

**Idaho Falls Post Register, Wednesday, March 16, 2011 -- by Emma Breyse**

## **Local state hospital one link in a weakening chain**

BLACKFOOT -- Each budget year in a bad economy brings the eternal question for publicly funded agencies: Will this year be the year we're cut too much? Until the economy recovers, all bets are off, but the state's mental health services should hold the line for this year, said Tracey Sessions, administrator of State Hospital South.

"The community is definitely concerned," Sessions said. "And I do anticipate that some of the smaller agencies are going to have to make some hard decisions, but overall, I don't think we're at that crisis point yet."

If Idaho ever does get to a crisis point, Sessions will be among the first to know. The two state hospitals -- the other is in Orofino -- are the most restrictive public options for mentally ill residents. Most of the hospitals' residents are there by court order because they've been found dangerous to themselves or others.

This year, the state hospitals have been a central part of the state budget debate, due to the possibility that all psycho-social rehabilitation services for adults would be eliminated.

"If they no longer had access to a PSR worker, I can tell you that a lot of our clients would end up in a hospital," said Becky Hymas, administrator at Upper Valley Resources and Counseling in Rexburg. "(Institutionalization) costs substantially more than what we provide."

A PSR worker receives about \$40 an hour for his or her services, a cost of about \$200 per week per patient. State Hospital South's costs for 24-hour care come to about \$500 per day per patient. Costs at a community hospital's psychiatric ward are at least \$800 per day per patient. Hymas' comments came when completely eliminating PSR services still was on the table at the House Health and Welfare Committee. The most recent legislation includes a one-hour-per-week reduction in PSR service hours.

Others who spoke out against the harsher cuts said they worried about putting their children in a full-time mental institution. Several specifically mentioned State Hospital South. Actually, Sessions said, that's not the question.

Idaho's state hospitals haven't been long-term facilities for several decades. Most of the state treatment facilities, including most community hospitals, focus on helping clients gain independence. Sessions said an average stay at her facility is about a month. Instead, her hospital has become part of an interconnected safety net of mental health services. What Sessions and her fellow providers discover with each budget year is just how much in funding cuts the system can endure.

"We know there are problems with our mental health system, and we know what needs to be fixed," she said. "It's a matter of having the money, and, in a best-case scenario, learning where we can afford to spend a little less so when that money comes back we can use it to really rebuild the system."

In the meantime, mental health services in Idaho are in need of some repair, Sessions said. There are two sides to recovery -- medication and human guidance -- especially when a mental illness is severe enough to cause a patient to be committed. Medication prices aren't something providers control, which means personnel gets cut when budgets get lean. But what happens if the state's budget causes services to be cut too much? Sessions doesn't have an answer for that question.