

Vast Expenses

following the dollars on Montana's reservations



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Vast Expenses

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Money is spread thin across the country. Financial worries constrain the American dream, while government spending cuts sweep across state and reservation boundaries. For Montana's Native Americans, spending has to be stretched across vast expenses.

Over the past year, the United States federal government paid over \$3 billion from the Cobell and Salazar settlements for decades of mismanaging Individual Indian Money accounts, bringing in money to families and tribes across the nation and state.

But making ends meet remains a challenge for Montana's reservations; 33 percent of the state's Native American population lives in poverty.

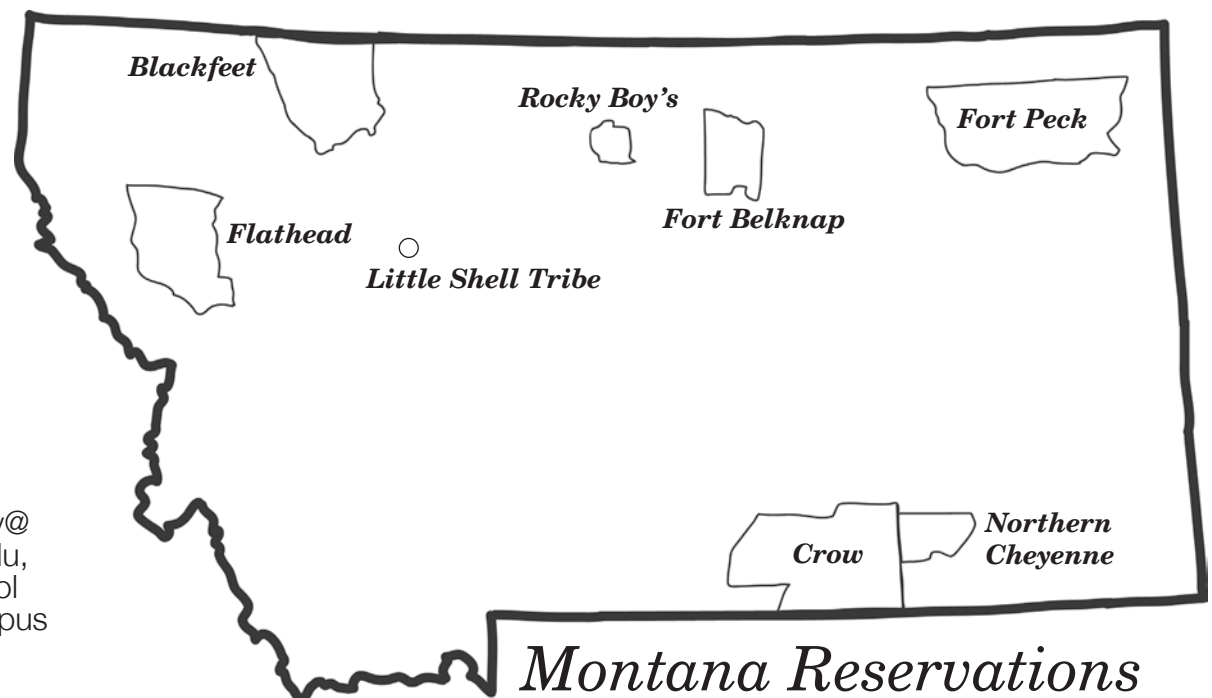
Stereotypes of money management in Indian Country focus on crooked tribal lawmakers and casinos as the only source of revenue. The University of Montana School of Journalism's Native News Honors Project seeks to cut through the superficial image of Native Americans and money to focus on the spending issues and decisions facing Montana's tribes.

Families on the Northern Cheyenne reser-

vation are still recovering from the 2012 fire season that destroyed more than 20 homes. Other homeowners on the Crow reservation, especially those seeking to buy houses, face years of bureaucratic hurdles and invisible homelessness.

Tribal members and descendants question enrollment in the Blackfeet and the high cost for maintaining tribal identity. For the landless Little Shell tribe, the price of keeping their culture alive has led them to depend on volunteers, while people on the Fort Peck reservation voluntarily fight high prices with an informal, trade-and-barter economy. Meanwhile, on the Fort Belknap reservation, the cost and availability of health care can be a life-or-death matter.

On reservations, spending does not fit a neat equation. It is complex and messy. The stories here span a variety of themes, ranging from researching centuries-old bloodlines to cutting through bureaucratic red tape. Each though, shows spending as a personal, familial and tribal affair, the impacts of which affect the day-to-day lives of Montana's Native Americans.



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Flipping the Coin

Finding health care on the Fort Belknap reservation



Jack Plumage sits in his living room while his granddaughter's friends retrieve some snacks from the kitchen. Plumage is one of relatively few American Indians in Montana who has the benefit of Medicare and Veterans Affairs to cover what the Indian Health Service cannot.

Story by TAYLOR W. ANDERSON
Photographs by HUNTER D'ANTUONO

Jack Plumage died once, but he's one of the lucky ones. He'd had a stroke and lay in his hospital bed when he died. He remembers having a vision before coming back, he says, five hours later.

He's 66 now. That's not considered particularly old. Not in most places in the country. But for a Native American living on one of Montana's seven reservations,

4

he's close to the horizon of the average life expectancy of about 68.

Plumage has one kidney. His left one died from diabetes and was replaced by his sister's kidney. The right one got a tumor on it, so it had to go.

"I went through surgery on a Friday, and they were just gonna take out three millimeters, it wasn't that big," Plumage says. "Then they decided they'd just take the whole kidney out. It might have spread, so they took it all out."

Plumage is lucky because he can access the country's health care sys-

tem without having to go through the Indian Health Service. The system is in place to provide health care, as mandated in federal treaties with the nation's 565 recognized tribes. But in Montana, it is underfunded and understaffed, unable to provide for people like Plumage and others.

Plumage, a descendant of both tribes on the Fort Belknap reservation, the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine, is a veteran, and for three decades his aging, muscular body has been in and out of health clinics across the Northwest for

dialysis, transplants and diagnoses not provided on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in northcentral Montana.

About 40 percent of Montana's Native Americans are uninsured, according to Montana Budget and Policy Center estimates, meaning a significant number of tribal members rely solely on the IHS.

Services such as child delivery and operations need to be outsourced to off-reservation clinics in nearby Havre, 47 miles away, and as far away as Billings, about 200 miles away from Fort



ABOVE | Plumage reaches into his refrigerator to retrieve his insulin. He takes around a dozen pills a day to manage his health and to keep his transplanted kidney functioning.

TOP | Plumage, 66, has run a long health gauntlet. He has had diabetes since 1984 and suffered from a stroke in 1996. A tumor wrecked one of his kidneys while his diabetes ravaged the other, leaving him to rely on dialysis until his sister, Jill Plumage, donated one of her kidneys.

Belknap Agency.

Put simply, the IHS needs more people like Plumage, the man with one kidney who doesn't believe he could have survived this long on local IHS care alone. Having Medicaid and later Medicare and Veterans Affairs insurance allowed Plumage to get the care not provided near this 40-miles-by-30-

miles prairie landscape reservation. It also didn't cost the IHS a dime.

It's common for the Fort Belknap Health Center to send patients to doctors in off-reservation towns for the care that can't be provided in the clean brick-and-mortar facility in the middle of the crumbling Agency roads. When a Native American patient without

insurance uses the IHS, the federally funded program is responsible for the bill.

Meanwhile, nurses in the Fort Belknap service unit were on a supply freeze in April, making due without basic supplies, like gauze, or more technical equipment, such as intravenous needles that deliver fluids to patients' hearts. They sometimes resort to using makeshift equipment to treat patients.

Nationwide, the IHS can't afford the need, so without insurance, Native Americans face grim health care scenarios.

In terms of people as dollars, patients in need of immediate treatment are costly, and there isn't enough money for preventative care. Plumage won't use the IHS anymore. He doesn't have to. He gets his pills there, but that's about it. He is insured and can drive west along the Montana Hi-Line and lazy Milk River to Northern Montana Hospital in Havre, 45 minutes away.

In the living room of his home in Fort Belknap Agency, with family pictures on the walls and family members sleeping upstairs and others playing downstairs, Plumage lifts his shirt to expose a deep and reddened scar. It runs down his stomach. Given his daily diet of insulin and pharmaceuticals, today, Plumage is lucky to be alive.

"There's been a lot of changes that I see in the IHS, from recruiting to care to all that," he says. "And a lot of the Indian people here, they don't realize that they should be getting better care. They really should. That's all they got when they go there."

People on Montana's seven reservations die younger than many others around the country. They're getting diabetes at an alarming rate. They have less money to live on, and the dollar has to go further at the grocery store or gas station. That means the processed foods at the Albertsons in Harlem make up a good portion of diets on this reservation.

Many on and near Fort Belknap are overweight and at risk of diabetes and other diseases. Parents are increasingly concerned with the obesity rates in schools. "Nearly 60 percent of the

40% of Montana Native Americans live without health insurance

students are in the abnormal weight category," said Julie King Kulbeck, who runs the tribally managed Diabetes Prevention Program.

Plumage is one of the 60 percent of Native Americans in Montana who have health insurance. Most people between the ages of 18 and 64 are uninsured, another national high among Native people. About one-in-five have private insurance, according to the Montana Budget and Policy Center.

In Montana, Native Americans rely heavily on the IHS for care, checkups, physicals and pharmaceuticals. Leslie Racine, a planning officer at the regional Billings IHS office, said the region has funding for about a quarter of the need.

According to a report filed this year, funding for the Billings IHS office decreased by a little more than a million dollars from 2012-2013. In its 2014 budget justification, the office is seeking to recoup that shortfall in its requested \$66.5 million.

American Indians and Alaska Natives are six and a half times more likely to die from alcohol-related illness than any other U.S. races; almost three times as likely to die from diabetes and twice as likely to be murdered or die unintentionally, according to IHS mortality disparity rates.

Waiting times in the state's IHS clinics are high. There aren't enough doctors or nurses to provide prompt care. The doctors who come don't stay long. They don't want to live anywhere near this rural reservation, says tribal councilwoman Patty Quisno. They'll

come fresh from school and stay for a few years before moving on. They come because working for IHS forgives \$20,000 per year in student loans for up to two years of service at the clinics.

In mid-April, there were 103 openings at IHS clinics throughout Montana. Another 10 were open in Wyoming. Jobs pay well, much more than the average wages made by the 20-30 percent who are employed on Fort Belknap.

A doctor came a few years ago from New York and another from West Virginia. Plumage liked the doctor from West Virginia, and the doctor liked it here. His wife didn't. So they moved back east, and the IHS facility here had an open position again. Today, it has open positions for medical officers, nurses, lab technicians and pharmacists.

Plumage says the facilities around here aren't hospitals. Hospitals birth babies and treat cancer patients and perform surgeries and typically have more patients than administrators. These facilities are clinics; Armories, as Plumage calls them.

"Indian Health used to be, not saying it isn't today, but it used to be a lot better in my opinion," Plumage said. "A lot better staffed, they had an ambulance crew."

He would know. He used to be the Fort Belknap service unit director. He was also tribal chairman once.

Plumage worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs on Fort Belknap in the 1980s when his physical tests spotted diabetes, the disease that would lead to a failing pair of kidneys, sending him away to the big hospitals in Oregon.

More recently, it was the cancer that sent him back to Portland. The doctors found a tumor on his right kidney in 2012 and decided to take the whole thing out. After battling an abscess after the surgery, Plumage has been feeling better.

Because he was insured, Plumage saved a big chunk of money for the Indian Health Service's Contract Health Service, which coordinates health care coverage for tribal members treated in off-reservation facilities.

6 He'd probably have ranked high on the Contract Health Service referral list—a 12-tiered ranking system



A cross marks an anonymous grave site at a cemetery off Highway 2 on the Fort Belknap reservation. The average life expectancy for American Indians living on Montana reservations is 67 — markedly lower than the United States average of 77.

for judging who can't wait to get to a hospital. "I usually just go to the VA whatever troubles me," Plumage said.

The VA bought Plumage plane tickets just fine, but it wouldn't reimburse him for the train tickets he bought for trips to doctors throughout the Northwest. He liked going through Glacier National Park on the train anyway, and the track follows the Hi-Line and Route 2 through the plains of eastern Montana.

He ended up paying for some train tickets and a knee surgery. A combination of Medicare, VA and the IHS has paid for everything else he's needed.

For those without insurance here, they have to either work or pray for health, or hope to make it onto the list for referral out of the IHS and into the Northern Hospital in Havre to see a doctor in a facility with more services.

Leslie Racine, the Billings IHS planning officer, put it another way. "We have to have one foot in the grave before they send us out," she said.

The IHS can't afford to send everyone to see a doctor off the reservation, so an IHS committee uses the 12-step evaluation to see who the Contract Health Service should send to the doctor on its tab and who can wait. Appeal times are slow, and it's the waiting they're sick of, and maybe sick from.

Administrators wait and see how much the federal government will give them, and then they adjust funds. If there are cuts, as there may be next year, fewer patients will get to the doctors off reservations, and more will wait.



Patty Quisno, 72, is the River Gros Ventre representative on the Fort Belknap Community Council and a former Indian Health Service employee. Quisno now provides oversight for tribal health entities on the reservation, other than the IHS. She is covered by Medicare and the private insurance she kept after retiring from IHS.

Many here are poor. Seventy to 80 percent don't have work and wait on either temporary jobs passing through with the seasons or government assistance.

There's a casino, gas station and no hotel on Fort Belknap. The largest employer is the tribal government. But even council delegates aren't much different than unemployed residents.

Councilors sat in chambers on a Tuesday, waiting for a quorum to arrive to start the meeting. Tribal President Tracy King was there, patched up after a run-in on the road with a cow. He didn't have insurance either at the time of his accident, and he said health care is an issue that should be addressed here.

The council knows the residents are suffering, and some express valid interest in addressing the issue from a leadership position.

"What we talked about was taking their Contract Health dollars, which is probably several million dollars, just taking that money and converting it to a universal reservation insurance policy, which would cover everybody," Quisno said.

President King, Buster Moore, Andy Werk and other tribal councilmembers agreed: There needs to be a better way

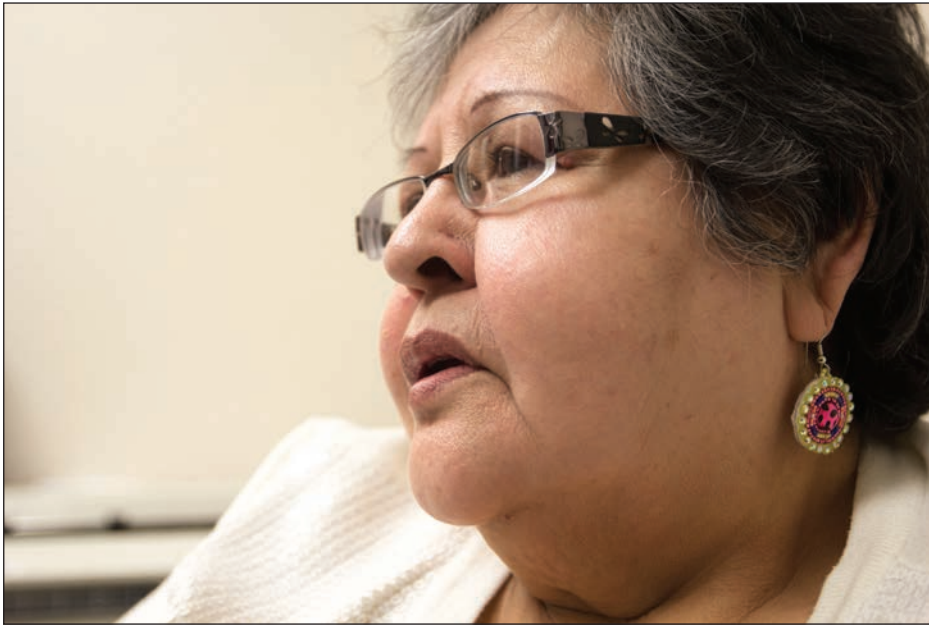
for tribal members to seek care. But that's a long way off.

