

Nonprofits ready to tackle variety of issues in 2022



Whitefish Lake Institute presented Volunteer Service awards last year to Northwest Montana Lakes Network volunteers Lynn Maas, Ann Grant and Jim Grant, who are pictured monitoring water quality on Lake Mary Ronan. The Institute is teaming up with researchers from Cornell University in 2022 to conduct a pilot study that will track septic leaching using new synthetic DNA technology. (Courtesy photo)

By **TAYLOR INMAN**

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Editor's note: This is the fifth story in a series that looks ahead to what's on tap for Flathead County in 2022.

Nonprofits in the valley spend their time trying to solve some of the Flathead's most daunting issues, from housing and food insecurity to water quality and land conservation. Here's a look at what a few organizations have planned for 2022.

Whitefish Lake Institute

The Whitefish Lake Institute is hoping its biggest project for this year will draw public attention to a growing problem in Whitefish Lake. The organization is teaming up with researchers from Cornell University to conduct a pilot study that will track septic leaching using new synthetic DNA technology. Executive Director Mike Koopal said aging septic systems around the lake are part of an ever growing problem of human waste pathogens leaking into the lake's crystal clear waters. He said a study on the lake in 2011/2012 confirmed this.

“It documented septic leaching along the shoreline in Whitefish Lake and it shouldn't have been surprising to anybody because it corroborated data going back into the '80s from the Flathead Lake Biological Station,” Koopal said. “So we documented the leaching in the lake, but there hasn't been a tool for source tracking, so we are limited in our ability to pinpoint where contamination is coming from.”

Koopal said that's one reason why this study is exciting — they will be able to pinpoint where the worst of the leaching is happening. Synthetically derived DNA pairs encased in a nanoparticle will have a unique signature so researchers can track it as it moves through the lake. Koopal said researchers at Cornell University will take the DNA and run it through their polymerase chain reaction machine, a highly efficient tool used to amplify small segments of DNA or RNA. He said this will be able to tell them where the nanoparticle came from, showing its path to the leaching.

This is a pilot project and will test the efficiency of this tracking technology, which has already been tested successfully in streams and rivers. Koopal said this means they are only looking at specific areas in Whitefish Lake and Lake Mary Ronan, and if it proves successful they might be able to apply it to a larger scale in the future.

Though fixing these issues can be complicated and expensive, Koopal said it's worth talking about now as the problem is set to only become worse as septic systems age. He said a GSI risk assessment study conducted by the Flathead Basin Commission shows that time is of the essence.

“We're at a critical point in the typical septic system lifespan in Flathead County, so the preliminary data is telling us that roughly half of the septics on the landscape are 30 years or older, and of course septics have an average life expectancy of 25 to 30 years in good site conditions,” he said.

The field portion of the study will start in the spring and they are hoping for results by this fall. He said they are also hosting a septic leachate summit in May at the Flathead Lake Biological Station in conjunction with the National Science Foundation. Experts from across the nation will be invited to share information and develop solution strategies.

Samaritan House

Housing insecurity in the valley is a pressing issue as affordable housing is out of reach for many people. The Samaritan House said its plans for 2022 include expanding its low-income apartments. Executive Director Chris Krager said they serve 1,450 people in their low-barrier shelter and transitional housing each year. Data surveys conducted over the past couple of years identified two gaps in housing and services for the area. Samaritan House is looking to bridge those gaps specifically by building “super affordable” two- to three-bedroom apartments for a total of 16 units and creating single-occupancy housing for veterans.

“Kalipsell might be the largest city in Montana without dedicated veteran housing,” Krager said. “So we’re going to build 15 units that will be dedicated and contracted to the Veterans Affairs for homeless veterans.”

Krager said there are a couple of reasons why homelessness in the Flathead is complicated.

“Homelessness here at certain times of the year could be fatal — it’s cold out. The other factor that complicates things is the lack of housing for people, affordable or otherwise. We hear that term a lot, ‘affordable housing’... but it gets a more specific face when you’re looking at a single mom who has to live with her family in the shelter because she can’t find anywhere to rent,” he said.

Krager said the mission of the Samaritan House is not only to temporarily house people, but also to solve the issue of what made them homeless in the first place. With the assistance of their case management staff they are able to look at ways to expand a person’s income, widen their search for housing, qualify and apply for support through other social service groups.

“If we aren’t working with our case management team to fix the problem, then we haven’t really fixed anything...so we’re tracking outcomes and shooting for the goal of reducing homelessness in the Flathead Valley,” Krager said.

Flathead Youth Home

Getting resources to people dealing with mental health issues is another problem many nonprofits in the valley are dedicated to solving, particularly among children and teens. While the Flathead Youth Home strives to provide short-term shelter care and long-term group care for kids 10 to 18 years old, Development Coordinator Hannah Plumb said they are seeing an increasing need to provide in-house mental-health services. Program Director Lori Madden said she believes Covid-19 has exacerbated many mental-health issues for children and teens who were already having a hard time before the pandemic started.

“A lot of kids have been struggling with disconnection with others and I think maybe because they were alone so long that now that they’re returning, it’s like ‘wow, I’m in school all day, I have to be respectful to adults, I have to be respectful to my peers.’ So I think those mental-health issues already existed but now with Covid we’re seeing them more and more,” Madden said.

Madden said funding has been cut for many state programs that provide youth with a case manager — someone who follows them through their placement, manages health care, keeps in contact with family, among many other responsibilities. She said staff at Flathead Youth Home has been filling this gap for the kids who come through their door, and part of their plan in 2022 is to double down on that “critical behind-the-scenes work” and have staff that only focus on case management.

“Some of these kids come from homes where they don’t have adults supporting them, they don’t even have the capacity to care for them properly, so we are starting to look at how do we more formally do case management for these kids and make sure they have the tools they need to be successful,” Madden said.

She said a good case manager could make a huge difference for struggling youth, but the hard work of keeping up with it often takes time away for staff to build relationships with the kids and establish a connection. Having a staff member who only works as a case manager gives other staff members time to build those important relationships. This will be taken a step further with the next part of their plan, which is to bring mental-health professionals to the youth home, creating a place where resources are more easily accessible to the children and teens they serve.

Reporter Taylor Inman may be reached at tinman@dailyinterlake.com.