Welcome to Wheatland County

Wheatland County is located just south of the center of Montana. The rural community has a population of around 2,200 residents. Its roots have been in agriculture, with many generational ranches. The main agriculture products are cattle, sheep, and forage crops. Taking advantage of the strong winds, wind power electricity has also become a significant component in the local economy. In addition to agriculture and wind power, the community is home to many small businesses.

On Their Own and OK

Afterschool childcare is very limited in Wheatland County, which leaves many youth home alone after school. In January 2018, Wheatland County MSU Extension partnered with the Wheatland County Sheriff’s Office and Hillcrest grade school to offer a series of workshops to help youth learn the skills they need to feel more confident staying home alone.

During the first session, many of the youth expressed that they didn’t really like being home alone. They were “nervous, unsure of what to do, and kind of scared.” Through the workshop series, youth learned how to safely make snacks, brainstormed ways they could responsibly use their time to do things they enjoyed, and used role play to review information about household safety.

Wheatland County Undersheriff Randy Cameron attended one of the workshops and talked to the youth about serious emergencies. The students had the opportunity to ask questions about what they should do in situations they were worried about and have an officer answer them. They were also able to practice making a call to 911, where the dispatcher answered and asked them questions. This part was a highlight for the students and eased many of their concerns.

After attending the workshop series, the youth were less anxious about being home alone for short periods of time and felt much more prepared. They understood the safety precautions they should take and what situations were real emergencies. Youth felt empowered by their new responsibility and were excited to make choices about how to spend their time.
Wheatland County MSU Extension is hosting the second year of Annie’s Project, which is an educational program to specifically empower women involved in agriculture. The program provides information in a safe, informal learning environment so that participants can feel comfortable learning more about farms and ranches.

Part of the strength of Annie’s project is that a local steering committee designs it. Each Annie’s Project program addresses financial risk, human capital, legal risks, marketing, and production, but the local steering committee develops specific topics covered in each area. Each session is customized to meet the needs of participants. One participant shared “I love the program, it has helped me be more effective on our ranch.” The program also provides an opportunity for women of different generations and perspectives to connect and support each other. Participants are finding that a lot has changed, and a lot is still the same.

By building the capacity of the women involved in family farms and ranches, Annie’s Project is helping build the capacity of each operation. Participants have the time to work on portions of their operation and increase their understanding, while working on the day-to-day operation. Participants have shared that after being in Annie’s project, they want to step into more of a management role on their ranch, where before they felt like they didn’t have the skills or knowledge. “The information being presented is information we can actually use.”

Annie’s Project participants learning about low stress cattle handling.

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