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## Hundreds rally in favor of Medicaid services

COEUR d'ALENE - Instead of a picket sign or a protester's placard, Carri Dickinson carried a photograph of her son, 25-year-old Troy Lancour, at the Medicaid Matters rally on Saturday. Lancour was diagnosed with autism when he was five years old. Now living in a certified home in Spirit Lake, he attends the SL Start facility in Hayden and is doing very well.

He is the face of modern-day Medicaid, his mother said. "Without the Medicaid services that he receives, he wouldn't have progressed as far as he has," said Dickinson, a Pinehurst resident. "When he was diagnosed, there were no programs, and now there are programs, and we just need to really keep them so he can continue with the quality of life."

Facing a serious budget shortfall for fiscal year 2012, the Idaho State Legislature is considering cutting \$50 million from the Medicaid budget, according to literature from Medicaid Matters in Idaho, a statewide campaign to raise public awareness of the Medicaid issue. The proposed cuts would likely reduce mental health and disabilities programs, along with certain therapies, chiropractic, vision and dental services.

Because the federal government matches \$70 for every \$30 of state Medicaid funds, the cuts would effectively total \$166 million, Medicaid Matters noted.

The campaign organized rallies throughout Idaho on Saturday. About 250 people assembled in the parking lot at the St. Vincent de Paul H.E.L.P. Center on Harrison Avenue. They waved signs and cheered loudly, voicing their opposition to the Medicaid cuts.

"We cannot allow our legislators to turn their back on us," said Virgil Edwards of the Coeur d'Alene Disability Action Center, urging the crowd to write or call their legislators. "We have to be one voice. Let's continue on."

New state taxes would increase revenue and alleviate some of the budget problems, Leanne Rousseau, a family physician at New Hope Social Services in Coeur d'Alene, told the audience. Increasing the cigarette tax by \$1.25 per pack would boost state revenue by \$50 million, she said. A tax increase on all tobacco products - snuff, chewing tobacco, cigars - would add \$53 million in revenue.

Rally-goers were urged to sign a petition in favor of the cigarette tax. Many wrote their names after the rally concluded. "We need solutions that are far-reaching and long-lasting," Rousseau said. "The tobacco tax, personally I think ought to be dedicated to health and mental health care. And it would offset the \$50 million cut they're proposing for Medicaid services."

In addition, a working Internet sales tax would increase revenue by \$30 million and aid small businesses, she said.

"It's a fairer thing for our local businesses to have the out-of-state competitors paying those taxes (for online sales)," Rousseau said. "And it supports local revenues, local jobs."

Medicaid-supported mental health programs are especially vital, Rousseau explained.

"What these kinds of service do is build infrastructure," she said. "What these services do is they help (patients with mental illnesses) get educated, help them find jobs, learn to budget, shop, cook. I consider them essential."

Lynn Russell of the Rathdrum Counseling Center - a substance abuse outpatient clinic - also emphasized the importance of mental health care programs and services. She said the cuts will have far-reaching consequences, well beyond the short-term.

"There were a lot of cuts done in January, and I think that they are sufficient at this point. See how they work out," Russell said. "I don't think that the legislators might understand the impact in the foster care system, in the prison system, in the hospital situation. We (health care professionals) are teaching people how to live and how to cope with their mental illness and their disabilities, and contribute to society."

According to Sen. Jim Hammond, R-Coeur d'Alene, the Legislature has very few budgetary options. The figure he has heard, however, is \$35 million worth of Medicaid cuts, not \$50 million.

"I don't see an alternative," Hammond said. "Certainly (lawmakers) don't want to make the cuts, but on the other hand, if you don't you either have to raise taxes or cut something else. There's only a few places where you can get enough money to get the kind of cuts that are necessary."

The Legislature's current philosophy goes against raising taxes, Hammond added. But the cigarette tax might have a shot - Rep. Dennis Lake, chair of the House Revenue and Taxation Committee, is in support of the tax as a deterrent to smoking.

With Lake's backing, the tax might leave committee and be considered on the House floor, Hammond said.