

## **AoA Older Americans Month 2008 Program Champion**

**Project:** Northern Transit Interlocal

**Organization:** Northern Transit Interlocal

### **Project Description**

North Central Montana's prairies are home to more cattle than people. In the last decade the population has dwindled making small town Montana even smaller. Shelby, Conrad, Cut Bank and Browning struggle to keep businesses local and profitable. Sunburst, Dutton, and similar size towns have lost grocery stores and pharmacies. Private bus lines eliminated routes in the last decade. It was just not profitable for them to operate.

North Central Montana decided to take action. The communities of Shelby, Conrad and Cut Bank and Toole, Pondera and Glacier counties formed Northern Transit Interlocal in the fall of 2005. The six entities formed an Interlocal committed to re-initiating, governing and sustaining a regional transportation program for the benefit of the residents and visitors of North Central Montana. Two Area Agencies on Aging donated time and a vehicle for the Interlocal to succeed. Both Area Agencies had established transportation systems within parts of the region but realized that a regional system would benefit not only the elderly but also all ages. "WE are all in this together," stated Deb Pate, Area III Agency on Aging out of Conrad.

Funds necessary to create and sustain the service were secured from various sources, including the city and county governments, Montana Department of Transportation, Opportunity Link, and Northwest Healthcare.

"Lack of access to affordable and convenient transportation is a barrier to people meeting their basic needs. Transportation is a priority in our work plan. Collaborating with entities to develop new transit programs or to expand the services of existing providers is one way we can begin to break down the fundamental roots perpetuating poverty," stated Terrance Munson, Executive Director of Opportunity Link. This statement was made with the donation of an \$80,000 check from Opportunity Link.

Montanans are independent and appreciate the unique beauty of the Eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains. Change is blowing in the region and transportation is one of the keys of this transformation.

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