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ALERT

## Community leaders meet for a second year to revitalize early childhood in Missoula

Skylar Rispens

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Guest speaker Chelsea Bodnar gives a presentation on her work with Montana Pediatrics, a nonprofit that aims children in Montana, during United Way's second annual Early Learning Fellows program at the Missoula Public cohort of professionals working in various settings with children and their families.

Antonio Ibarra Olivares

Skylar Rispens

**T**he second cohort of the annual Early Learning Fellows kicked off at the Missoula Public Library on Monday to continue collaboration between professionals working in early childhood development.

The professional learning group will meet multiple times over the course of the school year to network, learn about early childhood systems and analyze local Kindergarten Entry Assessment data to develop action plans in their work.

“The kinds of challenges that young children and families face and the kinds of support that they need, those don’t come from just one sector in the community, they come from everywhere,” said Grace Decker, the local collaborative coordinator for Zero to Five Montana in Missoula County.

The participants come from professional backgrounds in a variety of settings including child care, preschool, early intervention, parenting, social work and other environments. The number of fellows doubled from last year.

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Although children and their families work with these people frequently, the professionals themselves rarely have the opportunity to interact and share their expertise, Decker said. The fellowship aims to change that by bringing the professionals together.

The fellowship is made possible through a partnership between Zero to Five, a local nonprofit that builds connections across the community to better serve children and their families, and the University of Montana Phyllis J. Washington College of Education and its Early Childhood Institute.

Danielle Bailey, who works with the UM preschool lab, returned for a second year as a fellow to continue to grow her network of local experts.

“I want to build bridges and connections between all the services and education surrounding early childhood and really get the message out to everyone about the importance of early childhood supports and services,” Bailey said.

Another returning fellow was Doug Rossberg, who works with Missoula County Public Schools as a pre-kindergarten to second-grade instructional coach for the district. Through the fellowship he’s grown a deeper connection to Jefferson preschool, he said.

As a fellow last year he was able to launch project Lead the Way at MCPS, which is a science curriculum specifically developed for the preschool.

“I feel like last year was a lot of learning,” Rossberg said. “I feel like this year it will be a little bit more of a 'choose your own adventure.' I feel like I have a lot of different directions I could go with it.”

At the first session, Dr. Chelsea Bodnar spoke about her work with Montana Pediatrics, a nonprofit of innovative physicians that aim to improve access to high quality pediatric care for families across the state. Montana Pediatrics’ work has exploded since the pandemic and the popularization of telehealth services.

“We can solve those problems,” Bodnar said. “We can be present for the kids.”

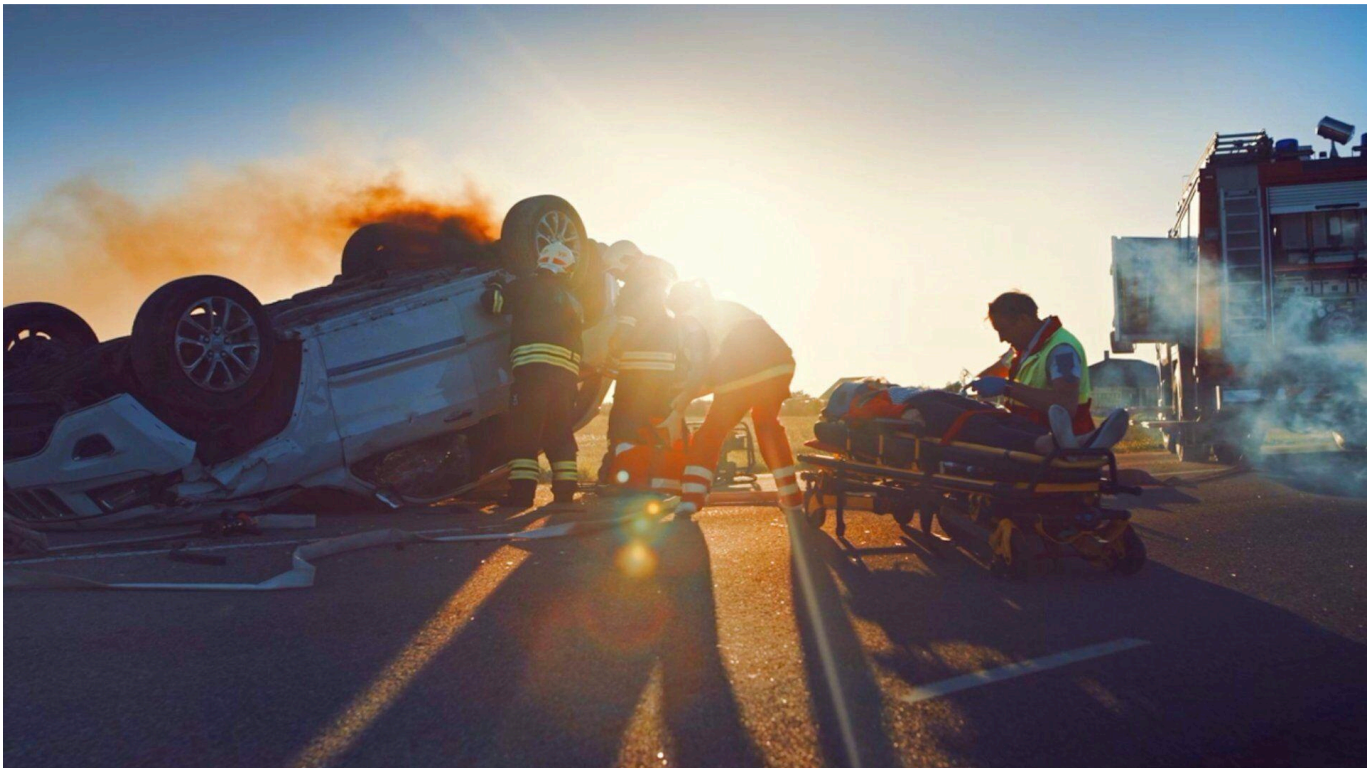
Through the use of technology Montana Pediatrics has expanded the ways it can serve families and children after typical office hours and weekends with Montana-based pediatricians.

In small groups, Bodnar had the fellows read through three examples of children receiving care through Montana Pediatrics to have them consider what types of social services could come together to better support that patient and their families.

“We used to think of telemedicine as a stopgap, but I’m actually really starting to believe it’s an incredible way to just show up and be present and also create culturally relevant community partners,” Bodnar said.

In the long term, Decker and Allison Wilson, who works with the UM College of Education’s Early Childhood Institute, hope that their fellows develop leadership skills to make change across the community.

“We want them to take tidbits of information and then opportunity that they learned from here and bring it back to their organization to initiate a new change idea,” Wilson said.



AEBs will now be required on all new cars sold in the US. Veuer’s Tony Spitz has the details.

**By Skylar Rispens**  
Education reporter