Quisno worked for the Indian Health Service for 34 years before retiring in 1994. She's kept her private insurance after leaving the IHS, and she has Medicare. Some older residents here have that. The elderly typically use the health system more and cost more money to care for, and the IHS encourages people to sign up for Medicare.

Patients with insurance help earn IHS revenue, as the program bills treatment costs to insurance companies and health programs like Medicaid. The IHS expects to collect about \$120 million more next year from billing Medicaid, Medicare and private insurers, mostly because the 2010 Affordable Care Act expanded Medicaid in a number of states.

Kevin Howlett, head of the Flathead reservation's tribal health department, said more insured Native Americans is only one side of the coin. "There's a whole host of factors, and one thing I emphasize across the state is it doesn't do any good to get people on Medicaid if they go right by your clinic."

Howlett's program is one of two on reservations in Montana where the tribe runs its own department aside from the IHS, which Howlett says im-



Ethel Bear works at Fort Belknap Agency's tribal health center, an Indian Health Service-funded offshoot facility. Bear is responsible for patients' third-party billing, which brings money back into the IHS by billing a patient's insurance, such as Medicaid, if they have it.

proves care for people.

"IHS as an institution is more concerned with the preservation of the institution, rather than the status or improving the health of Indians," he said.

About 43 percent of Native Americans in Montana either have Medicare, Medicaid or private insurance. If more patients both had insurance and used the clinics on reservations, it would generate revenue and keep money from flowing out of the IHS's limited budget, leading to more money for improved care for Native Americans throughout the state.

Something has to change. For patients who use the IHS, there's nowhere else to go.

The young people from Fort Belknap typically aren't born in Fort Belknap anymore.

Plumage says his daughter was one of the last born in the Fort Belknap hospital before it was torn down and replaced by the current clinic, just a few blocks from his house.

The Fort Belknap service unit lost accreditation to deliver babies years ago. It couldn't afford it. Keeping a doctor on staff for the few deliveries each month wasn't worth it. Now, pregnant Native Americans are asked to apply for Medicaid before they are referred elsewhere. If they are denied Medicaid, the IHS will pay for the pregnancy care.

Relatively few Native Americans

in this state have Medicaid, the state- and federally funded program for low-income people. It's clear many are qualified. The average Native American in Montana made about \$26,000 a year, about \$16,000 less than whites.

Many Native Americans are eligible but either don't know or don't want to enroll in the federal program. In her office in the diabetes center, Kulbeck said she didn't have insurance because she couldn't afford it, and she didn't think she was eligible because she was working. But she didn't know whether she would meet the eligibility requirements. Under Montana's stingy Medicaid eligibility limitations, she probably wouldn't, but she doesn't know.

Twenty thousand more Native Americans would have been eligible if the state decided to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. With so many residents on Fort Belknap out of work, it's safe to say many would have met the expanded 138 percent poverty threshold. But, in April, a conservative state Legislature decided it would wait and spend two years reforming what it considers a broken system.

There are three parties around Fort Belknap when it comes to stances on Medicaid: the one that has it or is eligible for it, the one that isn't eligible to be on it, and the one that doesn't want to be on it.

Patty Getten works in the Tribal



Patty Getten works in the Tribal Insurance Department and says she will not sign up for Medicaid or any form of health care outside of the Indian Health Service. She wants the health care and education pledged by the federal government in the original treaties. Getten plans to rely on what was promised, even though she blames the Indian Health Service for mistreating her mother's diabetes, which Getten believes led to her death.

Insurance Department, and she'll never be on Medicaid. Her mother had diabetes and was on Medicaid. Her husband has had two heart attacks. But she says she won't pay for what's owed to her, referring to the federal treaty rights to health care promised to the nation's tribes. "As long as the water flows and the grass is green, I'll get my health care from the IHS," she says.

What's important to people here doesn't seem to be that they're dying. The IHS keeps people alive, but it's going to get tougher when federal bud-

get cuts sink in deep. The clinics were already cut back. Unless something changes and more people get lucky like Plumage, the system will fund fewer patients annually.

The people will continue waiting for preventative care. They'll keep dying, and unless the people can have ready access to the hospitals in Havre and elsewhere, they may die faster.

Plumage isn't dead yet. He struggles off his couch to his feet and walks around his house. Plumage lives.

Fractioned Identity

A grassroots push to change enrollment policy is dividing the Blackfeet tribe.

Story by HANAH REDMAN

Photographs by STACY THACKER

There is no future for Seth Fenner on the Blackfeet Nation.

Seth Fenner can't inherit the house he grew up in. The house that sits on the same land where his great-grandparents are buried. It's where his grandparents, Truman Hall and wife Joy, raised three children and many grandchildren, and it's where they still live and ranch.

Once Fenner's grandparents are gone, Fenner won't be allowed to use the tribal land he is ranching. He won't get employment preference on the reservation. He could be left with no options but to leave his home, his roots.

Fenner uses Hall's land and leases to run his ranch and make a living on the Blackfeet reservation—land and leases he can't get on his own, because he is not an enrolled member of the tribe.

"He can't run his cattle, he can't inherit our mutual home or tribal land, because he doesn't have a tribal enrollment card," Hall said.

The bed of an old, horse-drawn wagon sits at the entrance to the property with the words "Hall Ranch" and "Home Sweet Home" painted on it in white. It's a cozy home in the country on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. It's full of pictures of his family, going all the way back to the early 20th century.

Hall and his wife are both enrolled members of the tribe, and all three of their daughters are enrolled, too.

In 1962, the Blackfeet tribal council amended the constitution to include a blood quantum-based enrollment policy. Now, anyone born after Aug. 30, 1962, looking to enroll as a member of the Blackfeet tribe must prove they are one-quarter Blackfeet by lineage. This means an enrolled citizen must have



Truman Hall and his wife, Joy, stand outside their home on the Blackfeet reservation. Both are enrolled members of the Blackfeet tribe and lease the land on which their ranch sits. The couple hopes to leave it to their grandson one day, but with the current blood quantum requirements, their grandson isn't able to enroll.

at least—or the equivalent of—one full-blooded Blackfeet grandparent to barely meet the quantum criteria.

In the past year, a movement challenging the blood quantum requirements has created a rift throughout the tribe, polarizing citizens and challenging the very definition of Blackfeet identity. Supporters and opponents argue that a change to the current policy could affect the reservation on several levels, from political to financial.

Fenner doesn't have enough Blackfeet blood in him, by the tribe's standards, to be enrolled. It's a question of identity his grandmother remembers

puzzling Fenner as a child.

She remembers Fenner asking her, "Grandma, I'm dark as Grandpa. How come I can't be an Indian?"

The Blackfeet tribe has considered changing the enrollment policy before. In 1994, the tribal council petitioned the Bureau of Indian Affairs to change to a model based on lineal descent: If your parents are enrolled, so are you. The reply quickly shot down further discussion of the matter.

The BIA responded to the request with a letter warning the tribe that eliminating blood quantum as a mea-

sure of tribal enrollment could blur, or even eliminate, the relationship tribal members have with the tribe. As a result, this could endanger the Blackfeet Nation's federal recognition.

"A tribe does not have authority under the guise of determining its own membership to include as members persons who are not maintaining some meaningful sort of political relationship with the tribal government," the letter states.

It goes on to say that the Department of the Interior is "extremely reluctant" to approve an amendment that would jeopardize that



ABOVE | Gabe Grant is an enrolled member of the Blackfoot tribe and an active member of the Blackfoot Against Open Enrollment group. The main goal of the group is to keep the current blood quantum requirement in place.

TOP | The Blackfoot Against Open Enrollment group meets at the home of Gabe Grant and discusses why opening enrollment would hurt the tribe. The group is fighting to keep the current enrollment requirement because they feel the tribe will lose funds if more people are allowed to enroll.

idea of blood quantum and instead adopt a policy of lineal descent for up to three generations. Any individual whose parents, grandparents or great-grandparents were enrolled Blackfoot could enroll.

Another group opposes the change in enrollment policy: Blackfoot Against Open Enrollment. The two groups clashed in rallies, protests and confrontations last summer.

There are a little more than 17,000 enrolled Blackfoot members and approximately 3,000 registered descendants, according to estimates from the Blackfoot Tribe Enrollment Office. However, not all descendants of the tribe register with the enrollment office, so there could be many more living on or off the reservation.

Those against changing the policy say lack of a blood quantum requirement would eventually destroy the reservation, using the BIA response saying that doing so could result in the Blackfoot tribe losing its tribal status.

George Calfail, an opponent of changing the enrollment policy, holds a bleak and cynical view. He said he fears that once people who have no genetic connection to the Blackfoot tribe become enrolled and hold positions of power, they'll be more likely to sell out and terminate the reservation once they find out there's no money for them.

"We're fighting to stop things like this, and to try to preserve our land, to preserve the culture, to preserve what we are," Calfail said. "And if they open the rolls, that's what's going to happen. We're going to cease. You'll just read about us in a book."

Supporters of changing the system share the same fear of losing the reservation. Hall, whose grandson can't inherit his land because he is leasing it from the tribe, is worried that as the number of enrolled Blackfoot decreases and the number of descendants increases, the tribal land base will eventually pass out of the hands of the tribe and into the general population.

"The land is really what holds this reservation together," Hall said. "I'd like to see it so the Blackfoot reservation will always be here. I think that

relationship. It warns that if Native American tribes fail to demonstrate a measurable relationship between the tribe and its members, "the courts or Congress may well decide that a tribe has so diluted the relationship between a tribal government and its members that it has 'self-determined' its sovereignty away."

Now, nearly 20 years later, the issue of blood quantum has risen once again with a vocal group pushing a plan to change the tribe's enrollment policy to one that would mirror the lineal descent model considered in the mid-1990s. Supporters of the plan say the enrollment policy would be more inclusive of descendants and essentially validate their tribal identity. Opponents say such a move would be financially catastrophic and could possibly result in the loss of the entire reservation.

In February 2012, Blackfoot Enrollment Amendment Reform, a group of enrolled and un-enrolled tribal members, proposed the tribe abandon the



Clyde Home Gun, rancher and enrolled member of the Blackfeet tribe, opposes changing the enrollment policy. As a member of Blackfeet Against Open Enrollment, he feels letting descendants enroll would decrease tribal finances.

if they don't do something about the blood, it's going to disappear. The fractions are going to get smaller and smaller and smaller."

Any reservation land that is owned either by the tribe or by an individual member of the tribe has "trust" status. That means it is held in trust for the tribe by the government and the individual holders of the land are exempt from paying taxes on it.

People who are not enrolled in the tribe are not allowed to buy trust land on the reservation unless it has already been refused by tribal members, said tribal councilman Roger Running Crane.

Fenner cannot inherit his family's land because it is leased from the tribal government and non-tribal members cannot hold tribal leases. The Halls do not know what would happen to their lease after they die.

After two generations of non-enrolled heirs, the land automatically loses its trust status and becomes "fee"

land, which is subject to the same taxes and laws as any other individually held piece of property in the United States. Proponents of changing the enrollment policy fear that land that loses its trust status, since it can be sold to anyone, would likely be sold to outsiders. They

"We're proud of who we are. We're proud of our history. We want to keep Blackfeet going forever."

**Gabe Grant
Enrollment change opponent**

claim that allowing descendants to keep the land they inherit in trust will protect the reservation's lands from non-Blackfeet buyers.

Non-enrolled heirs of trust land cannot hold that land in trust for more than two generations, according to a 2004 U.S. Department of Agriculture project, "Planning for the Passing of Reservation Lands to Future

Generations."

Kitty Bull Calf has long, straight black hair and a round face, telltale Blackfeet features, but her moss-green eyes give away her Irish heritage. Bull Calf is against changing the enrollment

policy, and she said the controversy has divided the reservation and her family.

"Right now there's really a separation," she said. "It's like an open wound that never should've been opened. They don't realize what they're doing to the reservation."

Bull Calf has eight siblings, and many of her nieces and nephews aren't enrolled. She said that while some of

her family agrees with her about keeping blood quantum as a requirement for enrollment, others don't even speak to her anymore.

"It tears people apart, like families," she said. "This wound is going to take time, time to really heal. And it's sad."

Many families on the reservation are split between enrolled and un-enrolled members. Hall's son-in-law isn't enrolled even though all of his siblings are, because he was born right after the 1962 cutoff date for enrollment through descent.

Gabe Grant, a former council member who opposes the enrollment change, has been following the issue since it began. He keeps huge stacks of newspaper clippings, official documents and letters in large plastic bins in his back room and garage, all of which have to do with enrollment reform and blood quantum.

Grant emphasized that he and the other group members hold no animosity toward supporters of enrollment change or from other ethnic backgrounds. He said one reason the group favors blood quantum as an enrollment requirement is to ensure Blackfeet DNA will not disappear through marriages outside the tribe. He is afraid that without a blood-quantum measure, the genetic traits making Blackfeet people different from other ethnic groups will disappear.

"We're unique," Grant said. "We want to maintain that uniqueness. We're proud of who we are. We're proud of our history. We want to keep Blackfeet going forever."

Grant and others who oppose the lineal descent system of enrollment claim the only way to keep Blackfeet blood from disappearing is to urge Blackfeet to marry other members of the tribe.

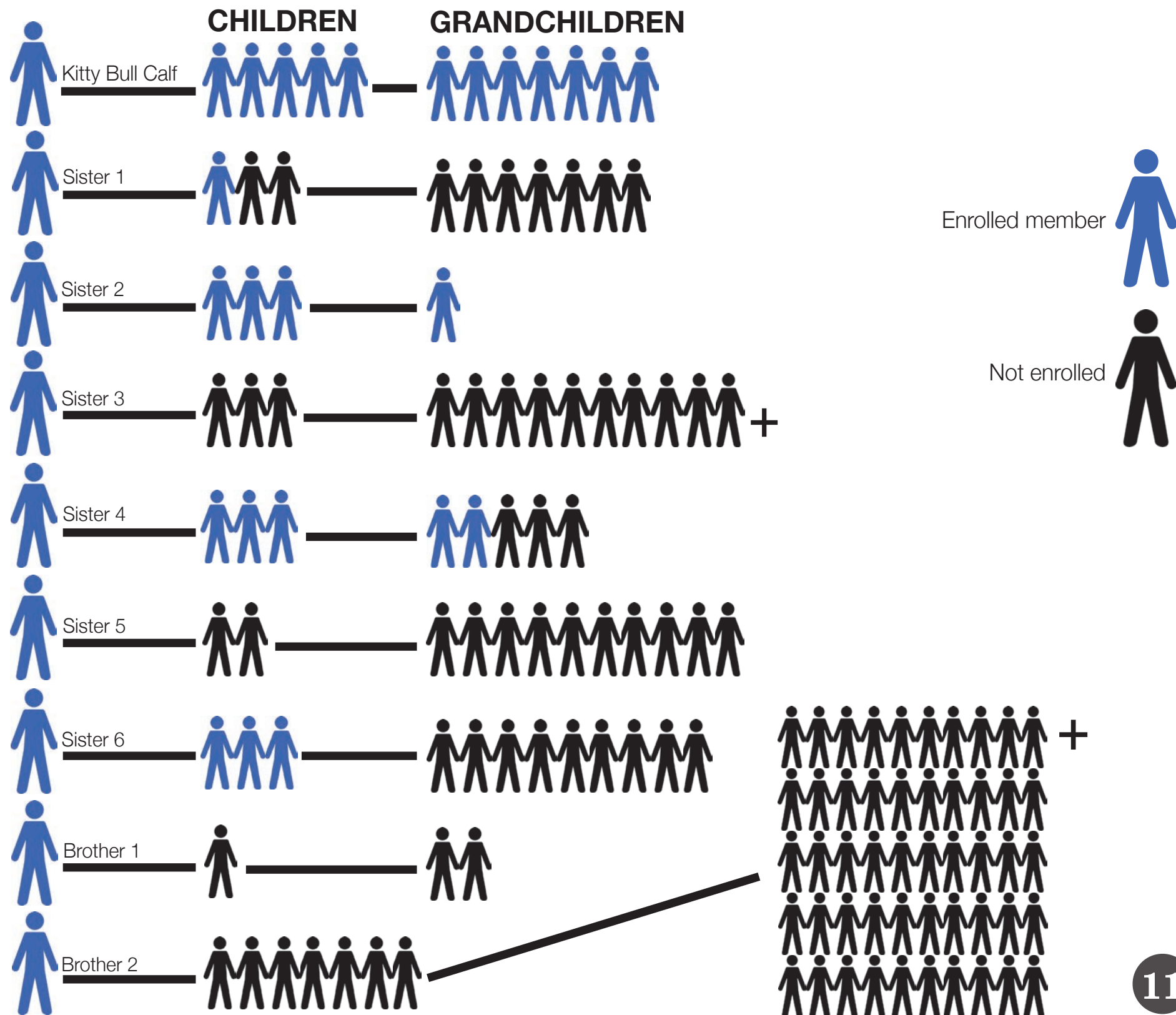
Calfail remembers his parents explaining blood quantum to him and his siblings when they were younger and encouraging them to marry into the tribe.

