

Spokesman Review, Tuesday, Feb. 15, 2011 – by Betsy Russell

Substance abuse treatment saves state money, study finds

BOISE – Idaho now has the data to show that its substance abuse treatment services directly save the state money. But the news comes as the state is preparing to scale back the services as part of its budget cuts.

For every \$1 spent on treatment costs, Idaho avoided \$1.38 in criminal justice costs, according to new research from the Washington State University Public Policy Center. Nevertheless, Gov. Butch Otter's budget proposal for next year calls for cutting the services by 30.3 percent in state general funds and 10.8 percent in total funds, and lawmakers are now saying they're likely to trim substantially more from the state budget than Otter recommended.

"This is a place that you can show a return," said Debbie Field, director of the state Office of Drug Policy. "But there's only so many dollars to go around. ... This is a real tough one."

For the new study, the control group consisted of those on the state's waiting list, who didn't receive treatment.

"Any difference is attributed to treatment," Sharon Burke of the Office of Drug Policy told legislative budget writers on Monday. "Our \$23.5 million investment conservatively saved the system \$32 million in other costs."

The study of the results of Idaho's interagency substance abuse efforts is aimed in part at answering question raised by Otter several years ago when he vetoed substance abuse funding because he said data hadn't been submitted showing the benefit; that prompted a legislative scramble to keep the program funded and make a case that it saves the state money.

On Monday, Field, an Otter appointee, and Burke presented the interagency substance abuse treatment budget to the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee.

Field said the effectiveness of the state's cross-agency efforts to deliver substance abuse treatment played a role in the state's prison population growing far less than forecast in the past few years. Idaho now has roughly 7,500 prison inmates; forecasts had suggested that by this year, it'd be up to about 9,000.

About 18 months ago, Field said, the waiting list for substance abuse services topped 2,500 people, and the state decided to give up on keeping waiting lists because it couldn't realistically promise those on the lists they'd get services. Now, she said, the state serves only those it's required by law to serve, including federal priority populations and those referred to it by the courts.