

I. PROBLEM DEFINITION

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Health & Safety

Custer County and the community of Miles City, Montana have had a place for senior citizens to gather and to take care of issues impacting seniors for over forty years. Within this space, they were able to prepare and share meals, meet various consultants, meet financial and tax advisors, and meet and receive care from healthcare professionals. They gathered for social events; met and conversed about current events and times gone by; and dealt with the many issues impacting senior citizens. It is or was known as the “Senior Drop-in Center,” hereafter referred to as “the Drop-In Center”.

Originally built in the late 1940’s as an office for the construction of the Miles City Veterans Affairs facility, the building was moved to its present site following completion of the V.A. Hospital complex in the early 1950’s. Initially, the building was converted from an office to a teen center called The Harmony Hangout, before becoming the Senior Drop-In Center in the late ‘70’s or early ‘80’s. The building has been added onto a couple of times since it was placed in the current location and had some interior remodeling done over the years. It has been the Drop-in Center for at least the last 35 years.

Recent problems with the sanitary sewer system mainline, HVAC systems, and aging and inadequate kitchen equipment have made it unsanitary and unusable. Use of the facility was temporarily stopped at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to comply with health guidelines, then permanently ceased due to water and sewer issues in the summer of 2021. The building also had very limited parking, requiring seniors to park in a dirt lot adjacent to the railroad tracks across a busy street. Accessible parking was limited to a couple of spaces near the building, and the recent expansion of the County Detention Center on the same site further reduced availability of parking and access; this expansion also required demolition of a north side addition to the Senior Drop-in Center, further reducing their available space.

Another issue that really curtails further development and renovation work of the present building is the fact that the Drop-in Center was placed in street right of ways (ROWs). At least two thirds of the building falls within the street ROW of Bridge/Harbaugh Street and 11th Street; the southeast corner may even be slightly inside the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad ROW.

Senior Centers can be designed to provide a multitude of services in addition to meals and socializing that will benefit the senior population of Custer County and Miles City, Montana. Wellness screenings and healthcare education, blood pressure checks, diabetes tests, foot exams, and other healthcare matters are important services for the elderly. Flu, pneumonia, and shingles shots are often provided at Senior Centers, and more recently COVID-19 testing, and vaccination drives, have been conducted at senior centers nationwide. Local healthcare providers and travelling specialists would be able to conduct outreach programs in a location already being utilized by the target population. The Senior Center could also be outfitted to accommodate streaming and teleconsultation services that many residents may not be able to access from home. The National Council on Aging has some great information on the benefits of Senior Centers and the services they provide on their website¹ and on their “Fact Sheet – Senior Centers” (included in Appendix).

Like most of eastern Montana, the overall population of Custer County has declined since the 1950’s, though the county has maintained steady numbers in its elderly population.² According to Eastern Montana County Level Population Projections from the Montana Department of Commerce, the overall population is expected to grow with senior population generally increasing.³ Growth in the number of senior citizens will in all probability place greater demand on senior services, including demand for services at the Drop-In Center.

During an early planning session held with public participation, the County Commission, SDI, and SEMDC, it was suggested that the Senior Center be considered as a location to consolidate multiple

services that provide for the needs of local senior citizens and other residents with like needs. Thus, simplifying the ability to access those services for those already using the Senior Center. Mentioned during the discussion were the Miles City Soup Kitchen, the Congregate Meal Program, the Commodities program, the Council on Aging, the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), Meals on Wheels, and the Custer County Food Bank. Not all those organizations may want to relocate from their present places, or their present provider system, but the ideas were put forth. Currently, the Congregate Meal Program is put out for bids and provided by private contractors with administrative oversight from the organization. The people in attendance at the first public meeting, as well as the County Commission, wanted to keep the Congregate Meal program as-is.

Custer County works with OneHealth Miles City to provide healthcare services to Custer County and the surrounding area. According to [healthdata.org](https://www.healthdata.org)⁴ Custer County has higher rates of obesity than the state average, women have higher rates of stroke, men have higher rates of heart disease, and lung cancer rates are substantially higher in men and women than both the state and national averages. The report indicates that rates of diabetes, blood, and endocrine diseases are much higher than state averages, and notably higher among women.

Another issue is Custer County exceeds State levels in Intentional Self Harm and Suicide with a rate of nearly 114 per 100,000 in Custer County; compare that to the Montana rate of 106 per 100,000, and 14 per 100,000 at the national level according to the CDC.⁵ Study reviews by the National Institutes of Health indicate that interaction and socialization with peers reduces suicide rates among the elderly.⁶

According to US Health Map|Viz Hub⁷ the diabetes rate in Custer County is over 12% compared to 11% for the State of Montana, and 14% nationwide. Nationally, diabetes impacts over 34 million people, though diabetes is a treatable disease. The Senior Center could provide a place for diabetes education, consultation, exams, and treatment.

According to the US Census⁸ in 2020, 11.5% of Custer County's population was living in poverty compared to 12.4% for the State of Montana. The www.censusreporter.org website indicates of Seniors (65 and over), 14% are living in poverty in Custer County.

Online 2021 US Census (See <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/custercountymontana>) (also see appendix) estimates 20.7% of the population of Custer County is over 65 years of age, with the population indicated as 11,916 that would imply there is a senior population of 2,466 persons over 65. The site also indicates at least 12% of those seniors over 65 years of age are living in poverty. From this data it can be implied that at least 300 people, the 12% of the total senior population living in poverty, could benefit greatly from a Senior Center, and that the remaining senior population would also benefit from services provided and social activities at the Senior Center.

¹<https://www.ncoa.org/article/get-the-facts-on-senior-centers>

²https://ftpgeoinfo.msl.mt.gov/Documents/Projects/Yellowstone_River_Clearinghouse/SocioEconomic_2015_Part1.pdf

³<http://www.remi.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/257-Joe-Ramler-Eastern-MT-County-Population-Projections.pdf>

⁴https://www.healthdata.org/sites/default/files/files/county_profiles/US/2015/County_Report_Custer_County_Montana.pdf

⁵<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/suicide.htm>

⁶<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3367273/>

⁷<https://vizhub.healthdata.org/subnational/usa>

⁸https://www.census.gov/datatools/demo/saife/#/?map_geoSelector=aa_c&s_state=30&s_county=30017&s_year=2020