

# Snapshots

**Snapshots** is a Rocky Mountain Development Council publication offering a view from the top, highlighting RMDC's work in south-central Montana communities.

## An Ombudsman Lifeline

**Senior citizens** in Lewis & Clark, Meagher, and Jefferson counties facing tough changes consider Jeannie Downs a lifeline. Officially, Jeannie is an ombudsman—an advocate—for older adults considering or living in assisted living and nursing home facilities. “It may be the fiercest blizzard of their lives,” Jeannie says. “Vision, hearing, and mobility losses have already constricted their world. Now the landmarks of their lives are disappearing: familiar settings and routines; freedom to come and go; the taste of their own cooking.

As an advocate for seniors facing these enormous changes, Jeannie can't stop the storm. “Instead,” Jeannie allows, “I sit and enter their slower rhythm; I listen to their stories. I witness their pain and fear—and then their growing acceptance. Sometimes I can spot a small, concrete change that will ease their transition: a cup of coffee **with** cream before breakfast; a new menu option; a small adjustment in routine. Mostly, I listen.”

Long-term care ombudsmen around the nation abide by a critical code of ethics: acting on a senior's behalf only with his or her permission; respecting all parties in a conflict; honoring the challenges that staff face; remembering that family dynamics predate mom or dad's transition to assisted living. “I try to offer and model respect,” Jeannie reports. “I can't turn back the clock, but I can be a handhold, a steady presence for folks who have, in past times, been a handhold for others. We lean on each other.”

RMDC's Area IV Agency on Aging Senior Services Resource Center staff assist seniors and their families in many ways: Medicare guidance; referrals to housing, home health, transportation, and legal assistance; case management for Medicaid-eligible individuals; and ombudsman assistance for those in or considering long-term care facilities.



91-year-old Rita Colen, a resident of Son Heaven Assisted Living in Helena, looks forward to her visits with Ombudsman Jeanne Downs.

## Head Start Family Advocates – Weather Proofing Families

Head Start teachers remember Dewey who at age four seemed almost beyond the program's reach. He'd been expelled from other preschools. He was disruptive and uninterested. More critically, Dewey's parents were at their own wit's end—frustrated, embarrassed, and close to giving up on their own parenting skills. They felt as if they'd already failed their kid.

Head Start staff, rather than being discouraged, welcomed Dewey and his family. While Dewey's teacher worked hard to engage him in creative learning, the family's designated Advocate met with his parents.

Head Start's mission focuses on family well-being as much as student achievement. Seven Head Start Family Advocates mentor the families of all 248 students in the Tri-County area. "Our job," says Advocate Jaymie Sheldahl, "is to empower, strengthen, and encourage families. We refer them to needed services such as Child Care Partnerships, energy assistance, county health, food stamps. We talk through problems, goals and possible next-steps."

"We're compassionate generalists," explains Advocate Christina Hine-Reber. "Head Start families live on so little money. The hurdles they face are often overwhelming. We can't 'fix' their lives, but we can walk next to them, suggest resources and enjoy them."

"If we can help parents build on the love they feel for their children and realize that they have what it takes to raise them well, we've done our job," Sheldahl says.

Dewey graduated from Head Start a transformed child—a youngster eager to learn. Dewey's parents graduated from the program as well, strengthened by the knowledge that they could provide the wise, loving guidance that Dewey will need to weather his growing up years.

In the kitchen, dad James cooked pancakes with his sons, James and Conner.



Head Start family events, including RIOT (Reading Instead of Television) kickoff, give Family Advocates an opportunity enjoy entire families. Signe Ask visited with student Miriam's parents Ben and Autumn.



## Preventing Homelessness

For 12 years, Casey and her daughter Meg had created a solid home for themselves as single mom and daughter. Casey's job as an administrative assistant for one of Helena's large medical insurance companies provided decent pay, health benefits, and a measure of security.

When Meg got pregnant at 15, the ground shifted. Casey and Meg welcomed the baby into their lives and adapted to the routines and pleasures of a new child. But at seven months, the baby died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Meg had received no child support to buffer hefty new-baby costs. Now, mother and daughter faced enormous medical transportation, autopsy, funeral and burial costs. Casey fell behind in rent. Her landlord asked her to leave.

Casey began the daunting process of seeking different kinds of financial assistance. To assist with apartment costs, area organizations referred Casey to RMDC's Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-housing (HPRP) program. In January 2010, Casey met with Program Manager Micheala Fencik and completed her application. A month later, she received a security deposit and first month's rent for a new apartment.

