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Idahoans decry proposed cuts to services for disabled

Lawmakers asked to preserve services for disabled

BOISE – Close to a thousand people flocked to the Idaho Capitol on Friday to plead with lawmakers not to cut services to disabled Idahoans. “I’ve been in two group homes and I know for a fact that it’s not very fun,” Jack Hansen, of Boise, a young man with developmental disabilities, told lawmakers. “You guys are my only hope. . . . If you make these cuts, I swear you’ll be making a huge mistake.”

Denise Wetzel, of Coeur d’Alene, mother of a 10-year-old son with disabilities, said she’s grateful the youngster has been able to attend his local public school and receive the developmental therapy he needs.

“I never give up . . . on what he can accomplish and achieve,” she said. “I want to see my son as a taxpaying citizen in the state of Idaho.” But, she said, “He needs support from trained and professional providers.”

Gov. Butch Otter recommends cutting \$25.2 million in Medicaid services next year, and he and legislative leaders said Friday the latest estimates show the state’s budget crunch may be even worse. Lawmakers have been considering proposals such as eliminating psychosocial rehabilitation services for the mentally ill, services provided to adults by developmental disability centers, and more.

More than 80 people testified at Friday’s hearing. Hundreds more filled the Capitol’s largest hearing room and five overflow rooms, and many more submitted written testimony.

Nearly all had the same message: The state won’t save money by cutting services to the disabled, because more will be forced into institutions. Speaker after speaker called for preserving the services and considering tax increases, from going after sales taxes on online sales to raising taxes on cigarettes, beer and wine.

But as the hearing stretched on for four hours, news came that House Speaker Lawrence Denney has single-handedly sidelined a pending measure to allow Idaho to take the first step toward taxing online sales. Denney buried the bill in a leadership-controlled committee that rarely meets.

Katherine Hansen of Boise, presented lawmakers with petitions signed by 13,740 Idahoans calling for consideration of a tax increase, rather than cuts to home- and community-based services for people with disabilities. The signers, she said, are “13,740 Idahoans from every county and every city in this great state. . . . The people who signed these petitions urge you to approach the current budget crisis in the same way they approach their budget crisis: Everything needs to be on the table.”

Terri Scarrow, of Jerome, told of caring at home for her once-promising daughter, profoundly disabled after being hit by a drunken driver at age 15, rather than putting her in a nursing home. “Where would you want to be?” she asked lawmakers.

Samuel Page, of Homedale, testified with his 21-year-old son, Jonathan, by his side in his wheelchair. Jonathan was injured in a near-drowning accident as a teenager and now goes daily to a developmental disability center.

“I’d just like for you to consider, and you have, all the Jonathans that can’t speak for themselves,” his father told lawmakers.

The heart-wrenching testimony moved Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, to tears. “We had some very moving testimony from people that clearly have no other sources for assistance other than their government – that’s pretty compelling,” she said after the hearing. “I think that it would be less than human to sit here, with some of what we have heard this morning, and not be impacted. So the challenge will be, what do we do next?”

Keough, vice chair of the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee, said she was surprised to learn of Denney’s move, even as person after person testified to the committee that the state should go after online sales taxes or take other revenue-raising steps to avoid cuts.

“I don’t want to second-guess the speaker, because I have no idea what his intentions are, but it definitely was interesting timing,” she said. “In this session, everything’s on the table, from the services we provide to the structure of our tax system. Everything has to be on the table.”