health, Geography, Nursing, Social Work, Physical Therapy, Special Education, and Counseling. In addition, we provided continuing education on topics including deaf-blindness, augmentative and alternative communication, successful transitions, COVID-19 safety measures, and family-centered, culturally responsive healthcare.

- Utah Regional Leadership & Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities
- National Center for Independent Living and Statewide Independent Living Council Training and Technical Assistance
- Montana Deaf-Blind Project
- National Center on Deaf-Blindness: Transition Outcomes for Youth with Deaf-Blindness
- Montana Transition Planning Model
- Center for Disease Control/Administration for Community Living Vaccine Support
- Rural Disability Hub for COVID-19 Vaccination Outreach
- National Disability Navigator Resource Collaborative
- National Network of Public Health Institutes

## SERVICE

The RIIC continues to provide a variety of valuable direct services focused on enhancing quality of life and promoting inclusivity for individuals with disabilities. In Fiscal Year 2023, activities included building accessible docks in partnership with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, support and resource dissemination promoting transitions to adulthood, amplifying the family voice in partnerships with state and national organizations, and offering independent living workshops focused on health and community living.

- MonTECH: Montana's Assistive Technology Program
- Montana Assistive Technology Loan (MATL) Program
- Montana Family to Family Health Information Center
- Floating Across Montana
- AMCHP Delegation
- Healthy Community Living
- Montana Disability and Health Program
- All of Us Outreach in Montana
- Children's Special Health Services: Montana Transition Resources
- Montana: Learn the Signs. Act Early.
- Disability Data Advocates Taking Action (DisDATA)
- Public Health Workforce Expansion
- Education Access
- Pediatric Assistive Technology



### ACTIVITY



MonTECH staff performed two cooking demos at the Missoula Public Library. Assistive tools were used throughout the sessions – tools to help mitigate challenges like tremors, limited hand strength or dexterity, reading disabilities, memory challenges, and developmental disabilities. The event was livestreamed via Missoula's community access channel and highlighted on the local news.

# PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS

## RESEARCH

Research conducted by RIIC staff in Fiscal Year 2023 yielded user-friendly online tools for state and tribal vocational rehabilitation, interventions that improve social connections, and important data on the impact of intimate partner violence among people with disabilities. Study findings are translated and shared for all audiences, so everyone has access to rural disability resources. This includes information on disability onset, healthcare access, transportation options, and rural personal assistance services.

- RTC: Rural: Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities
- Expanding the Availability and Quality of Rural Data
- Exploring Rural Disability Onset
- Rural Access to Health Insurance and Healthcare

- Rural Resource Analysis
- Partners for Healthy Community Living
- Personal Assistance Services in Rural America
- Rural Transportation Options
- Rural Self-Employment
- Impacts of COVID-19
- Project Connect: Online Peer Support to Reduce Social Isolation
- Texas Model Spinal Cord Injury Systems
- Loneliness and Its Relation to Health in People with Spinal Cord Injury
- Psychosocial Stress and its Relation to Maternal and Infant Outcomes among Women with Disabilities
- Alliance on Innovation in Maternal Health
- Rural Community Living Development
- Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development Project

## AWARD-WINNING

RTC:Rural staff attended the 2023 NARRTC (National Association of Rehabilitation Research and Training Centers) Conference at the end of April. Two staff members co-authored "Comparing Measures of Functional Difficulty with Self-Identified Disability: Implications for Health Policy" which won the 2023 Best Paper Award.



## PROGRAM

Project DIG (Disability Inclusive Gardening) is a pilot demonstration project aimed at better understanding how therapeutic horticulture-based programming can contribute to the quality of life and wellbeing of people living with disabilities. Accessible garden spaces were designed and installed at a disability service organization to implement a therapeutic horticulture program with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Program participants joined weekly gardening sessions with a skilled facilitator as part of the organization's day support services. Data collection and analysis will inform future DIG sites and projects. The RIIC collaborated with The Arc of Western Montana on this project, which was led by Tracy Boehm Barrett.



# PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS

## EVALUATION

Thanks to RIIC's talented evaluators, the range of health-related programs receiving high-quality evaluation services grew significantly in the last year. From extensive maternal and child health initiatives and pediatric psychiatry to HIV care continuums and community health worker programs, RIIC's evaluation services enhance and support health outcomes, inclusive care, and the effectiveness of programs across the state and nation.

