



LIFTT's Year of Growing Forward: A Future Built on Independence, Innovation, and Community Strength

This past year, LIFTT witnessed a remarkable unfolding of transformation across southeastern and eastern Montana. As our team traveled through vast stretches of prairie, small towns, reservations, and city neighborhoods, one truth became increasingly clear: the desire for independence is universal, and the resilience of our consumers is the force that shapes everything we do.

The numbers in this year's annual report are powerful, but their meaning becomes even stronger when we understand the lives behind them. Throughout the year, LIFTT served 876 individuals across 18 counties, a cross-section of Montanans whose disabilities, cultures, ages, and life

stories reflect the incredible diversity of this region. Consumers came to us with physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, mental health conditions, developmental and cognitive disabilities, chronic illnesses, and, in many cases, multiple intersecting disabilities that required thoughtful, individualized support. What united every one of them was the shared pursuit of autonomy, dignity, and the ability to direct their own lives.

As we moved through the year, LIFTT's staff delivered thousands of services that touched nearly every dimension of independent living. Information and Referral remained one of the strongest pillars of our work, offering clarity in moments of confusion and serving as a bridge between people and systems that often feel overwhelming or impenetrable. Skills training continued to reshape daily life for consumers who needed support with communication, transportation, home management, benefits navigation, financial stability, and the practical confidence that grows each time a new skill becomes second nature. Peer support, rooted in lived experience, remained one of the most transformative experiences we offered, becoming a steady hand, a nonjudgmental ear, and a reminder that no one has to navigate disability alone.

Over the course of the year, hundreds of personal goals were achieved: everything from mastering public transportation, securing stable housing, and accessing needed healthcare to building personal agency, developing confidence, and stepping into community life with renewed hope. Every one of these achievements helped shape a narrative much larger than any statistic could express. Together, they revealed a year defined not only by service but by empowerment.

One of the most vibrant and unexpected symbols of that empowerment emerged from our ADA-Accessible Community Garden, which flourished into a space of learning, healing, and leadership. Consumers who had never planted a seed before found themselves harvesting produce with pride. Individuals living with anxiety, chronic illness, or mobility challenges discovered new strength in tending soil surrounded by peers who understood their journey. The garden became more than a program; it became a living metaphor for what independent living can look like when barriers are removed and support is rooted in community.

Alongside these achievements, LIFTT's youth transition programs helped young people move toward adulthood with clarity and excitement. Logan's

journey, from a high school student with a dream to a young adult entering a teacher apprenticeship program, captured the heart of what Pre-Employment Transition Services are meant to be: a bridge into self-discovery, self-advocacy, and a future shaped by choice rather than limitation.

Health and wellness initiatives continued to grow at an astonishing pace. Tai Chi classes, SAIL sessions, diabetes prevention workshops, brain health groups, and chronic disease self-management education offered consumers a holistic model of independence grounded in physical, emotional, and social well-being. These programs strengthened bodies, reduced isolation, and nurtured lasting habits that will carry forward into future years.

And while so much happened within our buildings, homes, and gardens, another movement unfolded across the state's transportation landscape. Through the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center planning grant, LIFTT engaged in an intensive regional conversation about mobility, equity, and the future of rural transportation. Surveys, focus groups, and community dialogues allowed consumers to express what accessible mobility would mean for their lives, access to groceries, medical care, jobs, community events, and family gatherings. This work laid the foundation for a new era of ADA-accessible rural transportation services, one that will reshape independence for countless Montanans in the years ahead.

Through all of this growth, LIFTT's commitment to equal access remained steady and unwavering. In every program, every communication, and every service interaction, we ensured that information was accessible, that offices were physically navigable, and that alternative formats were readily available to anyone who needed them. This was not only a matter of compliance; it was a matter of honoring the right of every individual to participate fully and meaningfully in the world around them.

Perhaps one of the most profound strengths revealed in this year's report is that 91 percent of our staff and 92 percent of our board identify as individuals with significant disabilities. This makes LIFTT not only a service provider but a living example of the Independent Living philosophy in action: a community led by people who understand, firsthand, what independence requires, what barriers feel like, and what solutions can be built through solidarity and creativity.

As we reflect on the year, it becomes clear that LIFTT is not simply providing services; it is moving, evolving, and expanding in ways that position us at the forefront of rural disability advocacy and community-based innovation. This momentum is visible in every program we launched, every partnership we strengthened, every idea we nurtured, and every life we touched. It is visible in the voices of consumers who tell us they feel more confident, more informed, more connected, and more hopeful than they did when the year began.

And now, as our newly wrapped agency vehicles begin traveling across Montana: bright, colorful, unmistakably LIFTT, our presence becomes not just symbolic but boldly visible. These vehicles represent everything this year stood for: movement, connection, creativity, and the belief that independence should be seen, celebrated, and supported across every corner of our region.

The story of this year is ultimately a story of people, of staff who give everything they have, of consumers who show extraordinary resilience, of partners who believe in our mission, and of communities that welcome us with open hands and open hearts. It is a story of transformation grounded in compassion, courage, and commitment. And it is only the beginning.

As we look toward the future, LIFTT stands ready to deepen its roots, expand its reach, and continue building a world where independence is not an aspiration but a lived reality for every person who seeks it. Together, we are not simply growing: we are growing forward, with purpose, vision, and hope for everything yet to come.

Carlos A. Ramalho, Executive Director
LIFTT - Living Independently for Today & Tomorrow
www.lifft.org

1241 Crawford Drive, Billings, MT 59102

Email carlosr@lifft.org

Telephone (406) 259-5181

Facsimile (406) 259-5259

Direct (406) 294-5190

LIFTT is a Montana 501(c)(3) nonprofit Center for Independent Living (CIL) with offices in Billings and Glendive, providing services to aging and disabled individuals in 18 counties across South and Central Eastern

Montana: Big Horn, Carbon, Carter, Custer, Dawson, Fallon, Garfield, Golden Valley, McCone, Musselshell, Powder River, Prairie, Richland, Rosebud, Stillwater, Treasure, Wibaux, and Yellowstone.

Our Vision: Empowering aging and disabled individuals to LIFTT themselves above the barriers of life.

Our Mission: Living Independently for Today and Tomorrow – LIFTT's mission is to empower aging and disabled individuals to live independently through education, support, and opportunities.