But the distinction may not be so clear. Even though both of Robert Hall's parents support changing the enrollment policy and are enrolled, he isn't. They were born before 1962, and were enrolled before blood quantum was a requirement.

Blackfeet blood quantum is

BLOOD QUANTUM IN FUTURE GENERATIONS

Kitty Bull Calf is one of nine siblings, all of whom are enrolled members of the Blackfeet tribe. Like many families on the reservation, Bull Calf's family is divided between those who believe the enrollment rules should change and those who support the status quo. Only 10 percent of the siblings' grandchildren – 10 out of over 100 – are enrolled members under the tribe's current policy.



measured in 64ths. Robert Hall (a cousin of Truman Hall) is 15/64ths Blackfeet, which puts him 1/64th under the amount he would need to be enrolled. The math is complicated, Robert Hall said, but basically each parent contributes half of their own blood quantum to their children.

For instance, a child would need at least 16 "points" to be considered a Blackfeet tribal member. Robert Hall automatically passes 7.5 points—half of the 15 points passed down by his parents—to his child. That means he would have to find a wife who could contribute at least 8.5 points for the child to be enrolled.

Truman Hall sees the blood quantum system as the tribe dictating who people should marry.

"They say don't marry for love. They marry some lady because she's got an enrollment number. Marry for rights," he said. "Well, that's pretty unfair in this day and age to have to breed human beings like you would breed quarter horses.

Since Fenner, Hall's grandson, is not enrolled, there are some privileges tribal members can claim that he can't, such as per capita payments, employment preferences, protection under the Indian Child Welfare Act, and Contract Health Service from the Indian Health Service, which sends patients off the reservation for specialty treatment.

On the other hand, non-enrolled Native Americans can still receive payment from lawsuits against the federal government, such as the Cobell and Salazar settlements, if they have an Individual Indian Money account with the BIA.

But what supporters of enrollment reform want most for descendants of the tribe is the right to vote.

Troy Woodward is an attorney living in Washington, D.C., who has been helping the Blackfeet Enrollment Amendment Reform group deal with the legal process of petitioning to change enrollment. He called enrollment a political issue in which descendants of the tribe have lost their political rights.

12 "We should be able to vote in elections, and we should be able to have a say about what happens to land that

we inherit, and we should be able to pass our trust land that we inherit from our Indian parents to our Indian kids," Woodward said. "And all of that has been taken away from us."

Grant, one of the main opponents of enrollment reform, said the biggest benefit to being enrolled is the right to vote.

"That's what we don't want to give them, because there's such a large number that they would take over the thinking and the way they view things, bringing in their values that they have," he said. "Everything that the Blackfeet stood for—that would change with the large enrollment number."

More than 100,000 people claimed to be at least partially Blackfeet on the 2010 census. Grant said the large number of people who could potentially enroll would overrun the services on the reservation, such as housing or Contract Health Service through the IHS.

Councilman Running Crane said if the enrollment policy changed, some programs, like IHS, might end up paying for health care for people off the reservation who could become enrolled under a lineal descent model.

There are about 40 programs on the reservation that receive funding based on tribal enrollment numbers, including Head Start, Fish and Wildlife programs, several in forestry and wildfire work, and some health programs, Running Crane said. As for grant-funded programs, the tribe would have to re-apply after updating numbers in the grant request applications. That funding wouldn't automatically increase with a change in enrollment.

Linda Juneau, the spokesperson to the BIA for the Blackfeet Enrollment Amendment Reform group, isn't worried about being suddenly overrun with new tribal members. She said the enrollment reform group expects closer to 7,000 people would enroll under the lineal descent policy. She also said just because someone claims Blackfeet descent it doesn't mean they can prove their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents were enrolled members.

The lineal descent model doesn't stop after all the current descendants are enrolled. The grandchildren of a person who is enrolled as a descendant might end up with very little Blackfeet



Linda Juneau holds up a small replica of the Blackfeet tribe's flag during a Blackfeet Enrollment Amendment Reform meeting. The group has been banned from using tribal facilities to meet, so they hold their meetings at a member's home.

blood at all and would still be enrolled because their grandparent was.

According to its Indian Health Manual, IHS reviews different parameters that demonstrate need. Among them is population, along with quality of care and overall health in the area. If an increase in enrollment means an increase in the population of the reservation, then those funds might increase as well, but it's not guaranteed. And it would mean that Blackfeet Community Hospital would also have to treat more people, creating a potential strain on an already underfunded health program.

The tribe could try to show a greater need for funding through a direct conversation with the IHS once enrollment changes, but nothing is guaranteed.

Since the Blackfeet reservation's education system is part of the larger public school system in Montana, the schools don't receive funding from the BIA. Instead, funds are distributed based on the number of students attending the school, whether or not they are enrolled tribal members or even Native American.

The superintendent of the Browning Public School District, Mary Johnson, said only the Johnson O'Malley Fund could be affected by the number of tribally enrolled students at the school. That grant is sent to the tribal council, which can then distribute it to schools in the area.

Woodward, the attorney working with the Blackfeet Enrollment Amendment Reform group, said they have to collect signatures from two-thirds of the tribally enrolled members for the petition to hold a vote to be accepted by the BIAW. The group estimates it will have to collect around 4,300 signatures.

Once the signatures, all of which have to be notarized, have been collected, the petition will be sent to the BIA and put on public display for 15 days. If anyone wanted to challenge a signature or claim that a non-enrolled member was carrying the petition (which is against the regulations), the public presentation time would be the time to do it, Woodward said.

The BIA would then mail out a voter registration form to all enrolled members of the tribe. Those members who respond will then receive a ballot to vote on whether to keep the enrollment policy the way it is or to change it to a system of lineal descent for up to three generations, as stated in the petition.

Those opposed to changing the enrollment policy recognize that someday there may not be enough Blackfeet members to continue using blood quantum as a measure of enrollment. Grant said the group thinks certain things will have to happen before the issue can be put to a vote.

First, he said, the standard of living for Blackfeet members living in poverty needs to be improved so they can think clearly about the policy change and its possible outcomes. Second, an enrollment audit would have to be done to correct any mistakes or fraud that might have taken place in the records of enrollment and blood quantum. Lastly, an outside group would have to conduct a study to see exactly how many people would enroll under the new system and what it would mean legally and financially for the tribe.

Truman Hall thinks the tribe should put the issue to a vote so the people can decide and hopes they would decide to enroll descendants. He said his grandson's entire livelihood depends on changing the enrollment policy.

"[Fenner is] focused on making his living with ranching," he said. "But in order to ranch you have to have control of real estate. And by not being enrolled, he doesn't have any control of real estate at all. He has to do what the politicians tell him to do."

Fenner went to school in Cut Bank, just outside the reservation borders, before he moved back in with his grandparents on the reservation.

Hall said Fenner got into fistfights nearly every day there, because "the white population in Cut Bank was prejudiced against him for being an Indian." Now that he's older, Hall said, Fenner is facing the same type of prejudice from his own people.

"If I pass on, he's got no home here."

TOP RIGHT | Omie Crawford is an enrolled member of the Blackfeet tribe and lives in Heart Butte. She is a supporter of the Blackfeet Enrollment Amendment Reform group and wants the enrollment requirements to change from blood quantum to lineal descent.

BOTTOM RIGHT | Sterling Holy White Mountain, left, and Robert Hall discuss why it is necessary to change the tribal enrollment policy. Both men are descendants of the Blackfeet tribe and active members of the Blackfeet Enrollment Amendment Reform group. If enrollment requirements change from blood quantum to lineal descent then both will be eligible for enrollment.



Necessary Alternatives

The informal economy on the Fort Peck Reservation

Story by *BROOKS JOHNSON*
Photographs by *SAMUEL WILSON*

O’Ryan wakes up, but his mother doesn’t mind. He hardly makes a fuss as sun breaks the blinds of their Wolf Point apartment.

Brittany Deavila is waiting in her sweats. She has an hour before heading to one of her two jobs. She stares absently at the TV while the 2-month-old bounces on her knee.

Finally, a pickup truck growls outside, the noise rousing her cat, Oreo. It’s here. Brittany stands up to check, waiting without expression, and sees Autumn Arthur walking across the stubbly yard from her silver Chevy.

Inside, Arthur sets down the delivery, O’Ryan’s new high chair.

“It’s 80 to 100 dollars at Wal-Mart,” Deavila says, which is nearly 100 miles from here.

Instead it’s here at her front door after traveling 24 miles from Poplar. Arthur sets down the high chair, a colorful contraption complete with kid-friendly animals, and shows its new owner how to adjust the height. She then stands a little impatiently before Deavila disappears into a bedroom, returns with \$40, including \$10 for delivery, and Arthur is gone as quickly as she appeared.

The chair is Deavila’s latest success at online window-shopping. She arranged the delivery on the Facebook group, Fort Peck Rez Online Yard Sale.

“Most of the clothes my son has I got on the group,” the 19-year-old says. “I check it pretty often.”

Though the Internet helps fill the gaps, there’s no shortage of goods and services on the reservation, or in Wolf Point at least. But with rising rent, \$50 pairs of jeans, \$6 gallons of milk, the nearest Walmart in Williston, N.D., and gas at \$3.60 a gallon, the Fort Peck

economy incentivizes many to find a better deal on Montana’s most isolated Indian reservation.

The Fort Peck Indian Reservation lies in the northeast corner of the state close to the Missouri river. Nearly the size of Connecticut, it’s home to around 10,000 people; just over half of them are tribal members.

Being ultra-rural is only half of it. The 2011 per capita income in Roosevelt County, the largest swath of the Fort Peck reservation, was \$17,433, compared to \$24,640 in the rest of Montana.

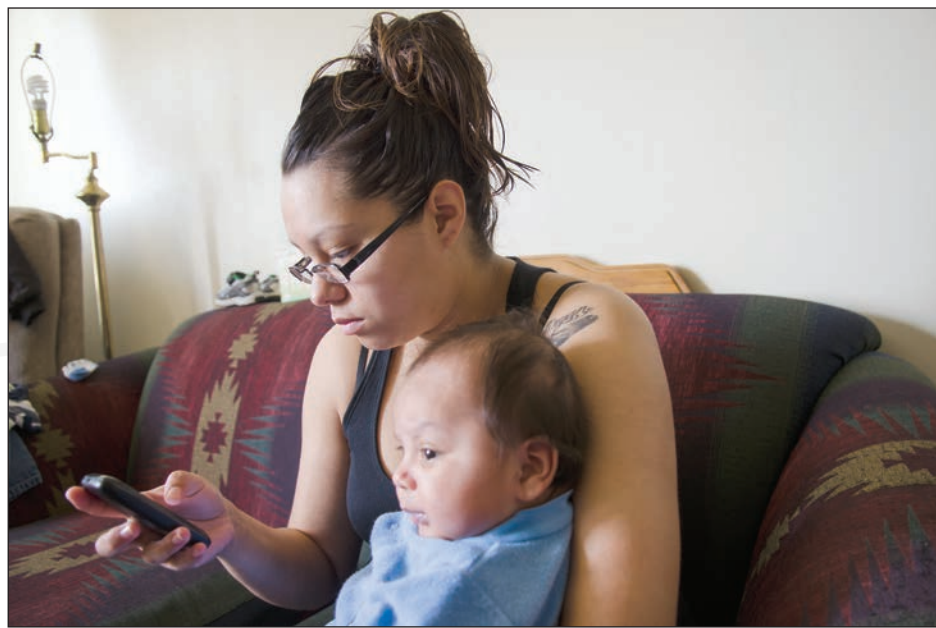
For Sioux and Assiniboiné tribal citizens, housing is scarce, and it doesn’t just come for free. There are polar ends of livelihood here: those without a job who qualify for housing assistance, and those who make enough to afford rising rent or the rates on high interest loans. Those in the middle often get left out, making too much money to qualify for aid or too little to thrive.

“A lot of our people are in survival mode,” says former council member Ingrid Firemoon. “People choose between paying this or that bill or feeding their children. But eventually we’ll help each other out.”

Which means that alternatives to the regular storefront economy, such as bartering, trading and secondhand purchasing, are just a way of life up here. People spend money, time and resources on each other. There’s no other way to bridge the distances.

High-speed Internet and 3G service have been a huge boon to life on the reservation since becoming available in the past few years. It connects the major population centers—Frazer, Wolf Point, Poplar, Brockton—in ways that Highway 2 cannot. It also gave birth to the Online Yard Sale.

Now boasting over 1,800 members, it’s a way for people to get a hold of necessities without having to travel or



Brittany Deavila, 19, holds her 2-month-old baby O’Ryan in her Wolf Point apartment. Deavila is waiting to buy a high chair she found on the Facebook group, Fort Peck Rez Online Yard Sale, for \$40. The chair is too big for O’Ryan now, but Deavila says he will soon grow into it.

order online. By volume and frequency, with population taken into account, it’s more active than Craigslist forums in Billings or Missoula.

On May 3, a few of the top listings included makeup, girls’ jeans, a digital camera and an ’87 F-150 for \$350. Rarely will there be a post older than a few days — someone’s always looking for what’s being offered.

Amy Headdress DeHerrera created the Facebook group, something akin to Craigslist only reservation-specific, in September 2011. She turns down the chattering police scanner (everyone here has one, she says) in her well-kept house in Poplar’s Airport Addition, a tribal housing development.

“We’re very into yard sales, and I thought this would be a great way to help the community,” she says. “I never thought it would get so big.”

Amy’s husband, James DeHerrera chimed in: “We’re in a high-poverty area. This is just one way for us to survive.”

Truly, one room downstairs is nearly filled with furniture they acquired solely through the site. There’s a leather chair, a leather jacket and a futon. Even their oldest son, Santiago, bought his white Ford Explorer through the group.

The emphasis on helping young families and children keeps her motivated in curating the site.

“Someone once was in need of baby formula, and within a few hours they found it,” DeHerrera says.

Mike Turcotte and his wife use the group to get clothes and diapers for their kids as well as their own clothes.

Turcotte taught seven classes at the Fort Peck Community College over spring semester. He is young but professional and speaks with earnestness during his Intro to Native American Studies class lecture.

“You’re going to have your times when you say, ‘Which bill am I not going to pay this month?’ Because that’s how we do,” he says in an interview



Kaydence Brown stands on the conveyor belt at Tande Grocery in Poplar while cashier Charley Swanson rings up the family's purchases.

after class. "We don't have any extras. We have our car payment, insurance; our rent got jacked up because of the oil fields; our phone bill, gas. It adds up. We're far from rich and far from having all the material things that would be nice to have."

