

**EMBARGOED UNTIL March 7, 2006**

CONTACT: Sylvia Burgos Toftness  
Northwest Area Foundation  
651-225-7704

60 Plato Boulevard E.  
Suite #400  
St. Paul, MN 55107  
T: 651.224.9635  
F: 651.225.7701  
www.nwaf.org  
info@nwaf.org

## **Montanans are Realistic – and Optimistic – About Prospects for Their Communities**

### **New Study Reveals Montanans Resemble the Nation, Saying:**

- ***Nearly half know someone who works two jobs and still struggles to get by***
- ***It's important for local elected officials to help people struggling to make ends meet***
- ***Healthcare, affordable housing and good-paying jobs should be priorities for local officials***

ST. PAUL, Minn. (March 7, 2006) – A nationwide survey released today by the Northwest Area Foundation reveals a state – and nation – acutely aware of people's financial struggles, yet optimistic that the number of people struggling can be reduced.

The survey asked peoples' perceptions of, and priorities for, their own communities. Close to half of Montana's respondents say they personally know someone who works more than one job yet still struggles to make ends meet. Nearly three in 10 Montanans say they know "a lot" of people who work full-time jobs but still struggle to make ends meet.

Yet, the survey revealed a penchant for optimism mixed with realism: nearly two-thirds say they believe the number of people struggling in their communities can be reduced.

"We were impressed by both the reality and hope in the responses," says Karl Stauber, president and CEO of Northwest Area Foundation. "In our work, we're seeing that communities can make great strides when they're willing to look at their current situation, identify their strengths, and then work together – community members, elected officials, business leaders, educators and faith leaders – to plan and implement strategies that attack poverty at its roots."

"These findings also tell us that people are hungry for solutions. The good news is that there are bold communities and innovative locally-elected officials who are taking action, and making important improvements, right now," stresses Stauber. "Every month, we are discovering that communities – all across the country – are developing goals, implementing strategic plans, and recording real successes," he says. "We also are conversing with local elected leaders who are aware that there are people in their communities who are struggling, who understand the linkages between policy and poverty reduction, and who are striving to make lasting change."

The survey of 2,400 Americans included oversamples in Northwest Area Foundation's eight-state region, including Montana. According to the survey, about two-thirds of Americans (64 percent) and nearly half of Montanans (46 percent) believe a family of four needs at least \$40,000 per year to make ends meet – far exceeding the federal government's poverty threshold of \$19,806 annually.

The survey revealed that Montanans are clear about priorities for their local elected officials: Almost nine of 10 Montanans say it's important for local elected officials to help people who struggle to make ends meet, and half say they would be likely to pay more in taxes if they knew the funds would help these people. Montanans are more likely than the nation to say keeping businesses with good-paying jobs, improving healthcare problems and creating more affordable housing are the most important issues.

**Hard Work Doesn't Abate Tough Times**

Hard work does not exempt people from financial struggles. According to the study, half of Americans (and almost one-third of Montanans) say “a lot” of people in their local communities struggle to make ends meet, and nearly half personally know someone who works two jobs yet still struggles to get by.

The perception that a lot of people struggle dominates all geographic areas nationally – rural, urban, small city, towns – except for suburbs. Women, people of color, people with less education and people making less than \$50,000 per year are most likely to say “a lot” of people struggle in their communities. These same demographic groups also are most likely to say there are a lot of people in their communities who work full-time jobs but still struggle.

While the federal poverty threshold declares a family of four is impoverished if they make less than \$19,806 per year, Americans – and Montanans – say it takes a lot more income to get by. When asked how much a family of four needs each year, people surveyed said:

*How much income would you say a family of four needs to earn in a year in order to make ends meet in your community?*

	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>Montana</u>	
At least \$10,000	1 %	3%	
At least \$20,000	8 %	13%	
At least \$30,000	23 %	36%	(NOTE: U.S. federal poverty guidelines for a family of four is \$19,806 per year.)
At least \$40,000	25 %	20%	
More than \$40,000	39 %	26%	

Montanans also overwhelmingly feel an individual needs more than the federal government’s definition of poverty – \$10,160 – to make ends meet; 80 percent say a single adult needs more than \$10,000 to for a basic standard of living.

