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## **Emergency health fund in need of urgent care**

BOISE -- Bonneville County Commissioner Roger Christensen asked the Legislature's budget panel for \$17 million in emergency funding Monday to overcome budget manipulation tactics employed a year ago to the state's Catastrophic Health Care Program.

Christensen, chairman of the CAT Fund board, said the program will go bankrupt as early as next month if lawmakers don't intervene by supplementing funding.

The CAT Fund is Idaho's indigent health care program, which covers the costs of catastrophic treatment for residents who don't have insurance, don't qualify for Medicaid, aren't on welfare and cannot pay their emergency medical bills.

Last year, Christensen estimated the program's expenses would be nearly \$32 million. Although the state is legally obligated to pay bills incurred under the program, lawmakers budgeted only \$22.2 million for the CAT fund -- allowing them to leave Boise last year under the auspices that they had passed a balanced budget.

Lawmakers knew they would need to backfill the CAT Fund with supplemental funding this year, and Christensen told members of the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee it's time to pay those bills.

"By the time we (CAT Fund board members) hit our February meeting, we won't be able to pay the bills we approved," Christensen told lawmakers.

Although the budget panel did not take formal action Monday, Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, said lawmakers would fast-track a funding request. It was not, however, immediately clear whether legislators would pay the entire \$17 million or free up a smaller amount of money needed for board members to pay bills coming due this month and next.

Under the program, the county where residents who received emergency care live pays the first \$11,000 of their medical costs each year. After that, the state picks up the tab.

Sen. Dean Mortimer, an Idaho Falls Republican who sits on JFAC, said budgeting for the CAT Fund can be especially difficult because there is no way to know how many residents will become sick or injured. However, Mortimer applauded efforts by the CAT Fund board to reduce state costs through medical review and screening applicants for eligibility for other forms of coverage.

Sixty percent of the program's expenses originated from the state's six most populated counties, including Bonneville County. The statewide average amount paid per claim last year was more than \$24,000. Accidents, cancer, heart disease and other illnesses are among the most common reasons for claims.

For the 2011 budget year, Bonneville County paid \$595,575 in indigent health care costs, Christensen said. Through the first six months of the 2012 budget year, the county has paid \$500,944.

"We still see a fairly significant increase in caseloads, and I think that's due to the economy," Christensen said.

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's 2013 budget would again undercut CAT Fund expenses. Christensen asked for about \$34.5 million in funding, while Otter recommends \$19 million from the general fund.

Rep. Fred Wood, a Burley Republican who sits on JFAC, called for lawmakers to stop intentionally low-balling the CAT Fund budget.

"I think we are in a position certainly to take care of our legal obligations as a state first," Wood said. "Not fully funding the CAT Fund for fiscal year 2013 ... I'm not sure is something I think this committee should do."