While Poplar is in what many would consider a beautiful part of the country, the town itself appears less so. A visitor's first impression will likely be the trash. Because it's everywhere; in the streets, in yards and piling up on an embankment overlooking the old A+S Industries warehouse. A quarter-mile removed from that scene sits the pristine tribal headquarters, the seat of gov-

ernment for the Sioux and Assiniboine tribes of the Fort Peck reservation.

Down a gray hallway sits the Economic and Energy Development Office. Policy analyst Tashina Tibbits taps away at her cell phone while the wind blows across an empty amber field out the window behind her.

She's a fan of the Fort Peck Rez Online Yard Sale, too. In the past, just as she said many people here do in the present, she's had to make harder trades. "I had in times sold WIC and EBT (food stamps)," she says. "I would trade the month's last \$20 in food stamps for money for gas or diapers."

That much in food stamps doesn't

get very far on the reservation. In the center of Poplar, surrounded by shuttered bars and storefronts, are the town's two grocery stores, Main Street Grocery and Tande Grocery. Main is small and well-lit, but not exactly an oasis of choice. Cheap (\$3.75) bacon is sold out, and many people are spending time in the frozen foods aisle.

Around the corner at Tande's, the cheap bacon is also nearly sold out. A woman offers warmed pizza rolls to those entering as little Kaydence Brown stands on the only cashier conveyor belt alongside a stock of milk and bread. The produce is limited to shelf-life friendly items like carrots and onions,

though the avocados don't look too dark.

"We had 10 gas stations, a bowling alley, four or five restaurants, five or six grocery stores, four car dealerships all with a smaller population in the '60s and '70s," says Floyd Azure, the elected chairman of the Tribal Executive Board.

He says though population has slowly grown, businesses have quickly disappeared. Cheaper prices at big box stores off the reservation have driven money out of the local economy. Azure says the majority of money spent by tribal members is spent off the reservation.



Lenny Gray Hawk inspects the engine compartment of a Ford Windstar. Gray Hawk has been working on cars since his childhood, a skill that now provides him with extra income and fills a niche in the community for inexpensive car work.

"We pretty much killed ourselves," Azure says. "I don't know where we start to change the attitude of this reservation."

The attitude reflects the idea that there is a void on the reservation; that drugs, alcohol and poverty are winning.

"We're in northeast Montana. There are a lot of drawbacks to living here."

At least there's no shortage of roads. Day and night the diesel engines roar up and down the main drag in Wolf Point, and the bumpy roads off the highway are specked with more cars and trucks than homes.

"They drive constantly," Azure says. "There's more traffic here 24 hours a day than in any big city I've visited."

The brothers Gray Hawk have benefited from that culture, having spent their lives inside of vehicles.

Lenny's leaning on his sister's red Ford Windstar while Tote gets the hydraulic jack ready at the garages of Fort Peck Transportation, where he works as a bus driver and mechanic.

"I just want to put some gas in and get it to go," Lenny says. The 52-year-old is wearing a thick camouflage shirt. He has a black bandana tied across his forehead holding his sunglasses up and his hair back tight. His humor is as dirty as the fluid they release from the

antifreeze tank.

They're working on reconnecting everything under the hood of the minivan after successfully installing a transmisison. After they free the engine block from "the octopus" of chains that had been used to hoist it out of the vehicle, Tote and Lenny jack up the front end a few feet. Lenny gets on his back first as the third mechanic brother, Brad, 54, walks into the garage.

"Someone will see you working on a car on the side of the road or in a snowdrift," Tote says, "and they'll pull over and say, 'Hey I've got a car you could work on.' All of a sudden you've got 200 bucks in your pocket and you didn't have a dime before."

Everyone on the reservation seems to know a car mechanic, and not the ones who work at the dealerships in Wolf Point.

"A loaf of bread is \$4 a loaf, dude. People have more important things to spend their money on than putting \$1,200 into a car," Lenny says. "But everyone wants to drive around. Everyone wants to get from point A to point B." So word gets out fast of who can get a car back on the road for half the price the dealers charge.

He points out that the hundreds of vehicles in the "car graveyard" in a field between Poplar and Wolf Point probably only need a few hundred dollars of

work. The red minivan above him sat there for two years.

Lenny gets out from under the steering column and points to his biceps. "Native American torque wrench," he says, laughing.

Brad once worked in a Cenex garage in Poplar, and Tote is also certified, though Lenny held out on the education and certification. Most of what they know came from their mechanic father and practice.

The stockier brother, Lenny, just finished a day shift working as an electrician at the under-construction tribal detention center, but seems genuinely thrilled to keep on working into the night. He says many people in Fort Peck help family and friends that otherwise can't (or shouldn't) afford car repairs.

Even Chairman Azure ran a garage in Poplar for 30 years. He could open it back up any day, he says while checking on his yellow T-bird and impeccably restored Mercury. Just this year he's helped out two of his co-workers at the tribal offices with maintenance for lower rates than what they can find at other garages, which charge around \$70 an hour plus the cost of parts. Too expensive for most, he says.

"The majority of people here only think of today and not tomorrow. We've got to get over that. It's one of our biggest hindrances," Azure says. "It upsets me when people can't make it paycheck to paycheck."

People often don't wait until the next paycheck. They make ends meet trading car work, clothes, diapers or horses.

On a sunny Monday afternoon, Julie Acheson drives with her daughter along the "Indian Highway," which runs parallel to Highway 2 north of the train tracks. "It's warming up today," her daughter Jocelyn says, pointing to the car's overhead thermostat reading 38 degrees.

They're on their way to some land north of Glasgow, just outside the western border of the reservation, to drop off Ophelia, an 1,800-pound quarter horse. They decided against the main route, since anything above 35 mph might scare her and send the whole Dodge Durango and trailer off the road. Ophelia is being traded for \$1,500 and the lumber salvaged from a felled barn.

"My grandfather was a horse trader,

he broke horses," Acheson says. "He was one of the last to travel in wagons back and forth between the Dakotas. So I guess it's in my blood to continue trading horses."

Back at her home on the edge of Wolf Point, her family keeps a dozen horses, a 34-year-old mule and a few cashmere goats. She wants to use the reclaimed lumber to build a new home on her property to replace the aging trailer.

"Ophelia is helping us build a better, safer home," she says. "I was careful in picking out a new home for her."

Acheson explains on the 120-mile round trip that she is always looking for good trades both on and off the reservation. Her daughter Jocelyn recently traded a car stereo for amps for her own car and often trades between her friends.

"I think people used to barter a long time ago before grocery stores," Acheson says. "I'd like to see it come back. A lot of traditions have been lost due to outside influence. I think it's important to teach kids about trading and morality." Acheson uses the Online Yard Sale for her barter, too, making trading a visible presence among its active members.

They buy groceries at Wolf Point's Albertsons, just like the many people who can afford to in town. Occasionally they'll buy clothes at Bryan's, the only retail clothing store on the reservation, but often find it too expensive for what they offer. They stop at the new ALCO (think Shopko) occasionally instead of making the trip to Glasgow or Williston for the few big-box items it carries.

Few hold out hope for lower prices, increased choices and stable rent on the Fort Peck reservation. It's too rural, too economically depressed, they say.

There's a reason Acheson trades, though. There's a reason the Gray Hawk brothers share their mechanical strengths, and Brittany Deavila and other young mothers have an advantage that comes with a new means of connectivity. Every necessity of life gets met, though the means may be a bit different.

"We've struggled all of our lives," former council member Ingrid Firemoon says. "And we have found a way to survive. We'll always survive."



LEFT | Courtney Gunter, left, Julie Acheson and Angie Soper stand with Ophelia, an 1,800-pound quarter horse Acheson is trading to Soper for reclaimed lumber and \$1,500.

BELOW | Julie Acheson and Angie Soper stand next to a fallen barn on Soper's property in Glasgow, which is just outside the Fort Peck reservation. Acheson traded her 1,800-pound quarter horse, Ophelia, for the salvaged lumber and \$1,500.



Waiting for Home

The long path to housing development on the Crow reservation



ABOVE LEFT | Mandy Plainfeather, 41, shows off an elk-ivory dress she made for her daughter in her home outside of Lodge Grass. Plainfeather said she likes the extra space her new home gives her for dress-making.

ABOVE RIGHT | Tessa Plainfeather and Emily Moccasin embrace in front of their grandmother's home. Tessa and her parents live with her grandmother and uncle in separate homes on the same allotment of land.

RIGHT | Danny Plainfeather, 40, gives a tour of the land surrounding his family's home. An offshoot of the Bozeman Trail ran through the property close to this area, known as the "chicken crossing," and was a path for travelers centuries ago.





The sun rises over the unfinished Good Earth Lodges in Crow Agency. The project on the Crow reservation was started in 2010 in conjunction with the University of Colorado-Boulder. The team developed large bricks made from materials found on the Crow reservation to build the houses.

Story by MATT HUDSON

Photographs by TIM GOESSMAN

It took three years of work for Mandy Plainfeather to secure her own home on the Crow reservation.

Three years for a process that required much more than just a nest egg and good credit. Instead, the Plainfeathers were bogged down by a stream of red tape mandated by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs. Mandy Plainfeather, 41, had to gather about 20 signatures from government officials just to lay claim to a small portion of the rural trust land on which her family has lived for generations.

The culmination came when the Plainfeathers—Mandy, her husband

Danny, 40, and their three kids—moved into their house in 2008.

“I think all the stuff we went through just to get to this point, I was so used to trying to get more paperwork and more paperwork and more paperwork,” she said. “So when this house came, to me it was just kind of unbelievable. This has been a lifelong dream for me.”

She is among a first generation of enrolled Crow members to independently finance their own homes on the reservation. Until recently, tribal citizens relied on the local housing authority, which has struggled to keep up with the increasing housing demand.

But financing a home on trust property also means dealing with the strict

federal oversight. If something is to be built, it must be federally approved through a process that is daunting and time consuming.

“It’s a lot of paperwork,” said Crow Chairman Darrin Old Coyote. “A lot of people, halfway through the paperwork, say, ‘Heck with this,’ and basically give up on pursuing a loan because of all the paperwork involved.”

For more than a century, the treaties between Native Americans and the U.S. government that promised sovereignty and support for the Crow also created a barrier to true home ownership.

“Even though we’re within the United States of America, we’re still like a foreign country,” Plainfeather

said. “That’s why you hardly see any kind of major developments, because we have to go through the BIA. And once they say yes, then you can do certain things, like this house.”

The main reason it’s difficult to put a home on the reservation is because the federal government holds the land in trust, meaning it holds the title to the physical acreage on behalf of the tribe. It’s the result of the federal policies formed more than a century ago, leaving intricate land ownership issues and a checkboard of tribal and non-tribal land.

Because the tribal and individual allotments are held in trust by the federal government, the Bureau of Indian Affairs must approve land-leasing deals.



ABOVE | Items from the family living in this house are scattered in the yard. Housing authority workers remodeling this home in Lodge Grass said there were 31 people living on the property.

RIGHT | Nevaeh Fisher, 4, blows bubbles outside of her great-grandmother Elizabeth Stewart's home in Crow Agency. Stewart secured the home through the Section 184 Indian Home Loan Guarantee Program.

That includes placing homes on trust land.

And because the federal government has primacy over land usage, Native Americans often could not use their trust land as a security for a standard mortgage loan.

"The local banks wouldn't loan to tribal members in some cases," Old Coyote said.

Banks are particularly hesitant to loan to tribal members living on trust land because the jurisdiction boundaries when it comes to collecting on defaulted accounts are, at best, hazy. In the past, he said, the loan programs available often came with interest rates so high that people ended up selling their homes to escape the debt.

20

"Predatory lenders were a big thing on the reservation if you wanted [to own] a home,"

Old Coyote said. "You'd get anywhere from 6 percent and up."

Most Crow tribal members lease housing through the reservation's housing authority, an extension of the tribal government. Tenants can rent units or pay one off over the course of up to 30 years. But with the limited funding and a growing number of tribal members needing housing, it has struggled to mediate the reservation's housing issues, which include overcrowded units, long waiting lists and substandard living conditions.

"These homes are falling apart faster than we can maintain them," Old Coyote said. "A lot of these homes are falling apart even though we throw money at them. They're still falling apart because they weren't built up to standard, up to code."

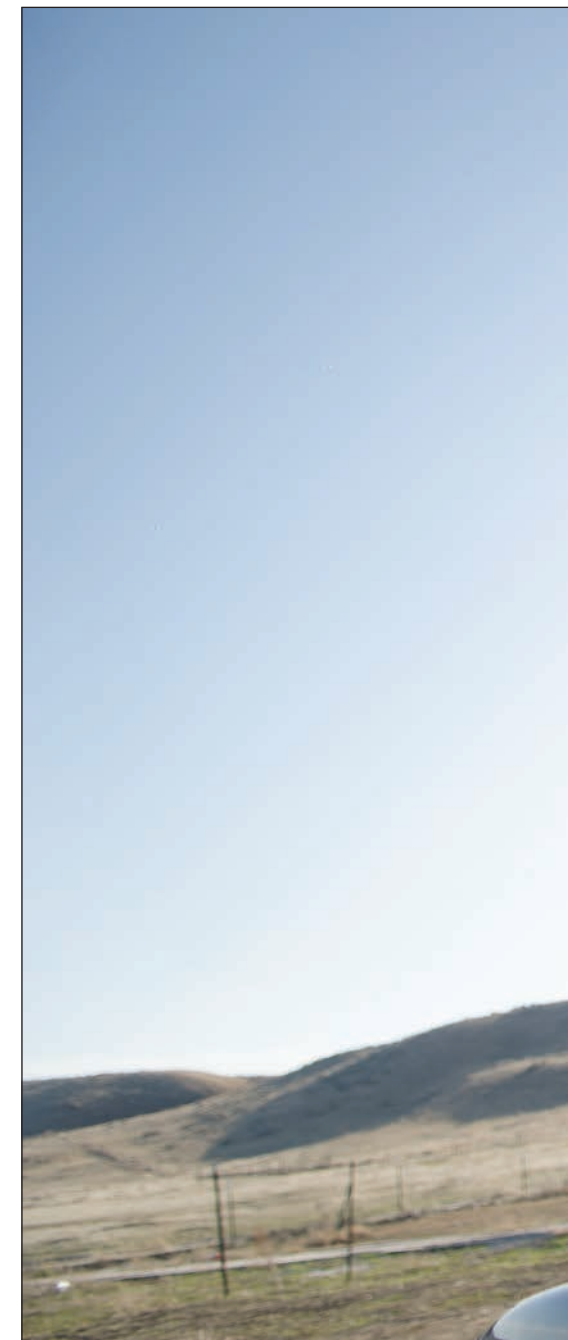
When Plainfeather and her husband

wanted a home, they looked for a way around the housing authority's waiting list. But on trust land, there is no circumventing federal oversight.

They found a program that landed them in their own home, but not before a lengthy process requiring the coordination of the tribal government, her bank and the BIA.

Plainfeather applied for a mortgage loan through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Section 184 Indian Home Loan Guarantee Program. Implemented in 1992, it was designed to increase the willingness of lenders to work with trust allottees. HUD guarantees the loan for the lender in the event of a default.

Plainfeather's lender was a Wells Fargo branch in Sioux Falls, S.D., which has an office for Native American lending. While not all banks are



trained for lending on trust property, the branch has adapted to serve this niche for clients on reservation lands and throughout the country.

Juel Burnette, the branch's sales manager, said that on non-tribal land, they can close a traditional home mortgage in 30 to 45 days. For a Section 184 loan, the land survey alone usually takes longer than that.

"We're waiting a minimum of 60 days just to get the land info back from the Bureau of Indian Affairs," he said.

Plainfeather took the first step toward homeownership in 2005 when she filed with the BIA to receive a 2.5-acre plot from her mother.



Then the BIA handed her a list of right of ways that needed to be approved. To clear the gravel road from the highway to her house, she had to file three right of ways through fee land and separate trust allotments. The right of way for her electrical service came with a \$2,200 bill for a new utility pole. On the rural, checker-boarded landscape of the Crow reservation, this is a common occurrence.

