

Group studies 'philanthropic divide' in rural communities

By John Harrington
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Philanthropic foundations in Montana enjoyed a 12.8 percent increase in assets last year, totaling \$404 million in assets in 2006 versus \$358 million in 2005, according to figures compiled by The Foundation Center in New York.

Despite the gains, Montana continues to rank 48th in the country in foundation assets. The state ranks slightly better, 46th, in grantmaking by in-state foundations, at \$23 per capita, versus \$108 per capita nationally.

To help bridge what local nonprofit advocates call the "philanthropic divide" between states with the least foundation assets and those with the most, the Washington-based National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy is preparing a study to assess the philanthropic needs of rural America.

"We're traveling around the country talking with rural nonprofits, discussing what their needs are and what might be some strategies for increasing philanthropy in rural areas," said researcher Rachael Swierzewski.

Bill Pratt, project coordinator for the Helena-based Big Sky Institute for the Advancement of Nonprofits, said foundations give to groups they're familiar with, and that breaking them out of that comfort zone can be a challenge.

"They give to what they're comfortable giving to, and they've got thin skins when they're

criticized," he said.

Swierzewski and another researcher traveled the state this week, holding focus groups in Lewistown and Havre in addition to Helena. The duo met Friday with representatives of a wide range non-profit groups in the area, from Helena Food Share to Montana Artists Refuge.

She said the rural environment of Montana is different from that in Kentucky, Florida and Texas, other states that have been part of the current study.

"Montana works on a different scale. There's a perception that you come to Montana and the whole state is rural," she said. "But there are different types of rural in Montana, and the groups in Havre and Lewistown see themselves as a whole different type of rural as groups in Helena."

The percentage growth of Montana's foundation assets last year was more than twice the 5.8 percent growth seen in the larger states. But in absolute dollars, foundations in the 10 wealthiest states grew by \$18.72 billion from 2005 to 2006, while those in the 10 poorest state gained just \$1.07 billion.

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