

New Helena nonprofit launching free eye care program for kids

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From left, John Morrison, Mountain Health Gives Executive Director Molly Severson, Board Member Joan Miles, and Mountain Health Co-op CEO Richard Miltenberger.
Mountain Health Gives

INDEPENDENT RECORD

A newly formed nonprofit organization in Helena announced Tuesday it will soon be providing vision screenings, eye exams and glasses for free to area children in need.

The Little Peeps program by Mountain Health Gives will be funded with a \$750,000 gift from attorney and former state Auditor John Morrison from a remainder account of a class-action lawsuit, a news release stated.

Little Peeps was chosen as the nonprofit's first program, officials with the nonprofit said, in part because of a 2021 Johns Hopkins University study that found that children with uncorrected vision are more likely to have low self-esteem, to fall behind in school, and to have behavioral problems.

And, according to the American Optometric Association, 1 in 4 school-aged children have a vision problem that, if left untreated, will affect their learning and personal development.

Common vision problems in children include vision loss, amblyopia (lazy eye), strabismus (misalignment of the eyes), refractive errors (nearsightedness and farsightedness) and astigmatism.

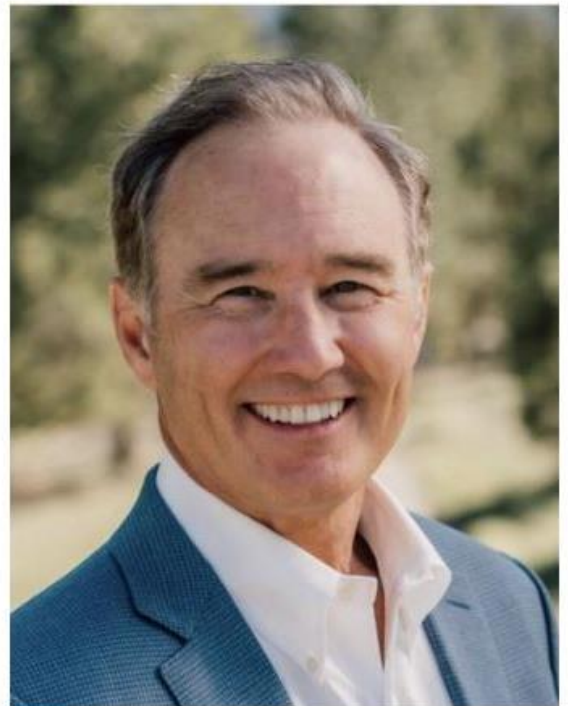
The Kaiser Family Foundation estimated that 51% of kids covered by employer insurance plans have an eye exam and glasses benefit and that more than 52,000 children in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming aren't covered by a health insurance plan.

It is estimated that the gift directed by Morrison will enable the organization to provide more than 3,000 vision exams and nearly 800 pairs of glasses annually over seven years to children in need.

Mountain Health Gives was formed by Mountain Health Co-op in 2021 to help fill gaps in health care for people living in the three states listed above that are served by the co-op.

Molly Severtson, a longtime Montana fundraiser and nonprofit professional, was hired in November as Mountain Health Gives' first full-time executive director.

The class-action suit that produced the funds, *Butler v. Unified Life Insurance Co.*, began as an individual claim by Sidney truck driver Charley Butler against a short-term medical insurance company for payment of bills related to cancer treatment, Morrison said.



John Morrison
Mountain Health Gives

A national class-action was certified to recover systemwide underpayments, and summary judgment was entered in favor of the plaintiffs. The suit was eventually settled, resulting in payments to more than 17,000 people. As happens in class-action cases, some class members did not cash their checks, which left residual money in the class common fund, Morrison said.

In such situations, the presiding judge may then approve a distribution of the funds to one or more appropriate charities. Some funds were also contributed to the Breast Cancer Research Fund and the Montana Justice Foundation.

Mountain Health Gives will work with other area organizations that are already offering similar services to children.

Morrison said he was glad to direct this gift to Mountain Health Gives.

“Children’s health has been a focus of our giving for a long time and I’m excited that this program will better the lives of kids in our region for years to come,” he said in a news release.

Learn more about Mountain Health Gives and Little Peeps at www.mountainhealthgives.org and more about Mountain Health Co-op at www.mountainhealth.coop.