



PRESS RELEASE

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Nonprofit receives \$750,000 gift to launch eye exam and glasses program for children

Helena, MT — In October, a newly-formed nonprofit organization, Mountain Health Gives, received a \$750,000 gift from a remainder account of a class action lawsuit. The gift was directed to Mountain Health Gives by trial attorney and former Montana State Auditor John Morrison.

The first program of Mountain Health Gives will provide vision screenings, eye exams, and glasses free-of-charge to children in the region. The program is called Little Peeps and is set to launch in 2023.

Little Peeps was chosen as the first program of Mountain Health Gives in part because of a large-scale, randomized study by Johns Hopkins University, completed in 2021, that found that kids 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, one in four 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.

In addition, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, it is estimated that only 51% of kids who are 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 at all.

Fortunately, early detection and corrective measures can help prevent eye problems from creating long-term issues for children, giving them the opportunity to achieve better academically and keep pace with their peers.

"I'm glad to have the opportunity to direct this gift to Mountain Health Gives for their Little Peeps program," Morrison said. "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."

Molly Severtson, CFRE, a longtime Montana fundraiser and nonprofit professional was hired in November to serve Mountain Health Gives as their first full-time Executive Director. Severtson said, "We're looking forward to launching Little Peeps and providing kids who might not otherwise receive an eye exam or glasses with this simple, but life-changing, service."

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 the course of seven years to children in need, once the program is up and running. Mountain Health Gives will work in cooperation with other organizations in the region which are already offering similar services to children.

Mountain Health Gives was formed by Mountain Health CO-OP in 2021 to help fill gaps in healthcare for people living in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming – the three states served by the CO-OP. Mountain Health Gives Board Member Joan Miles said, “Little Peeps will help us identify and rectify gaps in learning ability that many children experience due to vision problems. What a great start for our organization!”

The class action that produced the funds, *Butler v. Unified Life Insurance Company*, began as an individual claim by a Sidney truck driver against a short-term medical insurance company for payment of bills related to cancer treatment. Based on facts discovered during the litigation, a national class action was certified to recover system-wide underpayments, and summary judgment was entered in favor of the class.

The suit was eventually settled resulting in payments to more than 17,000 Americans. As happens in class action cases, some class members did not cash their checks, which left residual money in the class common fund. In such situations, the presiding judge may then approve a “cy pres” distribution of the funds to one or more appropriate charities. *Butler* class residual funds were also contributed to the Breast Cancer Research Fund and the Montana Justice foundation.

Learn more about Mountain Health Gives and Little Peeps at www.mountainhealthgives.org and more about Mountain Health CO-OP at www.mountainhealth.coop. If you would like to donate to the effort of Mountain Health Gives to fill gaps in healthcare or to the Little Peeps program, please visit www.mountainhealthgives.org/donate.

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