To be able to put a house on trust land, Plainfeather had to obtain a home-site lease. For this, the BIA performs surveys, including land appraisals, checking for cultural or historical significance and examining the environmental

impact of development. The paperwork travels through the tribal administration building, the local BIA realty office in Crow Agency and the regional BIA office in Billings for separate approvals. Depending on the capacity of each office, the forms can get bottlenecked. Some homeowners claimed the BIA lost their paperwork multiple times during the process.

Plainfeather said she collected about 20 signatures in all, from the BIA, the Crow tribal government and the bank. At times, she had to show up at people's offices to get them to sign, sometimes more than once.

"It was basically the same people to

get those signatures," Plainfeather said. "Well, they didn't tell me that until after each one."

The BIA performed surveys of four different sections of her plot, because they found high water tables on the first three. It was a headache for Plainfeather, but she is thankful it didn't take longer.

"Some people wait for home site leases for years," Plainfeather said.

One of the major complications with obtaining home-site leases is the fractionation of trust land. After more than a century of reservation allotment, the increasing number of heirs to individual allotments has made claiming a trust plot difficult for one person. An allot-

ment could have more than 100 heirs in some cases. If one of them decides to put a house on that land, they need to get signatures from a majority of the heirs.

Plainfeather only needed the signature of her mother, who was the individual holder of the land allotment.

In 2007, Plainfeather and her husband began searching for the perfect house while the BIA finished its work. After being pre-approved with the bank for their Section 184 loan, they had an idea of how much they could spend.

"I wanted a home that was going to last us, like, five generations because, you know, this is our home and it's always going to be our home," Plainfeather said. "And that my kids, my grandkids, have a place to come home to."

She closed her loan with Wells Fargo in November 2007. They also received \$10,000 in down payment assistance through a program with the housing authority. Immediately her husband, who has construction experience, began work with their son and nephew to build the foundation. The house was delivered on Valentine's Day. The family moved in May 2008, nearly three years after she filed the first set of paperwork.

Burnette said lending on the Crow reservation is uncommon because in addition to the BIA, a tribal economic development administrator must also approve certain land lease transactions, adding another link to the chain.

That job rests with Shawn Real Bird. He knows a bit about Section 184 loans, because he helped bring it to the Crow.

When Real Bird was 13, he went with his grandfather to Billings to replace their old Dodge pickup. He said his grandfather brought documents to the dealership that showed a good income from tribal land leasing. They bargained until it was nearly closing time, until the dealer told them they couldn't buy the pickup because the dealership could not verify the leasing income. Distraught, they returned to Real Bird's hometown of Garryowen on the reservation. Later, Real Bird's father told him that because they are Native American, "their money is not as green as the rest of the U.S. citizens."

That idea affected him. That night he prayed he could help change that.

"I said to the Creator, 'Let



Electrician Barry Glen, left, crew member Isaiah Dust, center, and head carpenter Chris Cole work on a house in Lodge Grass. As part of the renovation, the crew is making the house more handicap accessible for the elderly occupant.

me understand how this financial system works, this money system. I'm going to help my people that way," he said.

Real Bird, 49, works as the Crow tribal economic development specialist, but before that he was a realtor based out of Billings. Two of his real estate clients, a couple working for the Indian Health Service, wanted to purchase a log cabin overlooking the Little Big Horn River. The couple met the credit requirements. They had a combined six-figure income and were pre-qualified for a mortgage loan.

Still, the underwriters denied the couple's loan application. The realty manager told Real Bird that the Crow lacked the legal infrastructure, an official foreclosure procedure, to support lending on trust land.

"She said, 'How could it be in the 21st century that individuals don't have the right to obtain financing, live that dream? That all-American dream?'" Real Bird said of the conversation with his manager.

The realty firm manager told him that the Crow were unable to finance their homes because of the trust status of their land. Real Bird recalled that day with his grandfather.

"I remembered that prayer a long time ago," he said. "It's coming full circle now."

Armed with a master's degree in community economic development, Real Bird went to work for the Crow tribe with his IHS clients in mind. In 2003, he started work in the economic development department. He had learned about the Section 184 loan program and wanted the Crow to be eligible. To qualify, tribes must develop trust land leasing and foreclosure protocols. He worked with attorneys from a Billings bank and the Crow administration to draft those procedures. An important provision of the Section 184 loan rider for Real Bird was that, in the event of a foreclosure, the land stays within the tribe.

"If an enrolled member goes into default, the only alternative buyers would

be the Crow tribe, an enrolled member of the Crow tribe, or an organization of the Crow tribe," Real Bird said. "And that way, it keeps its trust status."

HUD and the Crow Legislature approved Real Bird's revised legal procedures in 2004. Since then, he said he has helped 160 families get loans.

He said the program helps Crow members see financial independence and allows them to dream big about where they want to live. He wants them to know that tribally sponsored housing is not the only option.

The Apsaalooke Nation Housing Authority is headquartered in the town of Crow Agency. The small town surrounds the Little Big Horn River and borders the Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument, the site of Gen. George Custer's famous last stand.

The housing authority operates on a block grant from HUD and serves three-quarters of the housing on the Crow reservation, according to its executive director, Karl Little Owl. In 2012, their

budget was just over \$3 million. That pays for about 50 employees and goes toward building new homes and renovating existing models.

The housing authority offers low-rent units or mutual-help-leased homes for tribal members. The monthly payment on a low-rent unit is determined by an individual's income. The mutual-help leases run for up to 30 years, and if the lease is completed, it is turned over to the tenant. They share the cost of repairs and appliance replacements throughout the lease period.

However, the need for housing outweighs what the housing authority can provide.

Michelle Wilson, the administrative officer for the housing authority, said their resources have decreased in recent years. She said development is now at a standstill and the authority can only meet one-third of the reservation's current housing needs.

"We're not building new homes," she said. "We don't have any new homes available."

A 2012 study by the University of Colorado-Boulder estimated a backlog of 1,500 housing applications at the Crow housing authority. With nowhere else to go, families often move in with other families, leading to overcrowded units. Old Coyote said it's common for two or three families to share a small house built for a single family. This contributes to what he calls an "invisible homeless" population.

Wilson said the new tribal administration has made it a priority to address the housing disparity. The housing authority is becoming stricter with tenants who fail to make their payments. She said their funding depends on how closely they follow federal regulations and that previously, payment schedules were loosely enforced. The result was a decrease in housing grants.

In April, Wilson was preparing to send out 100 compliance forms, requiring delinquent tenants to agree to get back on track. If they don't agree, they will be evicted.

Enforcing lease agreements is not an easy job but a necessary one, Wilson said. If tenants comply, the housing authority's funding could increase and more needs could be met.

"They need a better standard of living, and in order to do that, it takes

funding to be able to renovate these homes and make the upgrades that are necessary and provide homes that are really in dire need," she said.

Plainfeather's 2,000 square-foot modular home looks unassuming from the highway, across a quarter-mile stretch of field where the family's horses graze. Inside, tall cupboards reach up to the high, slanted ceiling in Plainfeather's kitchen. Three ovens are mounted in the wall at the end of the counter. She planned it that way, they are her favorite commodities in the house.

She also planned how the house is situated, for a perfect view from the kitchen table. In front, the window frames the snow-capped mountains. To the left, she can see her horses in the field and the rolling hills leading eastward to the town of Lodge Grass. To the right is the family den and the bedrooms

of the couple's children. A sewing machine sits on the dining room table next to the intricate dresses Plainfeather made for her daughters.

Toward the south end of the larger family plot runs a rutted dirt trail that crosses a quiet creek and leads into the hills, a path called the "chicken crossing." She said that's where travelers made their way to and from the famed Bozeman Trail for centuries. Today, Plainfeather and her husband, Danny, lead their cattle on horseback to graze over that same path.

Plainfeather has a deep respect for the property, which has stayed with the family. Her uncle lives in a cabin nearby, and her mother's house is there. Plainfeather planned for a long time to have her own place on the allotment.

Plainfeather likes to have family functions at their house, using her three ovens to prepare large meals. She and

her husband feel they are finally settled down, in their 10th year of marriage.

They have horses and cattle, with three calves on the way. They've built two sweat lodges in the tranquil area near the creek. One is housed in a wooden shed for winter use. The other is a stick frame with no covering, awaiting use in the summer. It's a sign of permanence, a sign that they anticipate a long future on this plot. Plainfeather is proud to live where her family does and that she helped create this life for her family. It's the kind of vision Real Bird has for Crow homeowners.

"It gives them ownership in this property, and I believe that ownership eliminates social problems, personal problems," Real Bird said. "If a husband and wife have a home, and their children can be someplace and they can own things and they can have different Native American ceremonies on that trust

property, picnics, invite their families, have birthday parties, then they have a healthy lifestyle."

Both Old Coyote and Real Bird proudly say they are among the first generation of Crows to take that initiative and own homes independently on the reservation.

Plainfeather is among them. She lives in the result of her ambition. She doesn't have to live away from her family's allotment in a housing authority unit. She doesn't have to sit on a waiting list, hoping one of the two repair crews that serve the 2.2 million acres of the Crow reservation will stop by.

Those duties are her own. Her house is her own. She's living that American dream.



Danny and Mandy Plainfeather's modular home outside of Lodge Grass. It took them three years to complete the Section 184 loan process and move into their home.

Unsettled

Spending the Salazar settlement on the Flathead reservation

Story by CARLI KRUEGER

Photographs by ABIGAIL REDFERN

Some would say it was an unwise investment. But for brothers Jonathan Spotted Eagle and Alonzo BringsYellow, money spent on their makeshift gym is money well spent. Together with another fighter, they run a mixed martial arts club called Fighter's Island out of Spotted Eagle's garage. They make no money off of their hobby, but it keeps them and the kids they train out of trouble.

"Before this, I was drinking in the bars," said Spotted Eagle, who has since given it up. "[The gym] helps me stay away from that. On the weekend, I can come in here, and by the time I'm done, I'm too tired to do anything."

The brothers pooled together their resources from an unexpected windfall last year. As members of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, they each received money in a major settlement that awarded billions of dollars to 41 tribes across the nation.

Combined with other payments from a separate billion-dollar settlement, 2012 saw an unprecedented injection of money into what is commonly known to be the most impoverished communities in the country. Although the Flathead Indian Reservation, home to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, is more economically developed than most western reservations, the influx of cash helped many Salish and Kootenai tribal members pay for expenses that may have previously been unavailable before.

Unfortunately, much of this money was spent off-reservation, largely because of a poor local economy.

"The money [was] probably spent more on non-Indian owned business than the Native-owned business because



Alonzo BringsYellow, left, and Sheldon Fisher spar in the Fighter's Island gym. Fisher trains here almost every day, preparing for his title fight at the end of the month.

there are less of them," said Eleanor YellowRobe, president of Native Assets Accounting in Box Elder and who authored the 2003 study "Uncovering Economic Contributions of Montana's American Indian Tribes."

According to that report, the Flathead tribes contributed the largest amount to the state's economy than any other tribe, spending about \$317 million in 2003.

YellowRobe said the 2012 settlement money would have a significant effect on the local economy both on and off the reservation, including bordering towns such as Missoula and Kalispell.

With their settlement, BringsYellow

and the brothers Spotted Eagle purchased two new throwing dummies, which cost up to \$1,000 apiece. They've spent around \$3,000 total on the gym over the last two years, picking up mats from old gyms and other equipment when they can.

Salish and Kootenai tribal officials deliberated for almost two years before choosing to distribute half of their \$150 million portion of the \$1 billion Nez Perce Tribe v. Salazar settlement. This settlement is separate from the Cobell settlement, which was settled in 2012 with its own hefty payout for several tribes across the country. The Salazar settlement was filed in 2006 over the

mishandling of tribal resources and funds by the federal government over the past century. The Flathead tribes joined the lawsuit as a plaintiff in 2008.

As a result of the distribution, adult Salish and Kootenai tribal members received \$10,000 each. Minors received \$5,000 in their Individual Indian Money accounts, and the other \$5,000 went to their parents or legal guardians. If tribal members were at all in debt to the tribe, which often finances personal loans, the tribe retained up to \$5,000.

The remaining half of the \$150 million is in the hands of the tribal government, collecting interest while officials decide how to spend it.



to long-term economic sustainability, culture and language programs, and elder programs, but money has yet to be designated to any specific programs.

Among the discussions for the money include plans to create language instruction and preservation programs. One councilman has an initiative to create a computer font for the Salish and Kootenai languages.

Meanwhile, a group of tribal members has mounted a campaign urging lawmakers to release the remaining money to the public. Such a move would give tribal citizens an additional \$8,000 with interest.

Less than a mile from tribal headquarters in Pablo, a sign with yellow and orange balloons directs people to an area beside the nearby grocery store. Members of The People's Voice Inc. sit under a pop-up tent near a trailer, collecting signatures for two separate petitions.

One of the petitions asks the tribal council to give the public an opportunity to voice its opinion in how to spend the remaining \$75 million by way of a public election. The other proposes a change to the tribal constitution allowing tribal members the ability to impeach council members—a privilege only held by fellow council members—and would go to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Oregon for approval.

Elden White spent the afternoon explaining each petition to curious tribal members. White has a wheeze in his voice and lost some sense of hearing, so people have to lean close to carry a conversation.

As vice president of The People's Voice, White helps lead the nonprofit, which has advocated for full payout since news of the Salazar settlement broke.

In order to hand the petitions over to the tribal council of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the People's Voice needed to collect signatures from at least half of the tribe's eligible voting population, 1,280 signatures in all. After their first weekend, they were only about 100 names shy.

"We're going to go as long as we can.



ABOVE | Vice president of The People's Voice, gathers signatures for a petition outside Pablo Family Foods. The petition proposes a full payout to tribal members from the Salazar settlement.

LEFT | Sheldon Fisher warms up his arms at the punching bag. Fisher says having the gym in the area gives him an outlet. "It keeps me busy, keeps my mind off of other things," Fisher said.

Over time, \$4 million of the remaining sum will be paid out to the Native American Rights Fund to compensate for the remaining legal fees incurred in the suit.

Tribal Communications Coordinator Robert McDonald said the council wanted to create a balance by distributing half the money to individuals and saving the rest for other initiatives that will benefit the tribe. The money, he said, will likely go



Cassidy Johnson outside her home in St. Ignatius. Johnson is not a tribal member and did not receive settlement money. But because her husband is enrolled, they used his settlement money to pay bills and buy tires.

The more signatures, the more it shows the power of The People's Voice," said Sharon Rosenbaum, president of The People's Voice.

McDonald said he has heard people say the tribe should consider the legacy of the money when it comes to spending it. He said some people believe this money does not just belong to the people who happen to be alive today.

Those same people "don't want to have to explain down the road to [grandchildren], this money that also belongs to you, went to your auntie," McDonald said. "A lot of people who are alive today, elders and ancestors, won't see this money, so there's been talk about how to honor them."

The council has remained tightlipped on its plans for the remainder of the settlement money. But that hasn't stopped tribal citizens from speculating. Some say they thought some of the money was going to go toward expenses on the Kerr Dam, of which the tribe will likely take possession by 2015. There were brief conversations, brought up in two district meetings and one quarterly meeting when the director of energy informally asked the tribe to loan funds for operation costs.

The People's Voice submitted a similar petition asking for a vote on distributing the remaining money last fall, but the effort was disorganized

and many of the signatures were dismissed because of questions of redundancy and how they were obtained.

Still, McDonald said the council would be under no obligation to follow the petition request.

"I don't think there's any mechanism for council being forced to take any action because of these signatures," McDonald said.

Rosenbaum said there's nothing leading the group to believe they have a better chance at success this time. If the petition fails to spur change again, Rosenbaum said they would try to take the issue to federal court.

Rosenbaum insists the group's efforts are not all about the money. It's also about giving tribal members another way to be heard.

"We're about giving the people a voice to determine how the money is spent," Rosenbaum said. "This referendum [would] only put it to a vote. That's what they should have done in the beginning."

