

## Intro Slide

In 1968, I was a middle school student in SF. My mother was working as an executive secretary and administrative aide for a research facility associated with San Francisco State University. My mom typed the grants and resulting research papers that came out of the center. The research center typically housed bio-scientists but in '68 a sociology professor, Dr. John Connelly joined the ranks. Dr. Connelly specialized in poverty challenges facing single mothers and female heads of household and military families of enlisted men. Coincidentally, my mom was a female head of household supporting my physically and emotionally ill father, my sister and myself on a secretarial salary. She was instantly fascinated by the information contained in the reports and grants she typed for Dr. Connelly. She began to have conversations with him about the scope of the problem and he in turn lent her a series of scholarly books from his personal library about the plight of specific populations of women. I would often find my mom sitting up in bed at night, reading these library loans. She would share what she learned with me because by age 12, I was well aware of our family's economic struggles and already doing my share to earn spending money and cash for clothes. As is the case today, my mom learned that in the 1960s many households that depended on women's wages lived near or below the poverty line. Likewise, the average married soldier serving in Viet Nam was paid so little that his wife and children did not have enough food money to last through the month. My mom was particularly struck by the story of one military wife who stretched food dollars by buying bread at the bakery outlet and doling out a piece at a time. She dreamed of being able to give both of her children an entire loaf of bread and telling them to eat as much as they wanted.

Despite our limited finances my mom taught us to share what we could; after learning about the plight of low-income women and their families, she redoubled her efforts to donate to food banks and since she worked on a college campus, actively supported training programs and scholarships for such women. Her lessons live on. Today, both my sister and I continue to help address issues of hunger and wage disparity.

## 60s Slide

**Other important events occurred in the 60s that helped shape our current culture.** Pres Johnson, in 1964, declared war on poverty. During the '60s **Divorce** became more acceptable, the Pill debuted and the **sexual revolution** was launched. The last two trends have helped perpetuate the cycle of households headed by women living in poverty.

## 60s REPRECUSIONS SLIDE

**Sadly, forty plus years later, the battle against poverty still rages.** And the stakes are higher than ever. The recession has made all of us more aware of economics. But it is important to recognize that recent boom times of the '90s and early 2000s did not benefit everyone equally. The American Middle Class has all but disappeared as well paying manufacturing jobs have gone overseas increasing the economic divide between haves and have nots. Paradoxically to some people's thinking, the recent economic crisis instead of leveling the playing field has upended it. A report issued September 30<sup>th</sup> by the Bureau of Economics found low-income earners have been hit hardest by the economic downturn. When they are laid off, they often do not get severance pay, they lack savings to help sustain them, and don't qualify for or can't afford COBRA. Others have seen their hours cut; for people who are already living pay-check-to-paycheck any decrease in income is catastrophic.

**Social trends routed in the 60s cultural shifts have added to the problem.** More women than ever are raising children without help from a spouse, through divorce or by choice. Research has shown the negative financial impact of divorce disproportionately falls on women and children. Households headed by single mothers tend to live close to the poverty line. Not only are more women choosing single motherhood, many teen girls are as well. The responsibilities of parenthood limit the educational achievements of many such girls condemning them and their children to poverty. With poverty comes hunger or at the very least, poor quality diets. It can impair learning; damage health, and promote a desire to get a job rather than an education, which perpetuates the cycle of generational poverty.

## Female Heads of Household Slide- read as is

### MT Moms Slide

**The figures on female heads of household have not been updated since a special Census report on the topic was issued**

**in 2003.** According to economists associated with the University of MT system, the trends remain the same or worse. About 60,000 divorced or single mothers headed up households in Big Sky country as of 2002. If we include new households led by women since 2003 and those in which women are the main breadwinner, an additional 10,000 such households probably exist in MT today.

Nationally, the teen birth rate has fallen steadily since 1995. In MT however, the decline in birth rate leveled off in 2000 at 50 babies per thousand teen girls, and has remained stable here since then.

Fortunately, most teen moms (68%) in MT are 18-19, but 40% of these young women never completed high school. Good date is not available about the educational status of younger teen moms. Many return to school at least initially, but we lack solid data on how many of these girls drop out or fail to complete a GED.

### **Montana Economics Slide**

Montanans like many residents of the N plains states have relatively low incomes. MT ranks 46<sup>th</sup> in per capita income out of 50 states, Puerto Rico and DC.

MT's unemployment numbers are deceptive. Montana's unemployment rate is significantly lower than the rest of the country (6.6% versus nearly 10% nationwide). But, this figure is deceptive. MT's wages are also much lower than the national average while the cost of living is not proportionately less. In fact, a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation published in 2008 found that to live at 300% of the federal poverty rate, a family in Missoula would need \$67,418 where as the national average for the US is \$63,600~ or 5.7% less.

### **Yellowstone Co Slide**

Here in Billings, many jobs for unskilled laborers are in the retail/service sector. These positions usually pay close to minimum wage and often come without benefits.