Today, Meg is continuing her high school education. Casey's work remains secure. Not long ago, Casey wrote Micheala, "Thank you from the bottom of our hearts. We truly feel as if we've been given a fresh start. This new apartment doesn't remind us of the baby's death so directly. We can't imagine what would have happened to us without this program's help."

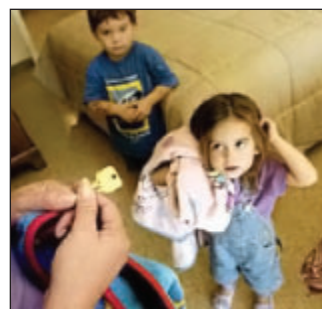


Program Manager Micheala Fencik works at RMDC's Jackson Street Center.



## The Face of Homelessness

On the night of January 28, RMDC and a host of other social service agencies undertook this year's *Point in Time Survey* of individuals and families with no housing or only precarious housing. The survey, conducted in Lewis



& Clark, Broadwater and Jefferson counties, was one part of a nationwide effort.

**In our tri-county area, over 400 people were identified as homeless. Of those 98 were children. 110 were women. 67 were vets. 91 slept outside.**

## Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-housing

HPRP funds were authorized by the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Short- and medium-term rental or utility assistance is available (a) to prevent families and individuals facing financial crisis from becoming homeless and/or (b) to re-house folks who are already homeless. Most, but not all recipients have jobs and can sustain housing costs after they receive HPRP assistance.



Roger Thorvilson and Concetta Eckel, both baby-boomer RSVP volunteers, help low and moderate income seniors submit tax returns every Thursday morning's throughout tax season at the Helena Senior Center. The AARP-Tax Aide Foundation oversees this critical volunteer service.

## Weathering Loss

Four years ago, Rachel lost her husband, Phil. They'd been married 25 years. With Phil's encouragement, Rachel had reshaped her fulfilling education career into part-time consulting contracts. After Phil's death, Rachel faced widowhood's gray, paralyzing fog. A grief support group helped. But the fog hung on. A friend of Rachel's introduced her to Rocky Mountain Development Council's Retired Senior and Volunteer Program—RSVP

Rachel started out cautiously with RSVP. She said OK to having her name put on the

“on call” list for short-term requests: working a reception desk for the Montana Nonprofit Association conference and cheering on walkers during the Race for the Cure. Now, Rachel also donates four hours each week guiding school kids through the Montana Historical Society and another three at ExplorationWorks.

“I never quit missing Phil,” says Rachel. “But I’m glad that someone pointed me toward RSVP. I get out of the house. I’ve got great new friends who understand. I’ve learned new teaching strategies. Mostly I needed a **reason, a push** to think about other folks and help somebody else.”

RSVP serves as a “job service” for volunteers 55 years of age and older, matching each volunteer’s skills, interests, and available time with the skills, interests and time commitments that nonprofits need. More than 450 volunteers work with 90 nonprofit organizations in Lewis & Clark, Broadwater, and Jefferson counties.

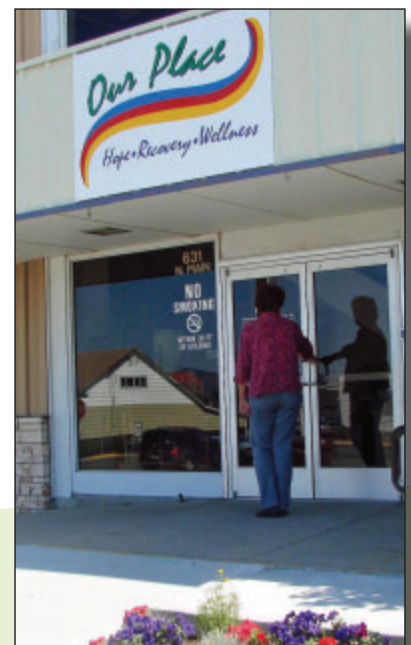
RSVP is one of four volunteer programs administered by RMDC. Individuals 55 and over qualify for RSVP, Foster Grandparents, and Senior Companions. Folks of any age can volunteer with the COMPEER program.

## Recovering

*Our Place*, a consumer-driven, consumer-run Drop-in Center opened officially just seven months ago. This welcoming social center promotes and encourages recovery for folks who have experienced mental illness and/or co-occurring substance abuse issues. Not a treatment or crisis facility, *Our Place* provides a much needed buffer from the gloom of loneliness and isolation for those working to recover from mental illness and substance abuse. Folks come to *Our Place* for social activities, peer support, help in obtaining services, and, most critically, relaxation and fun. They find a piano, a pool table, a television, conversation areas, knitting and writing classes, and most of all, acceptance. Use of *Our Place* has grown steadily over the fall and winter. By February 2010, *Our Place* hosted an average of 54 client-consumers each day.