The tribal council holds open meetings weekly and also has time slots available for tribal members to come into the tribal complex and speak with the council about whatever they want. People can also voice their opinions at district and quarterly meetings with the reservation's lawmakers. McDonald said there is a lot of opportunity for people to speak their minds.

Rosenbaum admits public attendance was low at the council's recent larger quarterly meeting, where tribal members had the opportunity to voice opinions on the settlement money.

Rosenbaum, who used her \$10,000 to clear out rot in her home and pay off a vehicle, said she would be fine without the additional disbursement of the money but other tribal members need it.

"This is a very rich tribe. A lot of money comes in here. But your average tribal member, they're poor," she said. "They're poor people. And it doesn't need to be that way."

Like with all of Montana's tribes, the standard of living for most Salish and Kootenai tribal members is far below national standards.

White, the vice president of The People's Voice, is building a new deck around his house with his money and sees full payout as an opportunity to improve the day-to-day lives of tribal members.

"We can pay off a lot of our bills," White said. "Most us on the reservations live from payday to payday. We travel long ways for working on the reservation. We need money for the high gas prices."

Tribal member Anthony Alexander didn't sign the petitions but would have liked to have seen the money paid out fully. With more money, he and his wife, a Blackfeet tribal member, would have purchased a home and land.

"We had a place picked out and everything," his wife, Charnell, said.

Now, Alexander would like to see the money held by the tribe go toward creating more tribal businesses, such as an insurance company, a bakery, a treatment center or an auto-repair shop.

"A lot of these businesses around here aren't tribally owned, and that's what I'd like to see," Alexander said. "We don't even own any of the stores on Main Street [in Polson]."

Charlene Petet, 68, said she does not want full payout.

"You've got to think about tomorrow," Petet said. "There are things that the tribe needs to leap and spend the money on, and that's the future. My preference is for the tribe to invest the money and only use the interest so that we would always have the principle."

Just before the money was paid out, Eagle Bank in Polson saw an increase in the number of checking accounts, likely because direct deposit is easier and quicker than waiting for and cashing paper checks. About six months after the money was doled out, the bank is closing many of those same accounts that have since gone inactive with a zero balance.

A lot of the settlement money went off the reservation and into western Montana. The tribal council conducted an economic impact study about the settlement payout with the University of Montana's Bureau of Business and Economic Research but hasn't yet released the report.

Police Capt. Louis Fiddler said there were no significant trends regarding crime, including DUI incidents and deaths, when the settlement money was released. There was a slight increase, he said, but it was comparable to similar instances of cash inflow, like when members receive their \$400 per capita checks three times a year, he said.

"We got 10,000, and we spent it wisely for the most part," White said. "In any society, you'll have people that'll squander it, lose it [and] make mistakes."

On the other hand, the tribal newspaper, the Char-Koosta News, had an influx of advertisements from car dealerships in the surrounding areas and states.

"The reservation was basically like a car parking lot," said tribal descendant Cassidy Johnson, whose enrolled husband received settlement money. Johnson, although Salish, is not enrolled and couldn't receive a payment.

"Everyone put their cars up for sale. Deals went out. Actually, I even heard a commercial on the radio from a dealer in Missoula for people to come buy a rig from there and they'd give them so much money for accessories."

Johnson and her husband, James Lozeau, spent their money mostly on their family. Lozeau works in the tribe's forestry department, and Johnson attends the Salish Kootenai College, where she is majoring in education. A portion of their money went toward Johnson's books. The rest of the money was used on bills, birthdays and Christmas.



Sheldon Fisher runs from his house to the Fighter's Island gym, which is housed in a garage.

The enrollment office at the tribal college said they had more students than usual coming in to pay off their student loans after getting their \$10,000.

Johnson and Lozeau have two children of their own and one on the way, but also raise their nephew Robert and niece Autumn through tribal kinship. There is no adoption through the CSKT, but Johnson has had Autumn, 3, since she was four months old. At this point, they've fostered three of Lozeau's sister's six children and hold full custody of two.

As a descendant, Johnson's biological sons also were ineligible for a payment. Both are just shy of meeting the 25 percent blood quantum needed to enroll in the tribe.

"We've been trying to get our two boys enrolled for a long time because they're, like, a fingernail away from being enrolled, but [the settlement money] wouldn't have been the reason we'd do that. Basically, if we enrolled our children, it would be because of the educational benefits and scholarships that they would receive."

However, their nephew Robert and niece Autumn do meet the blood quantum and are enrolled. They

received \$10,000 each. Because they are not officially adopted, their full \$10,000 payments went directly into their Individual Indian Money accounts.

"They'll have that when they turn 18," Johnson said. "I want to try and change that so they don't get it until they're 22 just because of responsibility."

Johnson said she thought there were a lot of people on the reservation who didn't know why they were receiving money. Therefore, she made it a point to educate their 8-year-old nephew about what was going on. They explained why he received his money and where it came from. "We try to teach that to our children, whether they're tribal or not."

Though Johnson could not vote in the matter even if she wanted to, she's not in favor of full payout.

"I'm relieved that it wasn't split up between everyone," Johnson said.

Back at Fighter's Island gym, they're training, just like they do every Saturday at 2 p.m., teaching each other the art of wrestling, boxing and jiu jitsu. All their knowledge comes from YouTube videos, magazines and, now, some experience.

Inside, a car is parked, taking up a

fourth of the space. An assortment of belongings in storage takes up another quarter. The rest is all room to wrestle.

Across mismatched mats pieced together with duct tape, two men grapple. The Montana spring chills the garage enough that their breath surges out in white, frosty puffs. They're sweating, though, bracing themselves on their knees and pushing against each other with their arms.

"We're part of the community here in Pablo, and this little area here by the tracks does not have a good reputation," said BringsYellow, 31, referring to the neighborhood around the gym. "It's known for people drinking and people doing drugs, people getting stabbed and killed. Bad stuff happens in these tiny neighborhoods over here."

"It's sad to see, and if we can have a few of those kids walk through our door and say, you know, instead of fighting over there, beating the hell out of each other, [you] can come train here and change your life."

The brothers will train anyone for free but require their students not to fight outside of the gym and to stay away from drugs and alcohol.

Spotted Eagle and BringsYellow said

that if they obtained the full payout, they would use some of it to improve the gym but they don't want to turn it into a for-profit venture. Rather, they'd like to invite trainers to come in and do seminars, which is something they've done in the past.

"We don't have any professional fighters. Nobody's a black belt in anything," BringsYellow said. "This is just all love for the sport."

Spotted Eagle said he'd like to see the payout because it'd help a lot of families.

"It'd get me back on my bills again, definitely," he said. "I'd have a lot more money to do things with my kids. I would probably do some things with the gym also. That's one of the two main goals, if we do get it."

BringsYellow no longer fights because he has glaucoma and the doctor said he couldn't afford to get hit in the head anymore.

"There's no victory for me in fighting anymore," he said. "My victory is in the kids."

Running on Empty

The Little Shell move forward on a shoestring budget

Story by ALLISON MILLS and ALLISON BYE

Photographs by CANDACE ROJO

Gerald Gray speeds up to 85 mph, passing the slower drivers. They might catch a flash of his “Shut Up & Fish” sticker on the cab’s back window, but then he’s flown past.

Gray, the elected leader of Montana’s landless tribe — the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians — is rushing to one of his two jobs, the job that he pays for. He pays in miles, hours and cash. Though serious, he has an easy smile and a patch of silver hair that catches the light. Gray jokes he can drive the 220 miles from Billings to Great Falls in his sleep. He does, after all, drive the route at least once a month for tribal council work.

He also works full time as the vice president of G+G Advertising in Billings, it’s the job that pays him.

All of Gray’s council work is unpaid. Rather he donates more than 100 hours per month to his duties. His travel expenses are uncovered, which, based on Montana state rates for personal vehicle use, amounts to at least \$736 per month.

“I’m definitely not in it for myself, because it takes up so much of my time and money to do this,” Gray said, joking that he and his wife call the intense commitment “The Little Shell

Days of Our Lives.”

In Billings, Gray fills up the tank of his Ford F-250, a total of about \$85. On the way up, he pulls over at Eddie’s Corner near Lewistown to buy a coffee. He says he always stops here on his way to Great Falls and at Ray’s in Harlowton on his way back.

The tribe relies on volunteers such as Gray because it has no money. The Little Shell is not recognized as a tribe by the federal government, so it is ineligible for federal aid. The tribe has no reservation and no treaty rights.

However, the state of Montana does recognize the Little Shell, and this designation makes the tribe eligible for state grants to pay for only three staff positions. Everything else, including the tribe’s highest elected position, is volunteer: Donations of time and heart. Those volunteers are torn between a duty to their tribe and the necessity of paid work to live.

“Without our volunteers, we wouldn’t have an office, we wouldn’t have enrollment, we wouldn’t have anything,” Gray said.

The tribe runs off of at least 1,100 volunteer hours per month. About 850 of those are donated by the tribal council. Based on estimates of other tribal councils’ wages, the Little Shell

TOP | Gerald Gray drives to Great Falls from his home in Billings at least once a month to participate in Little Shell activities. Based on estimates, he spends close to \$740 of his own money to fulfill his duties as tribal chairman each month.

MIDDLE | The Rocky Mountain West Building in Great Falls is home to the Little Shell’s tribal office. Since the tribe does not have a reservation, their population is scattered throughout Montana and the nation. Their headquarters is in Great Falls.

28 **BOTTOM** | The Little Shell council meets inside a room in the tribal office for a monthly work session. The council is made up entirely of volunteers who were elected to office last November.





ABOVE | Tribal Chairman Gerald Gray and council member Clarence Sivertsen use a pickup truck as a ladder to put up the Little Shell Chippewa Tribe Cultural Center's new sign. The building was completely renovated by volunteers and will open in the summer.

council members value their collective costs at about \$30,000 monthly.

That would more than drain the Little Shell tribal budget, which is estimated to be between \$160,000 and \$190,000 annually. This is about one-tenth of a percent of the 2011 tribal budget for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Montana's wealthiest tribe. The Little Shell budget also fluctuates dramatically depending on income from state grants.

There are nearly 5,000 members of

the Little Shell spread across the state and country. The tribe hosts a handful of events throughout the year, but its biggest bills are rent, utilities and payroll for certain employees. A council of seven volunteers oversees the activity and administers the money.

The work is invaluable, especially since the tribe's only income is through quarterly fundraisers, usually totaling around a few hundred dollars. Book and license plate sales, as well as revenue from a \$5 fee for enrollment applications,

also bring in a small amount of money. The budget's bulk depends on three state grants, estimated to total just under \$160,000 per year. These grants can vary month-to-month, are highly restrictive in what they cover and face threats of dubious future funding.

The tribe does have a financial stake in a 2006 lawsuit in which the federal government was sued for mismanaged funds. As a result of that suit, there is a \$4 million account waiting for the Little Shell in an Albuquerque bank.

However, the tribe can't touch the principle until the federal government officially designates it as a tribe.

Gray said the success of the Little Shell is like a puzzle and getting federal recognition is just one piece.

"It's an important piece, because it's a piece that we deserve," Gray said. "It's rightfully ours; it's already been proven."

The Little Shell filed for federal recognition in the late 1970s. It took three decades before the Department of the Interior denied the request. The

IN

Grants*

Book sales

Fundraisers

License plate sales

Enrollment application fees

LITTLE SHELL FUNDS

OUT

Rent

Utilities

Office supplies

Employee payroll

Program expenses

* *Indian Country Economic Development; Montana Tobacco Use and Prevention Program; Montana and Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council Wellness Grant*

federal government claimed the tribe did not meet all the legal requirements and lacked political influence over its scattered members. Taking the denial in stride, and having gained recognition from the state government in 2000, the tribe moved forward and is collaborating with Montana's senators Jon Tester and Max Baucus as well as Rep. Steve Daines to push through a federal bill that would grant them recognition.

The cultural center looks small, especially next to an egg processing plant and several construction warehouses. To the northeast looms Hill 57, the site on the outskirts of town where the Little Shell community used to live. The dirt road continues back to a set of trailers, hemmed in by an old wooden fence.

Gusty winds, the kind that slam open car doors, whip against Gray's truck as he pulls in. Within minutes, fellow council member Clarence Sivertsen has his own truck backed up to a tall, black metal frame at the edge of the lot. Gray pulls a large cardboard box from his truck and opens it, revealing a large, white sign.

30

Fighting winds and chilly air, Gray and Sivertsen climb on top of the truck's cab,

wrestling with the sign. They push it into place, locking it into the frame. The sign displays a medicine wheel with the words "Little Shell Chippewa Tribe Cultural Center" beneath.

Sivertsen's sister Colleen Hill serves as the Little Shell treasurer on top of her full-time job as an accountant at the Holiday Village Mall and managing her own accounting business. She has long, dark hair with straight bangs and deep blue eyes. Since January 2012, Hill has put together the only bookkeeping system the tribe has ever had.

"You put a project in front of me, it's gonna get done," Hill said. She volunteered to put together the tribe's first budget and backlogged seven or eight years of data to do so. "It was just sitting in these two storage sheds, just boxes and boxes."

Hill spends most of her evenings downstairs in her home office and estimates that she dedicates about 30 hours a week volunteering for the Little Shell tribe, but it was more when she was going through the old tribal data.

"Those types of things make it worth it when you know it's going to help someone," Hill said. "You just do what you gotta do."

Hill says she volunteers most

weekends and her weekday nights have a routine. When she gets home from work at about 5:30 p.m., she jumps straight to crunching numbers, stops for a bite to eat sometime around 7 p.m., then checks invoices and tallies expenses late into the night.

Rent totals about \$1,750 each month between the office and cultural center.

Payroll would be the next largest expense: A state job-training program pays for one part-time office receptionist, and the office's two full-time employees are funded through state grants. Kati Antonich, the tobacco-prevention specialist, and Darrel Rummel, the wellness program coordinator, are paid with two of the three grants the tribe receives. The third grant is the Indian Country Economic Development grant.

Rummel receives her pay through the Montana-Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council, which also gives enough money to cover program expenses and a small portion of rent and utilities.

Antonich receives her pay through the Montana Tobacco Use Prevention Program. The money also helps pay for part of the office rent and utilities, but paying for program expenses is more complicated because it operates on a

reimbursement basis.

"We have to basically front the state of Montana money and then get reimbursed," Chairman Gray said.

Depending on what the tribe can afford, expenses for the program range from \$700 to \$9,000 a month. It is a month-by-month balancing act.

Gray says the tribe is "under such a microscope with the state" because of the mishandling of Montana Tobacco Use Prevention Program funds by a past administration.

Office receptionist Denise Ramsted, who was employed through a Montana United Indian Association job-training program, was the only other office member paid for her position besides Rummel and Antonich. However, the job was temporary and expired in early April. While she had thought about volunteering before, she needed the money an actual job would provide to support herself.

Ramsted's mother, Patricia Maki, has volunteered with the tribe since 1969 and helps in the enrollment office.

"[Volunteering's] just something you can't get away from," she said. "Once you start, there's always something more to learn."

Maki, whose blue eyes are framed

by glasses, works between four and six hours a day checking enrollment applications and files, printing ID cards for tribal members and answering questions over the phone. She also works with the state welfare department when they are dealing with Little Shell children and does paperwork pertaining to the Indian Child Welfare Act.

Maki estimates her work is worth at least \$16 per hour, and based on her hours, her annual salary would amount to about \$20,000.

"The reason for me being here is hopefully being a role model for my own children and grandchildren and spark an interest in them in getting involved," she said.

Maki's friend Roger Salois also volunteers in the enrollment office, about four hours a day. Wearing faded blue jeans and suspenders, he keeps a can of diet Ocean Spray juice on hand while researching family names and blood degrees. A "cheat sheet" of blood-degree fractions encased in a plastic cover lies nearby; a smaller one is taped to a laptop keyboard.

Salois, also retired, began working with the tribe in 1995 and says he has served in almost every council position.

