

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The Northwest Area Foundation presented the Northcentral Montana Region with a unique opportunity to explore the dimensions of poverty and build a community driven ten-year plan to reduce poverty. Following interviews of 65 people representing a cross-section of the region, the NWAFF extended an invitation to Northcentral Montana communities to become one of four regions to receive an award for community based planning aimed at reducing poverty.

The four rural regions were formally announced in March of 2002 and include communities within and around the following areas: Minot, North Dakota, including the Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold; Pocatello/Idaho Falls, Idaho, including the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes; Great Falls Montana, including the Blackfeet Tribe, the Chippewa-Cree Tribes and the Gross Ventre/Assiniboine Tribes; and Waterloo/Cedar Falls, Iowa, including the Sac and Fox Tribes of Mississippi and Iowa. Each region received an award of \$600,000 to complete the planning process. The Foundation will select up to two communities for an intensive, ten-year partnership to reduce rural poverty. The Foundation will supply additional financial resources and technical assistance to communities selected for the long-term partnership.¹

The Northcentral Montana Task Force was created to respond to the invitation. Representatives from all corners of the region came together to consider the opportunity and develop a strategy to meet the challenge of the Foundation.

The Foundation's Unique Philosophy

Six years ago, the Northwest Area Foundation decided to change its mission to specifically help disadvantaged communities. After a year of strategic planning, community discussions, individual interviews and research in Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Oregon, North Dakota, South Dakota and Washington, several key findings emerged:

- People have lost confidence in attempts to find outside solutions to local problems.
- Many people have lost hope that communities can transform themselves.
- When asked what might make a difference, many people said their communities needed the resources – not just financial, but also ideas, leadership and coordination – to support their own efforts to improve their future.

"How can we make the biggest difference possible for the people we serve?"

Karl N. Stauber, President of the
Northwest Area Foundation.

¹ Northwest Area Foundation, News Release, March 1, 2002

The Foundation's mission and programs are based on these findings. The Foundation believes that positive and directed change is possible and the Community Venture partnerships were initiated to provide the resources to create community driven plans that build hope and reduce poverty.

The Six Criteria

The Foundation developed six criteria for each Community Venture Partnership to use as a guide for the development of their ten-year plan and asked each Project to demonstrate in their plan how the criteria have been met. The Northcentral Montana Community Ventures Project used them as guiding principles at each step of the way, and the reader will find them noted throughout the Plan.

"I'm impressed with the way the Northwest Area Foundation wants to build this coalition from a community ground up perspective."
Elected Official

1. *A significant focus on reducing poverty*
2. *Substantial involvement of diverse interests*
3. *Do no harm*
4. *Thoughtful and realistic strategies for accomplishing community goals*
5. *Development of local abilities to achieve long-term community goals*
6. *Learning and adapting in response to new knowledge and changing circumstances*

What to look for in the Plan

The heart of the community plan to reduce poverty lies in the narrative, which tells the story of how the plan was developed and lays the road map for community change. Following the introduction, the Plan is divided into the following chapters:

- Chapter 2: How The Plan Was Developed
An overview of the core processes used to develop the plan, 'lessons learned' and products and outcomes.
- Chapter 3: Northcentral Montana: Who and What It Is
Demographic data organized by the themes from the community values.
- Chapter 4: Community Conversations: Learning About Poverty
Hearing from the voices of the community and people living in poverty.

- Chapter 5: Strategies and Actions: Coming Together As A Region
A discussion of each strategic direction, strategies and actions outlining the rationale for the choices made by the Strategy Teams and describing the strategies and actions in terms of: what will be done? To meet what ends? To achieve what ends? For the benefit of whom? The chapter also specifies Coalition priorities for NWAFF funding for each strategic direction and presents the crosscutting themes that bind the strategic directions together.
- Chapter 6: Implementation: Priorities and Funding
A description of the financial plan along with the proposed budget presented by strategic direction and by the themes that bind.
- Chapter 7: Building Community Capacity to Change
An overview of what has changed during the planning process, with a focus on projects already underway, tribal collaboration, the formation of a new organization and what remains to be done to build the community capacity to reduce poverty.

In many parts of the narrative, the reader will see text boxes that describe aspects of the process and community participation. This has been done because the story of accomplishment lies in both the actual process that brought people together from communities across the vast and diverse region of Northcentral Montana for the first time, and the tangible plan of action, which they created together.

In addition to the narrative, there are a set of appendices, each related to a chapter, which provide more detailed information about the participants, the process, the countless meetings, the strategies and actions, the financial plan, the support of the community, and the resources used. These volumes will be available for review in the Northwest Area Foundation Regional Center Team Room.