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Health districts face cuts in funding even as need for services up

BOISE — Health districts took center stage on Tuesday in the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee for a presentation that reminded lawmakers of the public's increased reliance on government services when hard economic times hit.

Rene LeBlanc, director of the South Central Public Health District that serves the region, spoke to JFAC, outlining the budget situation and impacts from a statewide perspective that included all health districts in Idaho.

“Our local boards of health recognize the gravity of this economic situation,” LeBlanc said. “We recognize all state agencies will have to make challenging decisions.”

Like other state-funded entities, health districts have not been immune to cuts as the state deals with declining revenues. At the same time, there's been a 25 percent increase in clients during the past three years accessing the various programs and services offered through health districts, LeBlanc said.

“People are in need of assistance and we're doing what we can,” he said.

The state's general fund budget for health districts is \$8.27 million for the next fiscal year under Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter's budget recommendation. That's a 13.6 percent drop from this fiscal year's appropriation of \$9.57 million. The drop across two years is even wider. For fiscal year 2009, the state appropriated \$10.5 million, which is more than \$2 million beyond the current budget proposal.

Across the state, programs have been reduced or significantly curtailed. Which health district programs will be cut in the future remains uncertain, LeBlanc said. “It's still early to say what programs are being affected because we're still early in the budget setting process.”

One program, though, is coming to an end as far as health-district participation goes. Health districts have been notified by the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare that the contract for the Immunization Reminder Information System is ending for districts and being transferred back to the Department of Health and Welfare. The program helps medical providers track childhood immunizations throughout the state.

For SCPHD, discontinuing that program leaves another hole of about \$52,000 in lost revenue from the contract.

In LeBlanc's district, one potential idea is to combine the staff from offices in Minidoka and Cassia counties into a centralized location that would serve both counties. Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, co-chairman of JFAC, said the committee's hearings from different state-funded entities are winding down, with difficult decisions to be made in the weeks ahead. “It's been a painful process,” he said.