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New heart procedure gives Billings woman new lease on life.

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Lady Griz look to Big Sky play after tough non-con slate.

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Ellsworth suspended amid prosecution

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A district court judge has suspended Republican lawmaker state Sen. Jason Ellsworth from office pending his criminal prosecution for attempting to quietly arrange a no-bid, six-figure state contract for a long-time friend.

In the Dec. 19 order, Lewis and Clark County District Court Judge Kathy Seeley

granted the request by prosecutors with the Montana Department of Justice, which filed the official misconduct charge — a misdemeanor — against Ellsworth earlier this month.

Ellsworth is scheduled to make his initial appearance and enter a plea to the charge on Jan. 6.

Prosecutors with the state justice department allege Ellsworth violated Montana's

official misconduct statute, which prohibits elected officials from obtaining advantages for themselves or others by means outside of their lawful authority. The contract for Agile Analytics, a company formed months earlier by Ellsworth's longtime friend and business associate, was worth \$171,000.

Ellsworth did not return a call or text on Monday seeking comment for this story.

He does not have an attorney listed in

his criminal proceedings, but Joan Mell, his attorney in civil matters, said Ellsworth has not received a copy of the charges or summons to appear.

Mell said the allegations against him are politically charged and without merit and criticized the judge's order suspending Ellsworth without giving the senator a chance

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LOOKING BACK

TOP NEWS STORIES OF 2025



JESSICA ABELL, RAVALLI REPUBLIC

Employees at Rocky Mountain Laboratories in Hamilton were among some of the federal workers who lost their jobs in 2025.

Ravalli Republic editor Jessica Abell's standout stories of 2025

JESSICA ABELL
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'Really dark times coming': DOGE cuts dozens of jobs at Rocky Mountain Labs in Hamilton

As President Donald Trump's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), headed by billionaire Elon Musk, slashed jobs across the federal government, the Bitterroot Valley

was not immune. Federal workers for the Bitterroot National Forest and Rocky Mountain Laboratories were hit with furloughs, funding cuts and questions as to what the future would hold. The move prompted local demonstrations in support of federal workers, and local government officials also penned letters of concern regarding the cuts to Montana's governor and congressional delegation.

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PROVIDED PHOTO

Jarrod Chandler and his crew out of Trapper Creek Job Corps at the Noble Creek Mobilization Center in California. The Trapper Creek crew deployed to fight the historic Los Angeles fires in January.

RURAL HEALTH CARE

MT gets big share of federal subsidies

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Montana is one of the biggest winners in the Trump administration's \$50 billion rural health care sweepstakes, a process that has gripped the attention of the state's health department in recent months.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the federal agency that oversees government health insurance programs, announced Monday it would award Montana \$233 million this year and up to a total of \$1.2 billion over the next five years to improve access and support providers in rural areas as part of the administration's Rural Health Transformation Program.

"Every Montanan deserves top-level health care, no matter where they live," said Charlie Brereton, director of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. "This landmark funding provides the resources we need to execute our plan, which includes stabilizing our most rural hospitals and bridging the health care divide for families living in every corner of our state."

Within the "big, beautiful bill" passed and signed into law in July, the federal government set aside a pot of money to help offset Medicaid cuts included in the same legislation that are projected to disproportionately affect rural hospitals.

States could apply for a piece of the \$50 billion pie, distributed in part based on factors such as the number of rural residents, rural hospitals and the proposals put forward for how the money would be used.

The announcement triggered a seven-week sprint among Montana health officials to craft a compelling application with ideas to help the state address persistent challenges, including workforce shortages and razor-thin margins at rural hospitals.

Montana is one of the most sparsely populated states in the country and has struggled to close gaps in health care access for rural communities, which experience higher rates of chronic disease and have fewer physicians per capita, according to data from the state health department.

Those factors led health officials to believe Montana stood a good chance of reaping a large sum from the federal rural health grant, a bet that proved

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