

**The Big Picture: Using Data to Tell the Story**  
**Montana's Approach to Data and Information Gathering**  
Presented by Sherrie Downing, Montana Council on Homelessness Staff

- ◆ Montana has used a wide range of data and information sources to create a comprehensive report, *Homeless in Montana*, which has been widely disseminated to educate, inform, and build a constituency around the issue of homelessness. Some of the data sources include:
  - Montana's point-in-time *Survey of the Homeless*
  - U.S. Census
  - Agency specific data (e.g., the Department of Public Health & Human Services, including the Addictive & Mental Disorders Division, the Office of Public Instruction, the departments of Commerce and Corrections, the Montana Board of Crime Control and others)
  - Montana's biannual Prevention Needs Assessment
  - Private sector information sources, including associations and foundations
  - National studies, best practices, and statistics
  - Federal programs (e.g., Healthcare for the Homeless and Head Start)
  - By the time we do an update of the report, the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) & Client Database System (CDS) will also provide rich sources of additional data about the homeless persons served by the State's Human Resource Development Councils.
  
- ◆ There are several reasons for using multiple data sources:
  - The *Survey of the Homeless* provides a necessary and valuable snapshot of the homeless in Montana, but it has some drawbacks.
  - Using supplemental sources provides a more comprehensive look at the issue.
  - Numerous agencies are gathering highly reliable data. Just the act of making contact to determine what is *available* generates interest and support for this issue.
  - Rather than looking at this issue strictly through the self-report mechanism of a survey, supplemental data sources provide a big picture look at many of the issues common to homelessness. These also lend mechanisms for creating a matrix that will allow us to focus targeted efforts on specific subgroups.
  
- ◆ On the horizon – *innovations*:
  - AmeriCorps VISTA projects
    - VISTAs have been approved and will be recruited through the Prevention Resource Center VISTA Project. One of them will help build capacity for and through the Council.
    - A second VISTA will be recruited to help implement the activities set forth in an AmeriCorps Planning Grant funded by the Montana Office of Community Service. Planning grant activities will include an Awareness Tour that involves visiting each of Montana's seven population centers and at least two reservations.
  - A senior from the local alternative high school will serve as Council intern for her senior project. Activities will include an in-depth look at the issue of homelessness among local adolescents and young adults.