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Idaho Health and Welfare offices cut hours

‘Furlough Fridays’ help meet budget shortfall

BOISE – All Idaho Health and Welfare offices except state hospitals will close at noon every other Friday through the end of June so the state can save money by sending workers home early without pay.

Notice of the cost-cutting effort was sent to all of the department’s employees Monday afternoon, shortly after Gov. Butch Otter proposed an additional 1.6 percent holdback on the current year’s state budget. The “furlough Fridays,” as the employees are calling them, start Jan. 22.

The department has nearly 3,000 employees, but 85 percent of its budget goes to benefit payments. Already, in holdbacks over the past two years, Health and Welfare has trimmed its operating expenses to just 6 percent of its budget, said department spokesman Tom Shanahan, cutting things like travel and training until all that was left was office leases, utilities and hospital operations. That left personnel costs – 9 percent of the department’s budget – as the last possible place to cut.

“There was really no place to go,” Shanahan said. “The sad part is if you look at the record caseloads we’re seeing, it’s really difficult because we’re stretching our staff. ... We’re seeing record caseloads in many areas. It’s not slowing down.”

Otter sees the furloughs as appropriate, said his press secretary, Jon Hanian. “We, I think, knew that there was going to be a mix of these type of measures, and obviously we’re beginning to see that,” Hanian said. “We’re trying to get through this difficult time as best we can, while doing the least amount of damages to the services we have.”

Rep. George Saylor, D-Coeur d’Alene, who serves on the House Health and Welfare Committee, said, “It’s probably preferable to cutting out programs or services entirely. At least the opportunity for the service will still be there, it’ll just be more difficult to access it, I guess. It’s unfortunate for the employees.”

In an article published in the department’s internal newsletter Director Dick Armstrong said, “The cold reality is we cannot continue to provide the same level of service with these personnel reductions. We are going to have to close our offices every other Friday afternoon for the remainder of the fiscal year to meet the objective.” He added, “There are details to work out, for there will have to be some exceptions to the office closure furloughs, such as at our institutions. But the majority of our workforce should begin planning now to take four hours of furlough every other Friday afternoon.”

Shanahan said the 380 workers at State Hospital North, State Hospital South and the Idaho State School and Hospital can’t take furloughs, “because we have minimum staffing criteria for those facilities.”

Health and Welfare operates regional field offices in each of the five Panhandle counties, offering an array of services, including food stamps, child protection services, mental health care for adults and children, nursing home assistance and foster care licensing.

And even with all the worker furloughs, the savings won't be enough to meet the full midyear holdback Health and Welfare expects to face under the governor's budget proposal – \$1.6 million in state general funds – and additional savings will have to be found. Because state funds that Health and Welfare spends are matched by federal money, the cut also will mean a \$900,000 cut in federal funding to the department, for a total hit of \$2.5 million this year.

Beyond the current year, additional cuts are likely in the next fiscal year that begins July 1, but Shanahan said the department doesn't yet know whether they'll translate into more furloughs.

House Health and Welfare Chairwoman Sharon Block, R-Twin Falls, said, "The option which has been chosen with the furloughs, I think, is a better alternative than letting a lot of the employees go. We're trying to do our best to meet the challenges this year with the economy as it is. Hopefully, it's going to turn around. Furloughs are something we can easily change."