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## **Mental health advocate worries about Idaho cuts**

Doug McKnight is worried about the state of mental health care in Idaho, especially with a recent report that shows the Gem State is among those in the country with the deepest percentage cuts to funding for that particular area of need during the past three fiscal years.

He's also worried about the potential for impending Medicaid cuts to further exacerbate the shortfalls.

From fiscal year 2009 through fiscal year 2011, Idaho has trimmed its mental health care budget by 11.4 percent, according to figures released last week by the National Alliance on Mental Illness. That's a cut of \$5.3 million from \$46.4 million in 2009 to \$41.1 million in 2011.

Idaho's cuts tied for 13th in the nation. The highest percentage cut came from Kentucky, which slashed its mental health care budget by 47.5 percent, or \$193.7 million, during the past three years. The highest quantitative cut came from California, which slashed \$587.4 million

The deeper cut during the past five years in Idaho, however, has been to the number of people actually being served by the system.

"We have gone from serving 23,417 in 2007 to just 10,466 in 2009, and it's down from that," said McKnight, president of the Idaho NAMI chapter. "The people being served by the mental health agencies is dropping."

Last year, for example, in order to meet that declining budget, the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare closed nine mental health locations statewide, including one in Bonner's Ferry, an hour's drive north of Sandpoint where McKnight calls home.

That Bonner's Ferry location, he said, not only served the immediate area, but all of the outlying rural areas between there and the Canadian border.

"They all now have to drive down to Sandpoint," McKnight said.

He has assurances that while some cuts to the budget are planned for the upcoming fiscal year, Health and Welfare currently has no plans for closures or staff reductions. But the upcoming budget cuts will have some affect.

"They are talking about cutting back psycho-social services," McKnight said. "Last year, they cut they PSR for adults from 20 hours a week to five hours a week." They are talking now about cutting it further and making it more difficulty to qualify for those services."

McKnight said that includes requiring all patient files be scrutinized by board certified psychologists to determine if services are even needed.

"I really don't disagree with having the work programs reviewed, but requiring it to be done by board certified psychologists will make it difficult in the rural communities. That will create a bottleneck."

McKnight said there are many rural communities where there simply is not a board certified psychologist available.

What all this means, to McKnight, is some poor short-term decision making.

“It’s going to cost the taxpayers more over time, even a shorter time,” he said. “It’s the worst of all possible worlds, really.”

McKnight said a significant percentage of those with mental health issues who don’t receive the care they needed are likely to end up in the correctional system, which he said is far costlier.”

“It’s pay me now, or pay me later,” he said, “and the cost to pay now is much lower.”