"[Volunteering] just kept escalating for me," he said. "There's just more and more and more to do."

Tribal council secretary Louella Fredricksen, a small woman with curly hair, flits between her desk and the enrollment office. Fredricksen started in 1996, working with Maki to set up the enrollment database. She's now retired but still works several hours a day for the Little Shell while caring for her husband.

"I've worked my whole life, so it's nothing new," Fredricksen said. "When I retired, I thought, 'Oh no, what am I going to do, I'm going to get bored.' But I haven't had time to get bored yet."

For many of the Little Shell, the time they put into volunteering is essentially "priceless." For election committee volunteers Francis Flesch and Joe Martinez, it's hard to guess the number of hours a week they put in because they don't track it.

"If it's going to move us forward from where we're at today, I don't [mind volunteering] at all," Martinez said. "That's my goal, to move this tribe forward, in any way I can, whatever I

have to do."

Both men are retired. Martinez has a full belly laugh and eyebrows like black, inverted checkmarks. His leg was swollen because he recently had knee replacement surgery. Flesch, who has to carry around an oxygen concentrator because of a heart condition, has bright blue eyes and sings "Hey Joe" to Martinez every time he calls.

The two men worked together to set up the last election, organizing polling places and running background checks on candidates, on top of other duties. Candidate application fees helped pay for the elections. Flesch also helps manage the tribe's Facebook page and records council meetings and posts videos of them online.

For Flesch, who grew up in Judith Gap, working for the tribe is not just something he wants to do personally; it's also to fulfill a promise he made to his mother.

"There were a lot of people out there, in Judith Gap, that run us down," he said. "And Mom, she just kind of plugged along and stood up for us. So this is all, what I'm doing, I'm doing for her. That's the easiest way I can say it."

While the tribe has received a great deal of support from various members, many agree what they have now will not be enough in the future. Because the Little Shell tribe is unable to pay volunteers for their contributions, most, such as Flesch and Martinez, are elders. Members often say the end goal for the tribe is federal recognition, but many feel they will not be able to achieve this if younger people do not start participating. Through the tobacco prevention and wellness programs, elders hope youth interest will improve.

"This tribe will live and die with young people or without them," Martinez said. "They're going to live if they can come in, and they'll die if they don't."

Chairman Gray thinks the generation gap is simply a logistical problem. To him, economic self-sufficiency is the kindling for a brighter burning future. He sees the Little Shell operating like the Lumbee tribe in North Carolina, which has an established government, social services and tribal businesses but is not federally recognized.

"They don't need to be because



TOP | Little Shell secretary Louella Fredricksen adds up blood quantum numbers while checking the eligibility of an enrollment applicant. Fredricksen says she spends around five hours a day volunteering in the office.

ABOVE | An example Little Shell identification card is taped to a laptop inside the enrollment room in the tribal office. The tribe is in a constant process of enrolling new members.

they've got all kinds of business ventures going on," Gray said. "That's how I envision the Little Shell: With or without the federal government, we'll get there."

For the Little Shell, success is a mix of tradition, reality and hope for the future: keeping tradition alive in their community, accepting the reality of challenges they face and hoping the federal government will recognize their efforts. Gray believes all members have the internal drive required to move the

tribe forward.

"To me, the fire burns so passionate because when you're talking to our senators or representatives, they know it and I know it, and it's like this isn't going to die out until something is done about it. So we just keep fighting it."

Editor's note: Denise Ramsted, who was mentioned in this story as one of the paid employees of the Little Shell Chippewa tribe, died in her home on May 1.

Out of the Ashes

Residents continue to rebuild one year after the Ash Creek Fire devastated the Northern Cheyenne reservation



TOP | Sandy Spang lives in a double-wide trailer with her husband, Zane, and great-granddaughter, Lia. They are renting their home from Northern Cheyenne Tribal Housing Authority until they can build a new home on their land.

BOTTOM | Zane and Sandy Spang look at the foundation of their old home. The Spangs return to their ranch daily to feed their horses. They own 400 acres and lease an additional 9,000.

Story by KETTI WILHELM
Photographs by LEAH GREEN

Sandy Spang and her family nervously watched a newly sparked wildfire approaching over the horizon and thought, or hoped, firefighters would promptly snuff out the flames. As the fire continued to burn through the hills of southeastern Montana, engulfing stands of Ponderosa pine and crisp, dry grasslands, they started to get nervous.

With the fire sweeping closer to the Spangs' secluded home, ringed with tall trees and tucked between rolling hills and flat-topped buttes, Sandy called the Bureau of Indian Affairs police. An unfamiliar voice answered. Normally, she recognizes the voice of the officer on the line.

She asked for a pumper truck to come protect her home. The man told her no one was available. In a compassionate voice, he said no equipment could be sent. Nothing could be done.

"God help you, Sandy," he said.

Wildfires are nothing new in Montana's southeastern plains, where the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation occupies a remote swath of land entrusted to the tribe of about 10,000 enrolled citizens, half of whom live there.

The Ash Creek Fire, ignited by a lightning strike on June 25, 2012, wasn't the only fire that summer. It was by far the largest in the region and would eventually rank among the biggest wildfires in Montana's recorded history. Of the quarter of a million acres of land burned, about 44,000 were on the reservation.

Sandy, the family's 70-year-old matriarch with short, curly, reddish hair and soft eyes, told her grandchildren to get out the suitcases, which are difficult for Sandy to handle because she has multiple-sclerosis. Sandy's husband, Zane, opened the gates dividing their

9,400-acre ranch so their 31 horses could flee.

Meanwhile, Sandy kept trying to call the police, wondering if an evacuation was in the works. Eventually, another new voice answered, this one less gentle.

"Why aren't you out of that house?" Sandy recalled the voice asking her.

The area where their ranch was located, on Tongue River Road meandering along the reservation's eastern border, had already been evacuated.

"And I had not heard a thing," Sandy said. "No one told me. No one called me."

That was the beginning, the first in a line of mishaps and miscommunications that became synonymous with the devastation of the Ash Creek Fire for the people who lived through it.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs estimates the fire has run up a bill of \$7.3 million so far, shared between the four entities responsible for the damaged tribal, state, federal and private lands. The costs include equipment, firefighters and restoration of the land, which is still a work in progress. Additionally, the bureau estimates \$300,000 worth of timber burned.

Size and cost are not the only marks of notoriety distinguishing the blaze. Locals say the disaster could have been stopped before so much was lost. Communication failures and mismanagement of resources reigned supreme; interagency cooperation was nominal, at best, and, nearly a year later, allegations of corruption and nepotism abound.

"It was really a tragic comedy of errors," said Troy Spang, Sandy and Zane's youngest child at age 50.

The day after the fire swept across the land, the Spangs returned to where their home had stood for 31 years, outside the 800-person town of Ashland.

All that remained of the house were smoldering piles of soot and rubble.



A FEMA trailer sits behind the Bartlett's new home where their work sheds used to be. It is one of several trailers acquired by the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Housing Authority. Almost a year after the Ash Creek Fire blazed through the reservation debris remains to be cleared.

"When you lose things like we did, I mean everything, it's a hard thing to comprehend," Sandy said.

"I asked them to bring me a chair, and I just sat there and looked at it," she recalled. "I didn't cry, not then. I just sat there and thought about what was lost."

In front of the four cracked concrete foundation walls sticking up from the ground, wheelbarrows are lined up in what was once the front yard, like a gravestone with mementos laid in front of it. They are filled with neatly sorted remains of various household items.

Bently, 52 and the couple's oldest son, spent weeks sifting through piles of rubble to collect the few and scattered remnants — a broken mug, some metal artworks and hundreds of pennies, black and rough from flames.

"It was like an archaeological dig for your family," Bently said. "You're finding your life in little half-inch squares."

The summer of 2012 was one of the hottest and driest on record. The Spangs recalled the temperature soaring to 111 degrees by midafternoon the day their home was burned.

Making matters worse, the preceding summer was unusually wet, creating abundant fuel for the fires.

For thousands of years, Native peoples burned the plains to improve bison grazing lands and as a tactic of war, according to Ronald Wakimoto, a professor of forest fire science at the University of Montana. When settlers stripped the Native Americans of their land, the fires stopped. Without those regular burns, huge stands of Ponderosa pine took over what used to be grasslands, creating fuel for much bigger fires.

"Our policies keep the fires out as long as they can," Wakimoto said. "So when the lightning strikes, the fires produce tremendous heat. They're as intense as they can be."

Such intense disasters have devastating consequences on a reservation with entrenched poverty and unemployment looming around 70 percent.

The fire destroyed 22 houses on the reservation. The Spangs were one of only two families that had the cushion of homeowners' insurance.

They ran one of the few private enterprises on the reservation, their own tourism business called Cheyenne Trailriders, and welcomed guests from around the world for camping trips in teepees, horseback riding on their vast ranch and learning about Cheyenne history and culture. When the fire hit, they had to cancel about 15 trips, a net loss of about \$5,000, and Sandy said they were expecting up to 25 more bookings throughout the season.

Still, that loss pales in comparison to their torched home and land.

Sandy estimates the five-bedroom home was worth about \$250,000. It was a double-wide mobile home painted turquoise. The family had spent years renovating it. They added a basement with a large living room, two bedrooms, a library and several display cases full of art. French doors led onto a deck with a ramp to accommodate Sandy's walker.

Inside the home, the family had \$133,000 worth of belongings insured but only received \$25,000 in insurance money for them, along with \$5,000 to help clean and rehabilitate the property.

Sandy said the full insurance

payment for the house, when it comes, will be less than half of her estimate for the home's value, but it should be enough to buy a new mobile home. Now, Sandy, Zane and Lia, the couple's 15-year-old great-granddaughter whom they are raising, live in a small, dusty subdivision in another housing authority-owned mobile home, waiting for the bulk of their insurance money so they can rebuild on their land.

While the fire, and the institutional failures that accompanied it, cost the Spangs and many others dearly, they are quick to praise those who helped with the recovery.

"I want people to know that the fire is still raging because people have needs," Sandy said. "We have spent a lot of money that we didn't have because we had to buy back everything that burned up. Granted, we had a lot of good people that helped us, but we spent a lot of money."

In addition to the 1,200 firefighters assigned to the fire and the locals who pitched in where they could, the Spangs said the housing authority and the Boys & Girls Club of the Northern Cheyenne Nation were most indispensable in the tumultuous days and weeks after the fire.

The Northern Cheyenne Tribal Housing Authority is both a social service and a landlord. Its yearly budget of \$2.9 million is handed down by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. With it, they maintain, and collect rent on about 400 houses and apartment units.

Shortly after the fire, the housing authority rounded up 22 trailer homes from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, leftover from disasters in other states, and shipped them to Montana.

Twilla Speelman, a 50-year-old grandmother, is among those displaced by the fire and now living in a FEMA trailer. Speelman works part time as the head cook at the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Elderly Program in Ashland to support herself and the four grandchildren she is raising.

Economically, Speelman's situation is more typical of the reservation than the Spangs'. Her part-time job and her



Twilla Speelman's trailer was the only home in this coulee taken by the fire.



Twilla Speelman received full custody of her four grandchildren in June 2010.

husband's odd jobs as a mechanic aren't enough to keep the family fed. The household depends on food stamps, which don't usually last the whole month. The welfare support Speelman receives to raise her grandchildren, \$150 a month for each child, doesn't go far. Homeowner's insurance is an unattainable luxury.

The family's mobile home was the only structure that burned in the hamlet known as Rabbit Town, tucked away in the hills just outside of Ashland. Speelman estimated the home's value at \$20,000.

Ashland was at the center of the fire. The town boasts a small motel, a Catholic mission school that began as a brutal boarding school for Native American children and a handful of bars. A broad, gently curving highway takes motorists over the tree-covered mountains between Ashland and Lame Deer, the reservation's largest town with 2,000 residents. Home to the tribal government and the only grocery store on the reservation, Lame Deer was untouched by the fire.

When the fire approached Rabbit Town, Speelman and her family were in Lame Deer buying gasoline and didn't know police were evacuating their

neighborhood. On their way home, Speelman defiantly told the officer who stopped her

she was going back to gather what she could.

Moments after they arrived home, the fire cascaded over the low hill a few yards away.

"My oldest came and said, 'Grandma, let's go! That fire's here!'" she recalled, her mouth contorting at the pain of the memory.

"The sun was going down, and the smoke was already setting in," Speelman said.

It was too dark to see and confusion reigned.

They had no time to save anything.

Knowing they needed to find shelter and electricity for communication, they drove back to Lame Deer and met a mass of evacuees congregating at the Boys & Girls Club.

Geri Small, the club's executive director, returned to work that evening knowing that without electricity, the club was vulnerable to a break-in. When she arrived, a line of people seeking sanctuary greeted her. Small opened the club's doors and started trying to provide for the refugees.

The tribe had designated the elementary school in Lame Deer as the shelter site, but people still congregated at the Boys & Girls Club, a de-facto community center. No one knew the plan for this kind of emergency.

"That's what everyone was so upset

with," said Small, who is also a former tribal president. "They say there was a plan, but nobody knew what the plan was."

Speelman said that around 1 a.m. she helped the club staff make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to feed the hundreds of evacuees, including herself and her family.

It was a sleepless night as the fire raged on. Early in the morning, Speelman went looking for news about her house and found Ed Joiner, who was then the tribe's disaster and emergency services coordinator.

"He looked at me, and he said, 'Twilla, we don't know.' He said we got no communication, he said no cellphones, he said nothing. He said we don't even know where the fire trucks are right now," Speelman recalled.

"We got caught with our pants down that day," Joiner said in an interview. "We didn't even know we were going to evacuate [Ashland]. Basically, it was just a breakdown in communication."

Alec Sandcrane, the current emergency services coordinator, said the main reason for the lack of communication was the power outage. The entire reservation had no electricity, no phones, no cellphone service and no emergency generators to power back-up radios. Officials in Lame Deer couldn't communicate with firefighters, police

or residents in Ashland, which was surrounded by the fire. Making matters worse, fire trucks ran out of fuel and the gas station had no generator to pump gas, so a worker had to drive 200 miles around the fire to bring back fuel from Miles City.

That lack of communication fed the pandemonium that left Speelman and others without answers.

"For a whole week, we went not knowing where we were gonna live, what we were gonna do," Speelman said. She and her family spent their days at the Boys & Girls Club and slept at her sister's house.

The tribe first implemented an emergency plan in 2006. Sandcrane said the last public meetings about the plan were in 2005, when it was being drafted. Residents, including Speelman and the Spangs, said they hadn't heard a word about the plan before the fire, and never knew its contents.

Small said disaster plans are especially important for reservation communities.

"You may have 10 or 15 people living in one house and maybe no car, no phone [because of poverty]," she said. "Somebody has to know to go check that house."

Sandcrane said the emergency plan was in line for an update in 2012, before the Ash Creek Fire, and would have been more effective if it had been updated.

BY THE NUMBERS: THE ASH CREEK FIRE

Total acres burned:

250,000

Acres burned
on the
reservation:

44,000

Houses burned on the
reservation:

22

Firetrucks on
the reservation
at the time of
the fire: **13**

(one for every **34,154**
acres of reservation land)

Firefighters
assigned to the
Ash Creek Fire:

1,200

from **20** states

Estimated initial expense to
the Northern Cheyenne Tribal
Housing Authority:

\$200,000

"Mainly, the biggest thing on it is the communications have got to be updated," Sandcrane said. "Everybody's got to be on the same track."

So far, the legacy of this disaster is that no one was on the same track.

Small said about 550 people slept on the floor of the club's gymnasium that night, including about 40 evacuees from a nearby Amish colony. The next morning, the staff cooked pancakes, eggs and bacon on propane grills for the anxious evacuees.

"After that, it kind of became a safe haven, not only for the kids, but for the whole community," Small said of the club. After the fire, the tribe designated the club as a disaster shelter.

Some people were able to return to their homes the next day or stay with family in the area, but at least 20 evacuees lived at the club for two weeks, waiting for a place to go.