**David L:** *“Our Place is a safe environment . . . that encourages me to grow and seek my highest goals and that lets me give back to the community . . .”*

**Anonymous consumer:** *It’s excellent to have a place to meet friends and be together and have a social life. It’s nice to know the community appreciates us.”*



## Keeping Warm by the Numbers

### Rocky Mountain

#### Development Council

administers three programs that offer assistance to folks who face the unreality of being cold in their own homes or the even more horrifying prospect of losing power over unpaid heating bills.

In Broadwater, Jefferson, and Lewis & Clark—the numbers tell the story of need AND our improving ability to help.

#### Low Income Energy Assistance Program

2,700 applications will be approved this season.  
23% increase over the previous year.

#### Weatherization Projects

240 homes will be weatherized this year.  
74% increase over the previous year.

#### Energy Share Assistance

34 Energy Share Grants awarded through February 2010.

55% increase with the highest demand still anticipated.

#### Free Firewood

80 households have been given free firewood through February 2010.  
100% increase this winter.



### One Recipe for Warming Up a Chilly Home

**Step 1:** Apply to RMDC for Weatherization Assistance.

**Step 2:** Invite the Weatherization Crew and their blower door to come to your home. That red blower door is an ingenious device that measures air drafts and tracks their origins.

**Step 3:** Let the crew take action. In this case, they are blowing insulation into spaces and crevices that have been leaking heat.

**Results:** Satisfied customers

**RMDC**  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN  
DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

### Weatherization Program

Name: Nelson, Mt. 59602

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

WEATHERIZATION PROGRAM - CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY

For each item below, circle the number to the right that best fits your level of satisfaction and then circle the number to the far right that best describes the level of importance that particular item has for you.

Satisfaction	Importance				
	1	2	3	4	5
1	1	2	3	4	5
2	1	2	3	4	5
3	1	2	3	4	5
4	1	2	3	4	5
5	1	2	3	4	5

The service provided by the utility personnel.

The service provided by the energy auditors.

The service provided by the people who worked to seal around your home to test the weatherization measures.

The service provided by the people who inspected the furnace and other combustible appliances?

The service provided by the people who removed or installed a new furnace (if applicable).

The service provided by the people who repaired or installed a new hot water heater (if applicable).

The improvement in the comfort level of your home since the work was done.

The overall quality of your Weatherization experience.

Suggestions for Improvement or General Comments (write on back if necessary):  
*The weatherization crew was very professional and the work was done in a timely manner. I am very happy with the results.*

Please return this survey in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope.

## ISSUE 3

### Spring 2010

# Weathering the Storm

Devoted to the myriad ways  
RMDC helps people navigate  
difficult times.

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## Storm Proofing Your Financial Life

Most Saturday mornings, the Neighborhood Center Dining Room is jam-packed with folks taking either a Budget and Money Management Course or a First Time Home Buyers' Workshop. Beki Brandborg teaches both and corrals experts from around the community who share their professional expertise and experience. Community businesses and organizations, including Rocky Mountain Development Council, team up so that Beki can offer these practical, proven classes for folks who want to escape or avoid personal financial storms.

**Budget and Money Management Class** participants are taught how to live below their means and transform pocket change into retirement travel. They discuss how to improve their credit scores, clean up bad credit histories, and just plain save. **First Time Home Buyer** students learn how to find the right loan for themselves and how to choose an appraiser, a building inspector, a realtor, and a lending institution. Graduation from either class comes with newfound financial credibility and flat-out financial rewards.

### Community Sponsors:

American Federal Savings Bank, A.W.A.R.E. / Montana Home Choice Coalition, Career Training Institute, First Montana Title Company, Helena Abstract and Title Company, Helena Association of Realtors, Helena Building Industry, Helena Community Credit Union, Helena Housing Authority, Montana Board of Housing, Montana Credit Unions for Community Development, NeighborWorks Montana, Moore Appraisal Firm, Mountain West Bank, Northwestern Energy, Pillar to Post Inspection Services, Inspect It 1st Home Inspections, Helena Area Housing Task Force, Valley Bank, First Interstate Bank, and Rocky Mountain Development Council.



Suffice it to say that instructor Beki Brandborg believes in what she's teaching and has fun doing so. For more information go to: [www.MontanaFirstTimeHomeBuyers.com](http://www.MontanaFirstTimeHomeBuyers.com)