Welcome to Yellowstone County

Yellowstone County is located in Montana's south-central region and is the most populous in the state with approximately 158,000 residents. It is home to a blend of urban and rural communities who work together to make Yellowstone County the thriving industry hub it is today. Billings is the county seat and has the largest population in Montana. Being one of the largest urban regions of the state, Billings provides thousands of jobs in a wide range of industries. The areas that surround Billings represent Yellowstone County's equally essential rural farming and ranching communities. These communities include Laurel, Broadview, Huntley, Ballantine, Shepherd, and Custer.

The agricultural, energy, and healthcare industries lead the economic forces in Yellowstone County. Cash receipts for agriculture are the highest in Montana, totaling approximately $217 million in 2012. The county covers 1.68 million acres, with over 1.58 million of those acres representing irrigated cropland, dryland cropland, or pasture and rangeland. Sugar beets, corn, alfalfa, barley, and wheat are the main crops grown, while beef cow/calf operations and feedlots are the primary livestock enterprises. The energy industry is mainly comprised of receipts from oil, natural gas, and coal. Yellowstone County is home to several refineries and purification plants that process raw materials into usable energy resources. Both

the agricultural and energy industries are aided by the county's location and role as a major trucking, railroad, and air travel transportation center. The medical corridor brings many individuals to Billings from across Montana and northern Wyoming who are seeking cutting edge healthcare. Billings Clinic and St. Vincent Healthcare's Community Benefit combined total is approximately $66 million.

As described, Yellowstone County is unique in many ways. It has three full-time commissioners and one of the largest county Extension staffs in the state. Together, everyone involved works in partnership with Montana State University to meet the public’s diverse needs. Recognizing that change is always occurring, MSU Extension in Yellowstone County will continue to provide opportunities to meet the outlined needs of the community for years to come.
Connecting Rural Residents Through Exercise

When thinking of Yellowstone County, people often picture Billings and the many amenities that accompany living in an urban area. Great trails, access to gyms, and an indoor walking trail offer convenient exercise options less than 20 minutes away. However, the rural areas of Yellowstone County do not have access to these amenities.

Residents of Shepherd, a rural town in Yellowstone County, have a minimum 30-minute drive to the closest gym. For people who live beyond Shepherd, it is even further. The MSU Extension Family and Consumer Sciences agent is meeting the physical activity needs of this rural community by offering arthritis exercise classes twice a week at the Shepherd Community and Senior Center. Programming through MSU Extension offers a class incorporating safe physical activity that can also be practiced at home. Participants leave with improved strength, flexibility and mobility. For one participant who lives over 45 minutes from Shepherd, this has made a big difference. “In the last two weeks of class I have noticed how I am stronger and less sore. I deal with pain every day and by attending class, am more mobile,” shared one arthritis exercise class participant.

MSU Extension in Yellowstone County also offers chair yoga once a week to residents in the Laurel community at their new independent living center. Chair yoga offers a slower-paced, gentler class than traditional yoga. These classes give participants with mobility issues a chance to move their bodies in ways that reduce pain and increase flexibility. Chair yoga classes provide social interaction and are adaptable to participants’ needs; this is a unique opportunity for residents in a rural area.

By attending these classes, participants increase their ability to live independently, reducing their healthcare costs and reducing the cost of healthcare for all Montanans. Participants are learning safe ways to exercise in their homes and have experienced social connections with others as they practice the program together; a remarkable option for these rural communities. Healthcare professionals agree that the majority of the aging process is affected by factors within our control. By keeping active and staying strong, participants are able to affect the aging process. MSU Extension is educating rural residents about safe exercise to enhance residents’ health, reduce health care costs, and improve their quality of life.

MetraPark Education and Demonstration Garden

The summer of 2017 saw the culmination of the latest Yellowstone County Master Gardener project.