**Clear Priorities, Higher Expectations for Local Elected Officials**

While most Montanans are at least somewhat satisfied with the way things are going in their communities, clear priorities emerged for the state compared to the nation, including:

- Keeping and attracting businesses with good-paying jobs (89 percent vs. 77 percent nationally)
- Improving access and dealing with healthcare costs (85 percent vs. 74 percent nationally)
- Creating more affordable housing (70 percent vs. 55 percent nationally)

The vast majority of respondents feel that local elected officials should help people who are struggling, with about nine of 10 saying it is very or somewhat important, both in Montana and across the U.S. Likewise, four in 10 respondents cited better public transportation as a high priority.

Local officials get high marks for being knowledgeable: roughly seven in 10 people say their local elected officials are very or somewhat knowledgeable about people’s struggles to make ends meet (nationwide and in Montana). Similarly, most people say local officials would be willing to meet with them to talk about ideas for helping people. Montanans, however, are more likely to trust their local government, with 49 percent saying they trust it always or most of the time (vs. 39 percent nationwide).

*How often can you trust your local government to do what is right?*

	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>Montana</u>	
Always / Most of the time	38%	49%	*The margin of error for comparisons between the U.S. and Montana is +/- 10 percentage points.
Sometimes	41%	37%	
Rarely / Never	20%	13%	

**Optimism and Generosity Prevail**

Montanans say they are willing to do more, and pay more, to help people in their own communities. Indeed, the survey found that half of Montanans say they would be likely to pay \$50 more in taxes per year if they knew it would help people in their communities who are struggling:

<b>How likely would you be to:</b>	<b>U.S.</b>	<b>Montana</b>
Join with others in your community to discuss ways to help those struggling to make ends meet:	76 %	73 %
Take part in a church project to help people struggling to make ends meet:	78 %	76 %
Pay \$50 more a year in taxes if it would go to programs in your own community that help people struggling to make ends meet:	68 %	49 %
Talk to elected officials in your community about people's struggle to make ends meet:	70 %	62 %

Further, people across the state and nation are optimistic about the ability of people in their communities to reduce poverty. More than half (51 percent U.S., 63 percent Montana) of respondents say their community effectively deals with local problems, and nine out of 10 say their communities are home to willing and capable citizens:

	<b>U.S.</b>	<b>Montana</b>
<i>There are many skilled, capable people in my community</i>	<b>87%</b>	<b>98%</b>
<i>Most people in my community are willing to help neighbors</i>	<b>86%</b>	<b>91%</b>
<i>There are people in my community willing to help those struggling</i>	<b>88%</b>	<b>90%</b>
<i>I would like to do more to help people struggling in my community</i>	<b>90%</b>	<b>82%</b>

“Local elected officials play critical roles in economic development and poverty reduction. You get elected because people want you to be their voice. But you need to stay in tune with people in order to do that. It’s a two way street,” said Peggy Beltrone, Cascade County Commissioner. “You need to continue to touch base with the community, and to be in it for the long haul.”

For additional information about this survey, and for downloadable graphics and charts generated by survey findings, see [www.nwaf.org](http://www.nwaf.org).

The Northwest Area Foundation is dedicated to helping communities reduce poverty for the long term. The Foundation works on strategic efforts with a small number of rural, urban, and American Indian reservation communities, and the organizations supporting these efforts, in its eight-state region: Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. These states were served by the Great Northern Railway, founded by James J. Hill. In 1934, Hill’s son, Louis W. Hill established the foundation. Foundation assets were approximately \$452.5 million as of March 31, 2005. The Foundation does not accept unsolicited grant requests. For additional information, visit [www.nwaf.org](http://www.nwaf.org), or call 651-224-9635.

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Lake Research Partners conducted this telephone survey among 2,400 Americans age 18 and older from Dec. 14-22, 2005. A total of 800 interviews were conducted nationwide, and oversamples of 200 each were conducted in the eight states served by Northwest Area Foundation (Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, South Dakota, North Dakota, Iowa and Minnesota). For the national data, oversamples were weighted down to reflect their true proportion in the country. The data were weighted slightly by gender, race/ethnicity, age and region. The margin of sampling error for the national results is +/- 3.5%. The margin of sampling error for comparisons between the national and state data is +/- 10%.