

October 15, 2009

Wednesday's edition of the Independent Record contained a dramatic story and a picture of a Helena man in crisis on the U.S. 12 overpass on Interstate 15. The community of Helena deserves to know the good news and the untold story behind the picture in the paper. The untold story is that all the different pieces of Helena's crisis response system worked well and this man is now safe and receiving the support he needs. He was treated with dignity and respect.

Over the years the Helena community has worked to ensure that its emergency responders are trained to arrive at this kind of scene and use their training and act with compassion to de-escalate situations and protect citizens who are in crisis. The City and County officers, who were dispatched, arrived at the scene on Monday and did just that.

Other members of the community, learning of the crisis, passed the information on to people who knew the man on the bridge, including Disability Rights Montana. We were able to talk directly to the officer supervising the scene on the bridge and provide information. Other professionals including case managers and services providers worked swiftly and quietly behind the scenes to address the crisis which had driven the man to the bridge.

Because Helena has a Behavioral Health Unit at St. Peter's Hospital, the police were able to take the man to St. Peter's, rather than to the Lewis and Clark County Jail. At St. Peter's, the man was kept safe, compassionately cared for and treated by well trained professionals who confirmed his connections to the community and his personal circle of support, something that would have been far more difficult had he been taken to the jail or transferred to the State Hospital in Warm Springs.

The man on the bridge was taken before a district judge who appointed the Office of the State Public Defender to represent him. At his initial appearance it was determined that the best place for the man was to be returned to the hospital. The staff of the Behavioral Health Unit, in consultation with members of the community who knew the man from the bridge, determined that he no longer presented a danger to himself or to the community at large and that he had support in the community and resources upon which to rely and keep him safe. Having made that decision, he was released.

Disability Rights Montana is happy to have been a witness and participant in this swift, compassionate, and effective response. The community of Helena took care of one of its own. The man on the bridge is one of us, a part of our community, and today he knows that calling Helena home means he is cared for and that he matters to his fellow citizens. Every part of the system; police, hospital, courts, and community supports were activated and worked tremendously well together for a very good outcome. These events demonstrate that a local, well trained and compassionate crisis response system works. Every community in Montana should be this fortunate.

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Disability Rights Montana

Disability Rights Montana is a nonprofit organization and the state's protection and advocacy system for people with disabilities. DRM provides training, advocacy and legal representation to Montanans with disabilities. For more information go to www.disabilityrightsmt.org or call 800-245-4743