The Education and Demonstration Garden is one of two educational gardens located on the MetraPark grounds. The goal of this demonstration garden is to educate the public about research-based plant options that can be cultured in our region of Montana. Garden themes include: annual flowers, perennial flowers, xeriscape (native and drought tolerant)

Master Gardener education and demonstration garden.
plantings, roses, bulbs, herbs, children’s garden, butterfly garden, raised beds, and a wheelchair access garden.

The new site contains a 20’ x 30’ greenhouse utilized this year as an education opportunity for the Teen Tumbleweed Runaway Program (dedicated to helping homeless and at-risk teens). Approximately a dozen youth constructed their own 4 x 4 square foot growing box in the greenhouse, and met throughout the summer for educational sessions and maintenance of their garden boxes. This will be an ongoing project for Tumbleweed participants.

County educated Master Gardeners were available at the garden throughout MontanaFair to educate the public, answer questions and provide tours.

The demonstration garden would not be the amazing educational opportunity that it is without the caring volunteers of the Master Gardener Program. Dedicated Master Gardener volunteer Joann Glasser and her husband Cory were instrumental in designing and installing the brickwork, irrigation system and garden beds.

The demonstration garden has improved aesthetics in this area of MetraPark, and many compliments were given by MetraPark employees who enjoyed this garden as a summer “green space” oasis. Future plans include utilizing greenhouse and garden sites for K-12 and adult education programs.

Connecting Generations Across 4-H

In Yellowstone County, adult volunteers are the heart of the 4-H program. In many counties, they generally range in age from 21 to 75, which leads to a crucial question: How do we engage these different generations to make a quality 4-H program? Rather than focusing on differences between generations as a barrier, the Yellowstone County 4-H Extension agent incorporated methods to better communicate with leaders from multiple generations.

4-H leaders, parents and other Extension agents attended Generational Workshops that were designed to showcase how generational differences affect not only how each views the world but also how these various perspectives influence work life, volunteerism and youth education. These unique characteristics impact 4-H at all levels from local clubs to the national program.

The MSU Extension Yellowstone County 4-H agent shared research-based information highlighting each generations’ influences and fundamental values, and tips on motivating and relating to various-aged volunteers and methods to engage them. Incorporating generational knowledge in the local program, the 4-H agent adapted written notifications and even how meetings were conducted. For example, agendas and relevant documents disclosing meeting goals and purpose is essential for Millennials
(born 1981 – 1995), as they want to be involved and work with others. Gen X (born 1965 - 1980) participate because they want to help their children and understand, “Why?” Baby Boomers (born 1946 – 1964) attend meetings to continue traditions and accomplish the task at hand through teamwork. Equally important is providing an opportunity for interpersonal connections to be established between the generations of volunteers, therefore encouraging a better understanding of one another.

Utilizing various forms of communication is key to reaching everyone. While some people like information via paper mailings, others prefer emails and texts. By implementing these generational changes, the attendance at county 4-H Council and subcommittee meetings has recently doubled.

As MSU Extension, we need to be sure 4-H honors traditions and is ever-adapting. Educating others on how the current generation in 4-H is different than previous generations, and discussing methods to relate to and educate this unique group, are necessary. Youth born in 1995 through today (Gen Z) are technology natives, entrepreneurial, self-directed, collaborative, and truly want to make a difference in the world. By helping bridge the gap between the current generation to those of the past, we will continue to build successful future leaders who learn by doing.

**Teaching Today’s Youth the Value of Agriculture**

In a span of two and a half days, over 1,800 fourth graders visited the Northern International Livestock Exposition (NILE) and participated in the Fourth Grade Ag Education Program. The Ag Education program teaches fourth graders from Billings and surrounding areas about local agriculture, with sessions focusing on topics like livestock production, crop production, rangeland management, and more. MSU Extension in Yellowstone County has been active in ag education at the NILE for over 20 years. This year, Yellowstone County’s new agriculture Extension agent, as well as the 4-H and Youth Development Extension agent and the 4-H Program Assistant all played a role in teaching the students.

