

PRESS RELEASE

U.S. Attorney Jesse Laslovich announces almost \$2 million in federal Justice Department grants to fight school violence

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For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Montana

BILLINGS — U.S. Attorney Jesse Laslovich today announced grant funding of almost \$2 million to help fight school violence for two Montana educational entities from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs. The funding, totaling \$1,999,992, is from the OJP's Bureau of Justice Assistance's Fiscal Year 24 STOP School Violence Program Competitive Solicitation. The project period is from Oct. 1, 2024 to Sept. 30, 2027.

The Western Montana Professional Learning Collaborative in Lolo was awarded \$1 million, while Billings Public Schools in Billings was awarded \$999,992.

"The work of the Justice Department is often reactionary, as we seek to hold accountable those who violate the rule of law. But it is refreshing when we can be proactive in our work, which is why I am pleased to announce these grants. I applaud the work of the Western Montana Professional Learning Collaborative and Billings Public Schools for their focus on mental health services and crime prevention. We are unwavering in our pursuit of those who commit school violence, and these grants show we are equally committed to preventing school violence from occurring in the first place," U.S. Attorney Laslovich said.

The Western Montana Professional Learning Collaborative proposes the Expanding Montana Rural Student Mental Health Supports initiative, which aims to extend mental health resources to underserved rural, tribal and frontier schools in Western Montana. This project will provide comprehensive school mental health services, including trauma informed care, wellness training, curriculum and teletherapy to establish safe school environments and ensure equitable access to mental health services. The project builds on the success of Montana Cares, which currently serves more than 14,000 students and their families. Expanding care in Montana will extend those services in western regions,

addressing significant inequities in school-based mental health resources, and serving an additional 13,000 students and their school community families. Billings Public Schools (BPS) is the largest school district in Montana and serves more than 16,000 students. In the past four years, Billings has seen an increase in violent crimes, especially youth violent crimes and increased youth gang activity. Information from surveys, incident reports and Billings Police Department data demonstrate the need for support in BPS middle schools. The goal of BPS is to address the critical need for violence prevention, positive youth resiliency skill building and promotion of a positive school climate through the Culture of Care program. The Culture of Care program will use funding to hire two, full-time specialists to work directly with students in the six middle schools and a full-time program leader to coordinate training, support program implementation and promote stakeholder engagement. The program aims to reduce violence by addressing conflict before it occurs or escalates.

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