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Rep. McGeachin says health cuts may be needed

BOISE -- As the new chairwoman of the House Health and Welfare Committee, Rep. Janice McGeachin finds herself in the middle of an impassioned debate over proposed Idaho health care cuts. Even before state revenues fell below projections by more than \$10 million in December, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter and many lawmakers were preparing to cut \$25 million from the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare Medicaid budget.

McGeachin, an Idaho Falls Republican, said Wednesday that a \$25 million cut may not be enough, given that House leaders predict the hole in the state's budget may be as large as \$185 million.

"It's really difficult to absorb all that in one year, at a time when we also have no additional money available to spend on higher education or K-through-12 schools," McGeachin said. "Really, where I see the debate and battle here is on what our priorities are and what we will be able to afford to fund."

Before the session began, McGeachin said eliminating entire programs must be an option. But this week, she said she hoped to make cuts without killing off whole programs, such as psycho-social rehabilitation (PSR) and developmental disability (DD) programs for adults. Instead of making two giant cuts to the Medicaid program, she wants to make more precise cuts here and there. She hopes to reduce PSR and DD benefits, establish co-pays for patients, trim dental services and pass other reductions.

Last Friday, hundreds of people crammed into the Capitol for a public Health and Welfare hearing that consumed four hours. Most pleaded with legislators not to cut entire programs, suggesting that smaller, more uniform cuts or a tax increase would better serve the state. McGeachin agrees that Medicaid programs for mentally ill adults provide value to the state.

"I believe in the concept of effective PSR, when it is working to keep people out of hospitals and out of jails," McGeachin said. "It would be foolish to totally cut that service out. We may be able to cut (that money) out of the Medicaid budget, but that would increase state costs in other budget areas. We can't be that myopic when we go through these exercises; we have to look at the broader picture."

McGeachin also plans to call for an audit of Molina Medicaid Solutions, a California-based company that processes Idaho Medicaid claims and payments. After taking over last spring, Molina employees struggled to deliver timely reimbursement payments to Idaho businesses. "We still have big problems with the Molina Medicaid billing system," McGeachin said. "It's time we do some sort of review of Molina's (effectiveness)."

Sue Filutze, billing manager at Pearl Health Clinic in Idaho Falls, also wants Molina's performance evaluated. She said her company still hasn't been reimbursed for about \$100,000 in Medicaid-eligible services provided by two doctors. Last year, Filutze mailed letters to nine legislators, asking for state officials to intervene and help ensure money was flowing to Idaho businesses. Filutze said McGeachin was the only legislator to respond. "Janice McGeachin was the only one who went to bat for any of us," she said.