It is not uncommon for parents to work more than one job ~ often without benefits~ to make ends meet. An absence due to illness results in loss of pay. For families living paycheck- to-paycheck any decrease in take home pay can be disastrous. The impact of Yellowstone County's historically low wages is reflected in the fact that even in Fall 2007 when the DOW Jones closed above 14,000 points and the local unemployment rate was @ 1.5%, nearly 32% of the students in Billings Public Schools were enrolled in the federally subsidized free and reduced meals program. As of last June, that

number had jumped to 37% (@ 6000 students) and is expected to go higher when the final numbers are calculated the first week of October.

Based on interviews with school counselors, principals and social workers, the School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) members believe @ 8% (480) to 10% (600) of the students enrolled in the subsidized meals program have trouble getting enough to eat outside of the school day. Furthermore, SHAC members believe all of these numbers underestimate the real need because students in middle and especially high schools where open campuses make it "cool" to go off site for lunch, often forego the Free and Reduced meals program due to social stigma. Data from the Mayors Task Force on Homelessness indicates a % 190 increase in the last 5-years predating the start of the current economic crisis.

### **MT Foodbank Network SLIDE**

For several years the SHAC, which I chair, has been looking for ways to address the problem of chronic hunger amongst our students. This year, the Billings Public School system is lucky enough to have received a grant from the MT Food Bank Network to establish what is know as a Backpack meals program. It takes its name from the practice of discreetly slipping packets of nutritious, shelf-stable, ready-to-eat meals into backpacks belonging to eligible children on Friday afternoons.

The grant provides funding for the 2009-2010 school year. Next year, we will need to raise the roughly \$100,000 required to run the program ourselves. Fund raising for this need is already underway, and we are looking for funding to expand the reach of the existing program during this school year.

### **Terms of GRANT SLIDE**

Due to the terms of the Backpack Meals grant from Montana Food bank Network (MFBN), the meals can only be given to chronically hungry students enrolled in Title One schools that have a 50 % or higher enrollment in the Free and Reduced meals program. Siblings of these children also qualify. Seven schools meet this criteria. As of Friday Oct 2<sup>nd</sup>, SHAC is distributing 400 meal packets each week to students in the qualifying schools. However, we all know that poverty and financial crises do not neatly follow zip codes. Thus, there are many children attending other schools throughout our district that are equally in need of meals. We are actively raising funds to purchase meal packets for these children.

Due to the buying power of the National Food Bank Network, known as Feed America, each four-meal packet costs just \$3.69 so we are getting a great deal of value for each dollar we invest. People can sponsor a child for just \$15.00 per month. We estimate we need to raise about \$12,000 to feed students who don't qualify for the grant. We are fortunate to have received a \$4000 Centennial Youth Fund grant from First Interstate Bank Foundation and several thousand dollars in additional donations from FIB staff members. But we still have a ways to go.

### **Our Philosophy Slide**

The School Health Advisory Council believes addressing hunger is a humanitarian imperative and economic necessity- as chronic hunger traps women and children in a cycle of generational poverty that promotes other social ills including gang membership. Food or pocket money to buy food is a chief recruiting tool employed by gang members.

The stories of need are heart wrenching. Principals and teachers in needs low-income schools have told the SHAC that it is very common for young children who are not shy about revealing their families' financial straits to beg to be allowed to come to school over the weekend or school holidays because those occasions most of us associate with relaxation or celebration they identify as hunger and deprivation. Last spring, the principal of Newman Elementary was contacted by police late one evening because after several tries they had finally caught 2 kids—students at her school- eating out of dumpsters on King Ave.

To those fiscal conservatives who still believe spending money to feed children is not a good use of funds, I say, it not doing so will cost you more in the long run. Numerous studies have shown simply missing breakfast impairs the mental quickness of adults and children asked to perform fine motor skills or math problems. Now imagine you are routinely hungry? Such children don't absorb as much of the lessons they are taught in school both because their blood sugar is too low for their brain to function well and because they are preoccupied with thoughts of hunger. Such children may also be absent more due to illness or come to school with communicable diseases because it is the only place they get fed. Due to chronic malnutrition they often develop chronic health problems we as a society will pay for later. And they and are at higher risk of dropping out of school, becoming a teen

parent, becoming a drug addict or alcoholic or joining a gang thereby perpetuating generational poverty.

We recognize that the Backpack Program is a treatment not a cure for the problem of chronic hunger. We are using the program as leverage to involve more segments of our community in addressing hunger and its roots. We are coordinating feeding programs currently available through different social service agencies so the Backpack families get food for week-night meals; expanding EFNEP ( USDA's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program) that teaches people how to get the most for their food dollars and prepare staple food items; working with the Chamber of Commerce Enterprise Zone committee to explore attracting better paying jobs to MT and enhance job training programs.

In the meantime, we recognize that feeding children frees their families' limited resources so that the mother can eat and keep up her own strength and health and thus be better positioned to take advantage of job training programs.

**Special Heartfelt Thanks Slide**

To Soroptimist