Chairman, Committee Members, 

My name is Ariana Del Negro. I am the Board President of the Brain Injury Alliance of Montana and I am here today to put forth our support for House Bill 336.

Today marks the fourth session that, we, the Brain Injury Alliance of Montana, have come to the Capitol to voice our support for legislation that would expand much-needed funding to educate and support Montanans and their families affected by brain injury. Given motor vehicle accidents are one of the leading causes of traumatic brain injury in Montana, it is fitting that you, the House Transportation Committee, are tasked with determining the fate of House Bill 336 and it is because of you that we remain optimistic our goal can move one step closer to becoming a reality.

As most of you are aware, the incidence and prevalence of traumatic brain injury in the state of Montana is significant, as are the personal, medical, and economic challenges associated with managing its long-term effects. Those affected by brain injury represent a vulnerable population for which access to more resources is clearly warranted. In addition, the numbers in need relative to the limited number of available resources also reflect the importance of expanding funding to ensure the growth, sustainability, and effectiveness of these resources. Among the proposed funding activities of House Bill 336, increased funding for the Brain Injury Help Line, as well as funding for support groups throughout the state, and education and prevention outreach programs serve to fill outstanding needs.

We at the Brain Injury Alliance of Montana have borne witness to the positive impact of funding activities that build awareness and facilitate greater access to state-based resources for survivors, their families, and caregivers. One-time funding for activities such as public service announcements and support for educational conferences for professionals has led to an increased uptake of information and dissemination of educational materials, as well as improved the application of evidenced-based care. As one example, the Brain Injury Alliance of Montana was awarded a grant to broadcast public service announcements in March 2016 as part of Brain Injury Awareness month. In as short of a period of less than 3 months following the airing of the public service announcements, there was a 141% increase in calls placed to the Alliance, and a 514% increase in mailings of educational and resource materials.

As proponents, we fully acknowledge that opponents to this bill are not challenging the value of supporting brain injury funding at a state level. What is up for debate, however, and what has been echoed in the past are the objections by the Montana County Treasury Association to have opt outs as funding mechanisms. Prior oppositional testimony has described the opt-out program as “deceitful,” “unpopular,” or somehow undermining the will of the people by taking advantage of those who do not pay full attention to their bill.

Time is of the essence to maximize funding. The opt-out strategy is currently the best course of action for the quickest and most impactful outcome. To that end, because it offers a sustained funding mechanism outside of the general fund for programs tailored to the education and prevention of brain injury, we support HB 336.

Chairman, Committee Members, in closing, I ask that you put aside partisan politics, I ask that you trust your constituents to possess the necessary skills to make informed decisions, and I ask that you recognize how expanding available resources would tremendously benefit Montana survivors, caregivers, and families, as well as overall public health. I ask you to vote yes on House Bill 336. The Brain Injury Alliance of Montana looks forward to participating in the collaborative process as this bill moves forward to achieve our collective goal of creating a better future for Montanans affected by brain injury.

I thank you for your time.