- Montana Obstetrics and Maternal Supports Evaluation (MOMS)
- MOMS Contraceptive and Postpartum Care Survey
- MOMS Empaths
- Emergency Obstetric Services Study
- Exploring the Use of Recovery Doulas to Improve Maternal and Infant Health Outcomes in Montana
- Maternal Healthcare Experiences and Patient Care Study
- Enhancing Reviews and Surveillance to Eliminate Maternal Mortality
- Montana Perinatal Quality Collaborative
- Montana Title V Maternal & Child Health Block Grant Needs Assessment
- Montana Access to Pediatric Psychiatry Network (MAPP-Net)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Rape Prevention Education Evaluation
- A Needs Assessment of the HIV Care Continuum in Montana
- Understanding Barriers to Hepatitis C Testing and Disease Surveillance in Montana
- Participatory Evaluation of the Missoula Community Health Worker Program for Equity and Resilience
- Office of Public Instruction Agency Capacity Assessment for System Improvement
- Evaluation of the Healing and Ending Addiction through Recovery and Treatment (HEART)
- Montana Part C Family Outcome Survey
- Idaho School Readiness Program



RIIC evaluation services have seen significant growth in recent years, further enhancing capacity to document and celebrate positive change in rural communities. We provide needs assessment, program evaluation, and technical assistance services tailored to the needs of non-profit organizations and government agencies. Our approach underscores community engagement and fosters an equitable and just society by addressing health inequities and challenging oppressive social conditions. We use a variety of research and evaluation methods, with an emphasis on mixed methods and qualitative approaches.

TEAM



### RIIC researcher, Andrew Myers, on teaching Geography 468/469: Community & Regional Analysis

"Teaching geography students about disability lays the groundwork for a more inclusive and accessible future. In this class, they learn to think about disability not as a health condition, but as a demographic group, people with civil rights. They also practice using national data from the U.S. Census Bureau to identify and describe socio-economic differences between people with and without disabilities, and across different geographies. Students gain a working understanding of the intersections of health, disability, and geography while also learning technical skills such as analyzing large datasets."



TRAINING



## RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

### Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Self-Employment Guide

RTC:Rural adapted their existing Vocational Rehabilitation Self-Employment Guide into a resource for Native American and Alaska Native Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation programs called the Tribal VR Self-Employment Toolkit ([www.tvrselfemployment.org](http://www.tvrselfemployment.org)). RTC:Rural attended a Consortium of Administrators of Native American Rehabilitation (CANAR) conference and formed partnerships with tribal advisors to develop the guide, which includes worksheets, examples, and strategies for successful self-employment.

Building on these efforts, RTC:Rural recently partnered with the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Training and Technical Assistance Center (AIVRTTC) and the Northwest Indian College to develop regional and classroom self-employment training based on the Toolkit.



## PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

### Consumer Advisory Council

The Consumer Advisory Council (CAC) helps the Rural Institute develop strategies to reach and serve individuals with disabilities, families, and professionals in Montana. CAC members also present at conferences and webinars, disseminate information in their communities, and manage the Community Investment Fund.

CAC members and staff participated in the annual Montana Youth Transitions Conference in Great Falls November 2-4, 2022. One staff member and seven CAC members attended in person, assisted with presentations, and staffed the exhibitor table. Two CAC members presented virtually over Zoom on healthcare transition, supported decision-making, and less restrictive alternatives to guardianship. After the conference, a CAC member emailed:



“It is such a wonderful experience to learn about the process in an informed and supportive environment. Each time I have been able to attend, I feel like I learn something new and have more tools to bring back to families in my community as well.”

## COLLABORATION SPOTLIGHT

### Montana DeafBlind Transition Pilot

A new transition pilot ran in 2022-2023 headed by the RIIC’s Montana DeafBlind Project and in collaboration with Montana Children’s Special Health Services, Montana Vocational Rehabilitation & Blind Services, the Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind, Marc Gold & Associates, and the National Center on Deaf-Blindness. Project staff tailored two DeafBlind 101 webinars for a reservation-based school team serving a student who experiences a dual sensory loss. Staff followed these webinars with customized training and technical assistance meetings. The success of this project opens the door for future work with partners across the state.



**Rural Institute**  
For Inclusive Communities

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