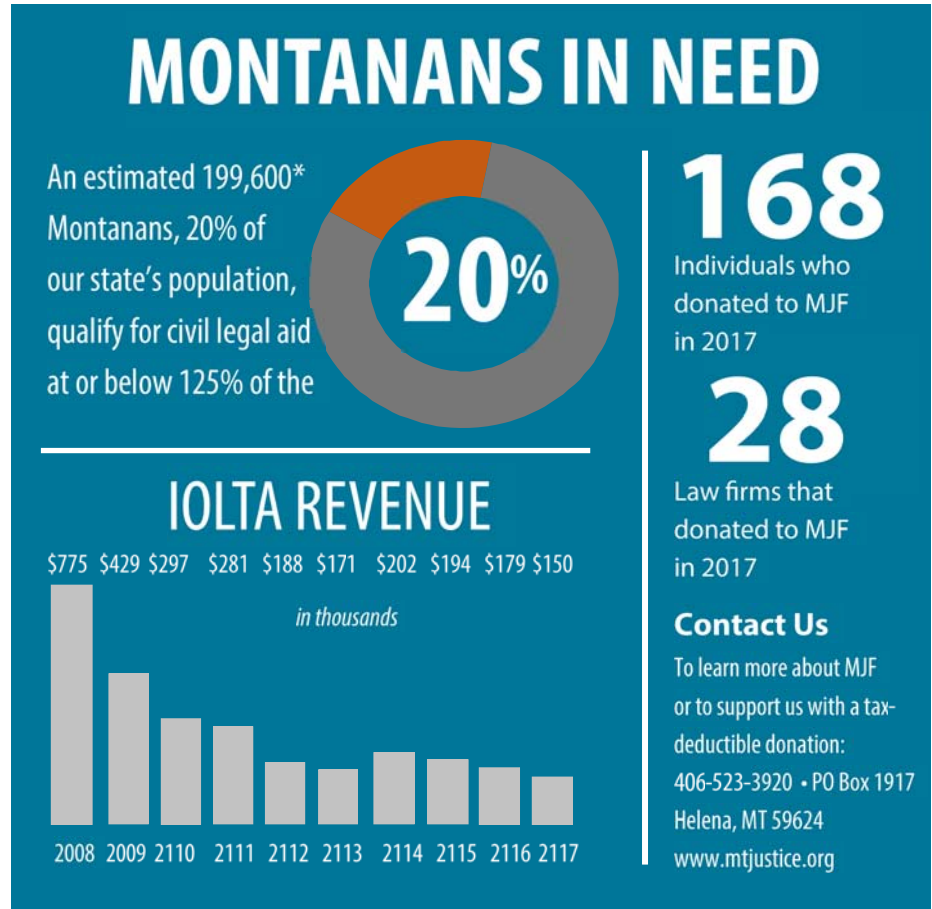


Attorneys' IOLTA compliance helps sustain Montanans' livelihoods, health and families

The Montana Justice Foundation and the State Bar of Montana recently conducted the 2017 IOLTA (Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts) compliance reporting process. While completing the annual certification process is mandatory, reporting is much more than simply fulfilling a professional obligation. Certifying IOLTA accounts is a valuable way Montana attorneys support civil legal aid programs and ensure greater access to justice for Montana's most vulnerable communities. Attorneys' diligence in maintaining trust accounts and reporting every year leads to big impacts in our civil justice system.

With the funds generated through IOLTA, cy pres awards, and donations from the legal community, the Montana Justice Foundation works to achieve equal access to justice for all Montanans through effective grant funding, promoting pro bono services, and developing more resources for Montanans in need of legal assistance. Our grant programs serve ordinary Montanans, particularly children, low-income families, Native Americans, survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse, elderly Montanans, and veterans. We support projects that help people stay in housing, receive medical care, escape abusive and violent environments, and rebuild their lives, and many of our current grant projects address the connection between legal problems and other challenges affecting Montanans' health and safety.

A new program from Montana Legal Services Association – one of Montana Justice Foundation's longstanding grantees – demonstrates an especially strategic and collaborative approach. MLSA joined with the Montana Primary Care Association to create the Montana Health Justice Partnership, a program that provides legal assistance to patients at several community health centers across the state. MLSA's Health Justice Partnership attorney works as part of a clinical team to address issues such as



* from the 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates

housing in disrepair, medical debt, family violence, denial of senior benefits, employment problems, health care access, and other issues than can impact patient health. The program recognizes that the populations most affected by barriers in accessing legal assistance to justice are also more likely to experience accompanying health problems – and that each type of problem can exacerbate the other. Through a single screening for multiple issues administered at the health center, the Partnership extends legal services to rural, migrant, and other hard-to-reach communities while spreading the cost and effort among a pool of partners.

Through the Health Justice Partnership, MLSA has had great success

working with the health care community and serving more clients. But, more importantly, it has also made a tangible difference in helping Montanans live healthier, more stable lives. For example, community health center staff identified a client in need of legal services after her abusive former spouse claimed he was not required to return their child after a visitation. The stress of the situation had exacerbated the client's mental health challenges, and she feared for the health and safety of her child if she were to lose primary custody. As a result of the screening at the health center, the client was referred to the MLSA attorney working for the partnership. The attorney successfully negotiated a settlement

agreement that maintained the client's primary custody of the child, kept the Permanent Order of Protection in place, established a visitation agreement and safeguards for the child, and secured child support dating back almost a year. MLSA's work through the partnership afforded this client improved physical and mental health, long-term safety, financial stability, and the security of her child's well-being.

All told, Montana Justice Foundation distributed nearly \$400,000 in grant awards to 17 organizations across the state in 2017. Like MLSA, many of our grantee organizations provide direct legal representation. However, the range of civil legal aid services provided by our grantees is much broader, including mediation services, law-related training and education, and Court Appointed Special Advocate programs that recruit and train volunteers to serve as advocates for abused and neglected children in the court system.

While IOLTA revenue provides a critical base of support for these grant

programs – since 1986, Montana Justice Foundation has granted more than \$6 million in IOLTA funds – Montana's IOLTA program is still recovering from the severe drop in interest rates during the last decade, and IOLTA revenue has dwindled to a fraction of what it once was. In 2008, revenue from Montana IOLTA accounts totaled nearly \$775,000; in 2017, these revenues were less than \$200,000. Attorney compliance is more important than ever before in accomplishing the IOLTA program's goal of achieving justice for all, and the Montana Justice Foundation is immensely grateful to Montana attorneys for certifying and maintaining their IOLTA accounts.

Yet, with all the good work that IOLTA funding has accomplished, Montanans still face significant barriers to justice. With an ever-increasing recognition among our community that access to high-quality legal aid helps ensure the overall health, well-being, and security of low-income Montanans, we can continue to expand our work to increase access to justice for all Montanans. To

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make a tax-deductible contribution in support of legal aid as a critical component of vibrant, healthy, and successful communities, please visit www.mtjustice.org.



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