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Mental health aid in Idaho is facing 'crisis level' cuts

Services for adults, children have seen state support drop dramatically since 2008

John Triplett routinely uses the term "crisis level" to characterize the funding cuts facing adults and children with mental health or substance abuse problems.

And while mental health services for children are one of the few things not on the chopping block for Idaho legislators this year, officials like Triplett, who runs Nez Perce County Court Services, continue to worry what effect continued cuts could have on kids with mental health problems who walk into his office every day.

Unless a person fits a specific requirement, he said, they don't get the help they need. "It's almost like a camel trying to fit through the head of a needle," he said. Continued prospects for cuts by the Idaho Legislature have prompted a call by Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter for communities to take on a bigger role to fill the void left by the state.

But providers say there's no network established to handle these kids should the state fail to help them. And both licensing and background checks make it even more difficult to get such a network started on a volunteer basis, as some in the Legislature have proposed.

"Cutting funds for children's services will only shift the cost to law enforcement, juvenile corrections, mental health institutions, which is more expensive in the long run both to the children and our society," said Roberta Rene, spokeswoman for the Idaho Youth Ranch in Boise.

Mental health already hit hard by state funding cuts

It may be too early to tell what the Legislature has planned for mental health services, though years of shrinking budgets have prompted provider closures in recent years. State funding for mental health has dropped from \$39.9 million in 2008 to about \$32.4 million this year.

"We've got about 47 positions that we don't have the money to fill," said Tom Shanahan with the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.

On the cutting board this time around are optional services like psychosocial rehab counseling funded through Idaho Medicaid, which paid \$179 million in mental health services last year.

Dwindling state support is nothing new to treatment providers like the Idaho Youth Ranch. The nonprofit organization contracts with the state on many of its group homes and shelters around Idaho. Declining state funds two years ago led to the closure of Harbor House, a substance abuse home in Idaho Falls for teenage boys.

Rene said Harbor House was one of three homes for children with substance abuse problems that have recently closed because of declining state funds. State support for substance abuse has actually increased, from \$22 million in 2008 to about \$32 million this year, mostly due to fluctuations in grants from the federal government. But providers remain worried about the prospect of slashed funding.

Such cuts require increased fundraising to help more people already in their care, Rene said. The youth ranch has seen no such drop in the demand for services aimed at keeping at-risk children out of the juvenile prison system.

"The care we provide to get a kid back on her feet is much more comprehensive than what juvenile corrections can provide - we treat the whole child and the family," Rene said. "In the long run, it's going to be more beneficial to the child and the family as a whole."

The Idaho Youth Ranch now relies less on state contracts than it did before the recession crippled state coffers, but continued dips in funding for those contracts will hurt.

The ranch's substance-abuse home for teenage boys in Coeur d'Alene gets 60 percent of its funding from a state contract. The ranch's office of family services in northern Idaho relies solely on state contracts, and the Hays shelter home in Boise relies on a contract for 37 percent of its funding. "All of those programs would be in jeopardy if Idaho cut services for mental health and children," she said.

Funding cuts shift assistance from intervention to crisis management

A lack of early intervention can already be seen in some kids who require more intense treatment that can only be provided at group facilities like the Northwest Children's Home in Lewiston. Rod Wilson, the home's executive director, said cuts to preventive services aimed at keeping more children with their parents can instead bring more children knocking on his door.

"What we're looking for in the future if they discontinue this (psychosocial rehab) ... these kids aren't going to get the services they need in the home or in foster care, and then they're going to rise to a level where they need placements," Wilson said. "Which is going to be with Northwest Children's Home."

The children's home contracts with state programs in Idaho and Washington. But those contract rates haven't been raised since 2003, leading to the organization's increased need to look toward outside donors, Wilson said.

"A lot of kids placed here have come through many foster-home placements, and they don't work out in a school setting, and they live with us for three months, six months, a year," Wilson said.

The strained need can also be seen in the numbers at Region II Juvenile Detention Center in Lewiston, which was averaging four inmates a day this time last year. That number has tripled to about a dozen per day in the past 10 months.

Today's services are now aimed more at crisis management, Triplett said, and don't solve any long-term problems for the more than 800 people his office supervises on adult and juvenile probation. Most of those, maybe 85 percent, have a dual diagnosis of mental health problems and substance abuse.

Nez Perce County has clinicians who deal with substance abuse, but mental health care is something that has to be offered through the state. Triplett's officers continue to refer juveniles to health and welfare for services, but they are coming against an agency that increasingly doesn't have the funding to get that child help. "There's some good folks at the state who want to do the right thing but their hand is forced," he said. And Triplett doesn't think well-intentioned volunteers can step up if the state cuts the cord. Volunteers already provide some level of help to people his office manages, but only professionals can administer mental health and substance abuse counseling services.

At the youth ranch, Rene said most positions require master's-level degrees. She couldn't say whether other programs facing cuts would be able to make do with volunteers.

"There are inherent challenges with volunteer programs," she said. "I think only health and welfare can look at how they're staffed, what the need is."

Detention is the easy thing to do, Triplett said, especially when a social worker is getting involved in an already-volatile situation when a child is 13 or 15 years old. The potential that health and welfare has done everything it has the funding to do can leave the courts to decide the fate of a juvenile, he said.

"Fifteen years ago, you would take this same juvenile, if they met the criteria for services, (they) would get up to 20 hours of (psychosocial rehab) services," Triplett said.

That same child is now getting five hours of the residential rehabilitation counseling service.

"Twenty hours, good heaven, that would be like pie in the sky," Triplett said. "You've got to be pretty severely disturbed to get five hours."

The state gets a fair amount of complaints about misuse of psychosocial rehab services, said health and welfare's Shanahan. Those services are designated as optional and among the cuts being considered by legislators targeting Idaho Medicaid.

"The person who is getting PSR (services and) is also getting other mental health services, those will continue," Shanahan said.

But if the court orders something to be done, Triplett said they have to do it, and it's got to be paid for. He worries this might create another problem should these issues not be addressed at the juvenile level.

"What I fear most, is that if mental health continues to get cut, juvenile detention centers and jails are going to become more of the de facto mental health centers in Idaho," he said. "And I don't think that's right."