The mission of the Fourth Grade Ag Education Program is to teach today’s youth using tactile learning methods, so that they understand the importance of agriculture in Montana. According to returned teacher surveys, 100% of respondents feel the program’s mission is being met. The program educates youth as well as their teachers, stimulating them to teach more about Montana agriculture in their classrooms. The Montana crop production session displayed the program’s positive impact with approximately 90% of teachers either strongly agreeing or somewhat agreeing the session taught them something they didn’t already know.

MSU Extension in Yellowstone County’s partnership of teaching Ag Education at the NILE continues to grow and develop. Teaching students where their food comes from and the role agriculture plays on Yellowstone County and Montana’s economies will always be needed as agriculture continues to change and advance. If the students leave learning one new thing about agriculture, MSU Extension is doing its job of successfully extending education to local communities.
Improving the Nutrition Status of Homeless Families

Poverty is a complex and overwhelming problem in our community. Those with incomes below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) are very low-income families. Many people wonder how they can help change the lives of people in poverty. The MSU Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) of Yellowstone County seeks to change lives of people at this income level. Recently EFNEP partnered with Family Promise of Yellowstone County to educate families about healthier eating choices and increased daily physical activity. Family Promise provides meals, shelter and a safe non-judgmental environment for local homeless families that need community support and a chance at a healthier, happier life.

Through the EFNEP Eating Smart • Being Active series and by incorporating the experiential learning process, Yellowstone County Nutrition Educators teach adults with minor children to make healthier food choices on a limited budget, how to read food nutrition labels and ways to practice food safety. The goal is to increase their ability to select and purchase foods that will improve the nutritional quality of the meals they serve to their families.

Another component of each lesson is physical exercise. EFNEP educators encourage participants to try physical activities designed for the program. One option is to use an interactive walking video. Walking is one of the simplest ways to get exercise and offers many benefits for people of all ages, income levels and in different stages of health wellness. For one young man who spent every day walking to his appointments, this was his favorite part of class. After trying out the video, he would often ask “When are we going to do that walking thing? That is fun!” There were always lots of smiles and laughter.

Through the Yellowstone County EFNEP program in 2017, 340 adults were educated about nutrition and physical activity in over 15 different communities. This impacted 1,119 family members that experience poverty. The hands-on approach allows participants to gain practical life skills necessary to make positive behavioral changes. Through the MSU EFNEP program and our community partnerships, participants also experienced increased self-worth, recognizing that they have something to offer their families and their communities.

EFNEP Educates for 50 Years

As the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) celebrates the 50th anniversary of its beginning, it is a great time to look at the success of EFNEP in Yellowstone County. EFNEP began teaching homemakers, always women, using one-on-one, in-home and hands-on instruction. Teaching changed to offer in-home classes with groups of friends. Now EFNEP offers group classes at community locations, with often as many men as women attending the classes.

In the early years of EFNEP, while the mothers were being educated, their children were also being taught through a special 4-H program led by EFNEP 4-H educators. The goal was for parents and children to receive the same information on preparing and eating nutritious meals and snacks. Youth were then taught a series of lessons at after school sites.

![Adult graduates from the EFNEP Eat Smart • Be Active class.](image)
EFNEP educators now teach a six-lesson series in Title I schools during class time for grades one, three and five. In 2017, 1,357 students were enrolled in the EFNEP program in 65 classrooms throughout Yellowstone County.

Does EFNEP make a difference? In a meeting with a caseworker of a partner organization, it was mentioned that even after graduation from college, she remembers EFNEP and the vegetable soup made in her first grade class using fresh, canned, and frozen vegetables. She still makes that and taught her children that a least-liked vegetable put with a favorite veggie tastes good. The funny green puppet used in third grade taught her about the Fight BAC (bacteria) rules of Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill. From fifth grade, she recalled how quickly germs multiply in food. All of these things, plus MyPlate knowledge, help her safely feed her family healthy meals. Educators often meet people who have an ‘EFNEP story’ of recipes handed down in their family or how, as a child, EFNEP helped their family secure food. EFNEP makes a positive and lasting impact on many lives.

Debbie Holman, EFNEP Nutrition Educator, teaching first graders about healthy snacks.