

Lewiston Tribune, Thursday, Jan. 27, 2011 – by William Spence (2 pages)

Panel hears from Medicaid providers

One speaker says federal health care reform may be best solution

BOISE - After soliciting major Medicaid provider groups for cost-saving ideas, the Idaho House Health and Welfare Committee got a long list of proposals Wednesday - including one most unwelcomed.

Steve Millard, president of the Idaho Hospital Association, said if lawmakers really want to save money, they should "help implement (federal) health care reform."

"There are some good things in there," Millard said of the Affordable Health Care Act.

His comments came shortly after the House State Affairs Committee introduced a bill to "nullify" the federal legislation.

Rep. Janice McGeachin of Idaho Falls, who is chairwoman of the Health and Welfare Committee, voted in favor of nullification. She said health care reform would greatly expand the Medicaid system, even though states already have a difficult time managing costs.

"The federal government is choking us with mandates," she said.

Implementing health care reform was just one of the ideas Medicaid providers brought to the table Wednesday.

Susie Pouliot, CEO of the Idaho Medical Association, said reimbursement rates for doctors are already so low some have stopped taking new Medicaid patients.

Cutting rates would simply exacerbate that situation, she said, so the state might want to look for efficiencies in the way health care is delivered. She suggested the state consider a "medical home" model, in which each patient is assigned a primary care physician who coordinates whatever care they need with other providers, with an emphasis on preventative care.

"The medical home model can generate efficiencies and, potentially, cost savings," Pouliot said.

Robert Vande Merwe, executive director of the Idaho Health Care Association-Idaho Center for Assisted Living, said assisted-living facilities can often provide 24-hour care for the mentally ill and developmentally disabled at a lower cost than what the state spends on certified family homes.

He also suggested lawmakers consider privatizing the Idaho State School and Hospital, which provides long-term care for people with developmental disabilities.

The committee needs lots of help and good ideas as it struggles to craft a budget for fiscal 2012.

Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter has proposed cutting \$25 million in state Medicaid funds. When combined with federal matching dollars, that would result in an \$84 million reduction in services. To reach that goal, some entire programs may have to be eliminated - and even that may not go far enough.

Rep. Ken Roberts, who sits on the Health and Welfare Committee, told providers \$25 million in state cuts is probably the best-case scenario.

"That could grow considerably," he said. "It's time to go back to the drawing board and take a severe look at how to close the budget gap."

The public will have its opportunity to weigh in on the issue Friday, when the joint budget committee conducts a public hearing focused on health and welfare expenditures.