"It was a lot of work, but it was well worth it," Small said. "Our people were safe and they were taken care of."

During those weeks, the Boys & Girls Club spent \$23,000 on food and other relief efforts, which FEMA reimbursed. Labor was not on the bill because the club's staff volunteered their time, saving up to \$15,000 from the tab.

Days after the fire, housing authority's Executive Director Lafe Haugen secured used FEMA trailers for the victims. They were delivered at the end of July.

Haugen said housing authority paid about \$90,000 to have the trailers shipped to the reservation and another \$55,000 to set them up. People like Speelman, who were left with nothing after the fire, were given the trailers for free, but Haugen said they sold about a dozen to people whose homes didn't burn to recoup the transportation cost.

Families like the Spangs, who had insurance on their homes and other means to get back on their feet, were not offered FEMA trailers.

Police did notify Susan Bartlett and her family when their neighborhood was evacuated. They had 15 minutes to leave and were able to collect some clothing and their two kids' social security cards, but little else.

Despite the devastation, they knew they could start over, Bartlett said.

"We're young enough and we're

ambitious enough, we can do it. We know we can," Bartlett, 37, said.

Getting a loan can be extremely difficult on reservations. Local sources of credit are rare and banks are leery of lending to people who live on sovereign land, where they have no authority to enforce the terms of the loan.

When the Bartletts found out the Small Business Administration was offering low-interest rate loans to victims of the Ash Creek Fire they decided to apply.

"We weren't trying to ask for a handout," Bartlett said with determination written across her broad, strong face. "We didn't want money to replace our house. We wanted to get qualified for something, just something to get us started."

The business administration gave them a \$92,000 loan to buy a new, double-wide mobile home. Their payment is manageable at around \$500 a month.

The FEMA trailer the housing authority offered to the Bartletts sits empty, adjacent to their new mobile home, on the same piece of land where

they lived before the fire. Housing authority was so busy after the fire they couldn't hook up the trailer's utilities until November, just before the Bartlett's new mobile home was delivered, so they never moved in to the trailer.

Bartlett hopes the community will be more prepared for the next fire.

Sandcrane, the tribe's emergency services coordinator, said one of his top priorities is buying generators to keep communication alive and the gasoline flowing when another disaster hits. FEMA will likely pay for one generator, costing about \$2,300. The first one will go to the gas station, and Sandcrane is hoping to find money to buy a second generator for the communication towers soon.

The tribe acquired two firetrucks in February and have a third on the way. It will only have to pay to ship, about \$3,500 each.

"It's been something we've been trying to get done here for a number of years," Sandcrane said. "But now, with the fire, it has opened up some funding and opened up some eyes."



LEFT | The Ash Creek Fire destroyed homes so thoroughly, items within are no longer recognizable.

BELOW | Dean Spang, who is dean of student affairs at Chief Dull Knife College in Lane Deer, stands in the shed they rent from housing authority. Although most of their belongings couldn't be recovered, the Spangs did not lose all of the tack for their horses in the fire.



Symptoms of Spending

Story by EBEN WRAGGE-KELLER
Photographs by THOM BRIDGE



The new Rocky Boy's health center was supposed to be finished in spring of 2013. It has since been delayed and remains \$15 million short from completion. The medical center stands as a symbol of the economic difficulties plaguing one of the smallest reservations in Montana.

Three police officers stood outside the front door of the Chippewa Cree Business Committee chambers on the cold, spring morning. Inside, security guards waved a metal-detecting wand over employees before they were allowed to enter the tribe's legislative chambers.

Out back stood three more police officers, blocking the door from the 12 Rocky Boy's citizens there in protest. Among them was the man at the center of the day's controversy and enhanced security detail, Business Committee Chairman Ken St. Marks. Standing with his

supporters, St. Marks was already sure of the council's vote. He was certain of the outcome as the council members deliberated whether to remove him, the tribe's elected tribal council chairman, from his position. But when the verdict was final, proving him right, his voice still carried a tone of disappointment.

"I'm kicked off the council," St. Marks said.

Surprised at the thought, a supporter, Russell Standing Rock, asked him to clarify.

"They kicked me off. I'm off the council."

The Chippewa Cree Business Committee, the governing body of

the 6,177-member tribe based on the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation, voted to remove St. Marks as chairman. The event came six months into his term, which was filled with accusations from both factions regarding misspent tribal funds and alleged corruption.

The council leveled a number of accusations against St. Marks: employee harassment, sexual harassment, financial misconduct, unauthorized expenditures and illegal employment practices.

On the other hand, since he was elected chairman, St. Marks has filed his own claims against the council and has asked for a federal investigation

into the council's spending.

Coincidentally, in a separate federal investigation, a member of the tribe's business council was indicted in U.S. District Court on charges of embezzlement in early May.

Council delegate John Chance Houle, along with the head of Chippewa Cree Construction Corp., Tony Belcourt, and three others were indicted on charges of misspending more than \$300,000 of federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds.

St. Marks began making waves early in his term. In February, he received a memorandum from BEH Gaming,

a Florida-based limited liability corporation, claiming the tribe owed the company more than \$16 million for the construction of the tribe's Northern Winz Casino. But upon asking for formal documentation, St. Marks said he was immediately met with resistance.

"My question to [the council] was 'Where did the money go?'" St. Marks said. "As soon as I asked that question, they turned on me and voted me out of there."

In the BEH memo, the company stated the tribe had agreed to make monthly payments upward of a quarter of a million dollars. Instead, the company stated, it had only received one payment of \$10,000.

The council provided no comment. Kerey Carpenter, general counsel for BEH, verified the company is based in Florida but would not give any information regarding its business with the tribe or with the Northern Winz Casino. Beyond that, BEH has no official listing or online presence. Its existence is solely determined by the court documents and the letter sent to St. Marks alleging the tribe owed \$16 million.

This was the first in a series of troubling finds in the tribal council budget, which St. Marks claims is in debt by nearly \$50 million. It is also the reason there is only a shell of a new medical center sitting in town, incomplete and unattended.

This story is not new. Tribal governments throughout the United States are constantly under scrutiny for how money is spent. On Rocky Boy's, the story continues

to play out with the most recent indictments regarding the federal reinvestment and recovery money.

In July 2012, the Department of the Interior launched a federal investigation into the North Central Montana Regional Water System Project designed to bring clean water to Rocky Boy's and surrounding areas. Among the initial findings, the inspector general discovered that some of the \$33 million in federal funds designated for the \$361 million project had been diverted into private business accounts. The money was eventually replaced, but the inspector general shut down the pipeline project until the tribe can implement tighter accounting regulations.

According to the indictment document, Houle coordinated with four others—Tony Belcourt, Hailey Lee Belcourt, and Tammy and Mark Leischner—to create a surrogate company, MT Waterworks, used to perform a complex series of transactions that funneled federal stimulus dollars into private accounts.

Among the alleged illicit transactions are using money to buy a house and to finance private businesses. In total, the group is charged with misspending \$311,000.

Tribal governments and misspent money seem to be a common focal point in media coverage of Indian Country. That's not to say the phenomena doesn't exist, but the reasons behind these incidents have a common thread. Recognized tribal governments are relatively new and still finding balance between traditional and contemporary policies, said University



TOP | Ken St. Marks was removed from the Chippewa Cree Business Council amid accusations of employee harassment, financial misconduct and illegal employment practices. He says this was a cover for the tribal council's dissatisfaction with his cooperation with federal investigators into tribal misspending. Here he is at his house located just above the hill above Rocky Boy Agency.

MIDDLE | After receiving a letter from BEH Gaming Ltd. claiming the tribe owed more than \$16 million for the construction of a hotel onto the Northern Winz Casino, Ken St. Marks began questioning the financial state of the tribe. He says the tribe is in nearly \$50 million worth of debt and argues some of that is a direct result of misspending.

BOTTOM | People going into the tribal chambers during Ken St. Marks' impeachment hearing were met by guards at each entrance and subject to being searched with a metal detecting wand.

of Montana School of Law professor Maylinn Smith.

"Part of the problems I see with tribes, and Rocky Boy is not unusual in this, is that they've had government structures somewhat imposed on them that really do not meet their cultural needs," Smith said. "They're trying to work in a system that does not build on consensus, that does majority vote."

Smith has been practicing Indian law for 26 years, and during that time she has seen accusations of corruption on tribes across the state. The problem, she says, isn't the people. It's the power.

"I think any government is corrupt," Smith said. "You're going to get corruption in any government. And I think that the stereotype that may come across is the corruption in Indian Country really is more of a reflection of tribalism, tribal communities, clan systems. Where historically, as part of tribes you are supposed to support your clan, your family members."

The council refused to comment. But, according to court documents, the Business Committee filed a restraining order against St. Marks by the Business Committee on March 15, 2013. The courts dismissed the restraining order six days later, after the committee had refused to present any specific accusations.

Will Gopher was released from prison last winter and has been living in a condemned home with his nephew through the last few months. He spends the majority of his time making brightly colored beaded jewelry—necklaces, earrings, bracelets—and selling them to a store in Havre to help keep the lights on. In the summers he fights fires, but in the fall, winter and spring, he struggles to pay the bills.

The home, which has mold and wood-rot issues, is all Gopher can afford. But during the colder months, he must turn on the stovetops in the house to stay warm or burn a small allotment of wood brought in by the Forest Service.

"Well," Gopher says, flicking his cigarette out the doorway. "You gotta be good with the council, that's all there is to it."

Gopher has spent his whole life in Rocky Boy's. During his time in prison



Even after receiving certificates for construction and carpentry, Will Gopher has difficulty finding work on the Rocky Boy's reservation, which he claims is a result of his lack of favorability amongst the tribal council. Instead, he beads jewelry sold in the neighboring town of Havre.

he earned multiple construction and carpentry certificates, but since his release, he hasn't been able to put any of his newfound skills to work. As he looks around his home, he assesses the costs at around \$6,000 to make it livable again.

In his time on the reservation, he's felt as though there hasn't been the kind of disclosure necessary to keep the tribal members informed. The tribal council members' salaries are, in particular, a sore subject.

According to St. Marks, who also served as a tribal councilman in the early 2000s, council delegates earn more than \$100,000 annually, while the head of the council earns an extra \$20,000 on top of that. With eight council members on payroll, nearly \$1 million of the tribal budget goes to their salaries alone. Some council members have businesses, ranches and other forms of income on top of this.

Gopher points out that a delegate earns more in one month than he did in a year working at a local sports bar and

restaurant, where he took home \$520 every two weeks, \$620 if he took extra shifts.

"It's kind of hard to understand why we're so poor, when we get all this funding and we can't even get a tank of gas, or a \$50 food voucher," Gopher said.

He is representative of the 65-percent unemployment rate on the Rocky Boy's reservation, but he hopes to earn enough money over the summer to fix up his home and make it livable. He goes down to the tribal council headquarters every day to ask for work and claims he is widely ignored or told there is nothing for him to do.

Meanwhile, nearly half of households in Rocky Boy's live on less than \$25,000 per year. According to the 2011 U.S. Census Bureau information, the average household in Rocky Boy's has a median income of about \$27,000.

Rocky Boy's is home to two very different scenes: low-income housing and brand-new buildings with modern

designs that could rival more affluent, metropolitan areas. A brand-new law enforcement building sits, casting sharp, angular shadows on the trailers across the street.

A few hundred yards up the road sits another building, unpainted walls of Sheetrock draped in opaque plastic sheets. The Chippewa Cree Medical Center sits unattended, a symbol of the economic troubles plaguing one of the smallest reservations in the state.

The construction of the new medical center is short \$15 million dollars and has only recently resumed construction after the tribe received a \$5 million loan. Though 20 new employees were just hired, there is still no word as to where the remaining money will come from and much disagreement about where the money went.

Ted Demontiney has been on the business committee less than a year. By the time he was elected, the new clinic had already begun construction, thanks to loans from tribal businesses with



TOP | Because it's difficult for Barbara Eagleman to receive adequate health care at the temporary clinic, her granddaughter Glenda must help with daily activities and medical transportation. The Eaglemans claim the only way to see a doctor at the temporary clinic is to go by ambulance, which is more costly and uncomfortable for Barbara.

ABOVE | Suffering from chronic back pain, respiratory issues and a heart condition, Barbara Eagleman is forced to travel to Havre and Great Falls to receive the necessary health care for her problems. Lack of funding, she claims, has resulted in a dismissal of the medical transportation program and the in-house health checkup she was supposed to receive.

the understanding that they would be reimbursed when an anticipated insurance check arrived.

"They had \$25 million and they split it. \$12.5 million went to the clinic," Demontiney said about the insurance check. "They must've hired too many people, and that kind of put them in a financial strain. They split the other \$12.5 million into four different programs that needed some

bailing out, paying out loans and some debts that they had from other programs."

The hospital project, initially estimated at \$22 million, has now breached the \$30 million mark. The new completion date has been pushed back to 2014.

Without the funds to build the new clinic, tribal members are forced to leave the reservation for medical care

during after-hours operation using the Indian Health Service Contract Health Service program, which contracts with outside hospitals to provide care to tribal members. Driven by funding shortfalls, medical center officials have drafted a system in which they gauge the severity of a patient's symptoms to determine whether they will receive treatment.

St. Marks said his tribal political career was driven by the story of a friend who unsuccessfully sought treatment at the medical center. She had complained about a pain but was sent home with aspirin.

"She'd go back every day," St. Marks said. "Finally, one day she got so sick they rushed her to the hospital. They flew her to Great Falls, and she died a couple days later. Cancer."

Glenda Eagleman has been taking care of her grandmother, Barbara, for the past few years. Over time, Barbara's condition has grown steadily worse and has resulted in several trips to the Havre or Great Falls hospitals per week. Each time, Glenda claims her grandmother is given some pain medication and sent on her way.

On May 6, Barbara was diagnosed with malignant cancer.

Years earlier, Glenda lost her daughter to an asthma attack. She claims it took the ambulance 45 minutes to drive to her house, three miles down the road.

"When we went and checked on her before we go to bed, and I noticed that her eyes were open. I went and checked on her, and her brothers were with me, and I checked her pulse, I noticed she wasn't breathing. Right away I started CPR," Glenda said.

Officer Larry Bernard arrived at the Eaglemans' home shortly after the family called 911 and assisted with multiple shifts of CPR while waiting for the ambulance to arrive.

"I often wonder if they would have gotten her to Havre right away, if they could've started that shock treatment and adrenaline in her heart, if she could've had a chance," she said.

Resorting to Contract Health Service is costly and the tribe owes up to \$4 million to outside specialists, Demontiney said. "And we're making it a priority to pay those bills out there so we can see the specialists and

continue the services," he said.

But things are expected to get worse before they get any better for the tribe. In March 2013, the first of the federal sequestration budget cuts were made and are expected to impact Native American reservations across the country.

"The sequestration hit all across the board on everybody, and we're prepared to do what's necessary on all the budgets, all the line items," Demontiney said. "It's gonna start hitting us pretty soon, probably in the middle of this month we'll start feeling the lesser money. It will get worse, yeah, but you gotta prioritize and make sure that your adjustments are necessary for survival of the businesses."

Since the Indian Reorganization Act was passed in 1934, the vast majority of tribes have outlined protections designed for these types of situations in their tribal constitutions. But not every tribal member is aware of the power they have if they act as a group.

"Part of this is that I think tribal people have been subjected to so much top-down authority, through the BIA or whatever, that they have not appreciated the level of action they can take as a citizens' group," Smith said.

Article VIII of the Rocky Boy's tribal constitution outlines a tribal citizen's right to organize and petition the government. But Smith, with the University of Montana law school, said she has never heard of it being used.

"It is a huge tool for the populous, your tribal general membership, to use to make changes in the government," Smith said. "But you have to have someone who can organize the people, and that's where you have those divisions along family lines often that make it difficult to make that majority vote."

Smith said St. Marks is making use of his rights, but if tribes really want to make changes, the most dramatic change doesn't occur from the top-down. It starts with the people.

