

October 21, 2023

Billings, Montana

To Whom It May Concern,

The four signatories of this letter are aware of the recent reports about substandard practices at The Billings Food Bank. We have heard similar stories over the past 25-35 years and experienced our own difficulties working with the Food Bank thus, we agreed to share some of our insights.

Billings, Montana, population 117,445 (2021), is the largest city in 500-mile radius. As such, Billings is the healthcare, banking, legal, retail, and social services hub for over 250,000 residents in eastern Montana, the western Dakotas and northern Wyoming. Over 800 nonprofits in the Yellowstone County area help address various social service needs, fund disease-specific research, and support cultural and community benefit institutions and programs.

Our educational and experiential backgrounds motivated each of us to volunteer time as community wellness advocates. We met through our volunteer efforts namely The Nutrition Coalition, Billings Action for Healthy Kids (a partner of Montana Action for Healthy Kids), The Billings School Health Advisory Committee (appointed by the Billings School Board), Healthy By Design (a community health coalition hosted and coordinated by RiverStone Health, St. Vincent Healthcare, Billings Clinic), Best Beginnings of Yellowstone County (hosted by United Way). We have worked together for over 20 years, in some cases longer.

The volunteer organizations listed above sought to bring best practices to individual public and private institutions and charitable organizations based in Yellowstone County. And to foster collaboration between entities whose work overlapped to reduce duplication of efforts and maximize the impact of grants, government and private funding, charitable donations, and volunteer hours.

Over the past 35 years organizations we volunteer for have made numerous attempts to engage Billings Food Bank Director, Sheryle Shandy and the Billings Food Bank Board in collaborative efforts to ensure that food donations in the Billings area are equitably distributed amongst organizations that provide food relief and that these organizations in turn provide the healthiest meals or food boxes possible in an equitable and dignified manner to those seeking aid. Ms. Shandy has rebuffed all such efforts. The Billings Food Bank Board has also refused to meet to discuss concerns.

Many other health and wellness organizations and advocates in our community have reported similar difficulties working with the Billings Food Bank. Worse yet we have heard, and in some cases witnessed, hungry people turned away despite large reserves of food on hand; food boxes containing nothing more than coffee, powdered coffee creamer and other non-nutritive items; and reports of food left to rot.

In October of 2017, after an 14-month-long investigation by the Department of Health and Human Services, the Senior Commodity Food Program, was removed from The Billings Food Bank and reassigned to Family Services, Inc. Details contained in an article describing the changeover, published in the November 6, 2017 issue of The Billings Gazette, suggest that many of the issues the four of us had heard about are true and a deeper investigation of the Billings Food Bank practices is warranted.

https://billingsgazette.com/news/local/family-service-takes-over-program-that-provides-food-to-senior-citizens-in-billings/article_07d021ba-fe8a-529d-ae3d-75bb6471d080.html

Family Service, which provides food to nearly 1000 families a week, functions as the de facto food bank for Yellowstone County. It also provides food to pantries in other eastern Montana counties. Still, with an estimated one in six Montanans struggling to get enough healthy food to eat all month long, there is room in Billings for the Food Bank. Our goal is not to close the Billings Food Bank. Rather, we want the management of the food bank to comply with all recognized best practices for food banks and for charitable organizations. We urge the print and broadcast journalists to use their research and publication skills to make this happen.

Sincerely,

Kathy Aragon. Karen Sanford Gall, Bernie Mason, Virginia Lee Mermel