

8 Reasons to Invest in Health Departments to Address Behavioral Health

- 1 Health Departments Serve All**

Health departments serve communities in every county and tribal reservation in Montana. Throughout the state, these agencies are working to prevent disease, promote wellness, and improve quality of life.
- 2 Local Control**

Health departments are the foundation of Montana's de-centralized public health system. Montana state law and DPHHS regulations assign local public health authorities – local boards of health and health officers – the duty to address issues of public health importance.
- 3 Experience and Knowledge**

Health Departments bring experience and knowledge. DPHHS and other state agencies rely on health departments to address leading causes of mortality and morbidity among Montanans, including prevention of cancer and cardiovascular disease, and work to promote wellness for children, families, and underserved populations.
- 4 Impartial Partner**

Public health departments are like Switzerland: neutral partners in a competitive field. Because health departments typically do not compete with hospitals and clinics for patients and billing opportunities, they are able to work with many partners with little or no competitive tension.
- 5 Community Engagement**

Health departments specialize in community engagement. High-functioning departments and tribal community leaders are experienced in practices needed for effective community collective action: community assessment; building public awareness; stakeholder identification, coordination, and strategic planning; community empowerment; and evaluation.
- 6 Prevention Focused**

Health departments are focused on all types of prevention. They have experience working across the prevention spectrum, from primary prevention (preventing a disease or condition before it exists) to secondary prevention (identifying and treating a condition early) to tertiary prevention (actions that reduce harm and facilitate healing).
- 7 Existing Infrastructure**

Health departments are part of an existing system of services. Existing DPHHS contracts with all local health departments mean this work can happen quickly and efficiently. All local health agencies maintain a master contract with DPHHS that allows the state to write "task orders" to fund and achieve shared objectives. This system has been used for years to fund and pursue chronic disease prevention throughout the state.
- 8 Workforce Development**

Health departments can address workforce challenges. Local and tribal public health agencies are durable organizations that can provide collaborative work environments, institutional memory, and wages and benefits to attract and retain qualified workforce.

How to Invest in Health Departments to Address Behavioral Health

Improving Montana's behavioral health system and building mental wellness and resilience of Montanans is a huge job that cannot be accomplished entirely from Helena by Legislators or staff at DPHHS. This work will require local energy and ideas from local leaders, and it will look different in Kalispell than it does in Big Timber, Livingston, Rocky Boy, Sidney or Hamilton.

Fortunately, Montana's local and tribal health departments offer an existing network of organizations in every county and tribal community through which state leaders can empower, support and fund local efforts to build mental wellness and resilience and prevent bad outcomes. These locally-run health departments- required under Montana state law to address issues of public health importance - can be used to address the state's biggest public health challenge: improving behavioral health.

Here is one way this could happen.

- 1** Every local health department in the state has a master contract with DPHHS that allows the state to fund local agencies to address public health priorities.
- 2** DPHHS uses these master contracts with locals to address various public health challenges – chronic disease, cancer prevention, tobacco use – through 15 prevention regions, each led by a local health department. Those regions are shown in the map.
- 3** This system is not currently used to address behavioral health in counties and tribal communities in Montana. But it could be used by DPHHS to fund work that makes sense in these regions, and within a framework provided and supported by DPHHS and statewide partners. This system could be a unifying force within the regions, allowing work that includes all types of prevention as well as community engagement for mental health service providers.

