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Idaho cuts welfare programs amid shrinking budgets

BOISE — The shrinking budget for Idaho's Department of Health and Welfare is already having an impact on dozens of mentally ill patients and some of the services those clients receive.

More than 100 clients have been notified that outreach services like those that dispatch caseworkers to homes to help with medication checks and everyday tasks — from providing assistance with paying bills to picking up prescription drugs — will no longer be available through state clinics in Caldwell and Payette. The Idaho Statesman reports that cuts to similar programs are being made to smaller numbers of clients in Boise and other areas of the state. And additional program cuts are expected in coming weeks.

The Department of Health and Welfare is shrinking its 2010 and 2011 budgets in response to funding cuts ordered by the Legislature and Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter in response to declines in state revenue. For example, the agency's 2011 budget for adult mental health care is set at \$18.9 million, about \$3.4 million less than the 2009 appropriation.

State officials said some of the clients losing services have other insurance options like Medicaid, Medicare or private insurance. So far, people without those options have not been affected. Still, it's not clear if those losing services will be able to find other options to continue the home visits and other programs.

But at least one private insurance provider is exploring alternatives to fill the void. Paula Campbell, a member of the board of directors of the Boise chapter of the National Alliance of Mental Illness, said the hands-on help state workers provide to mentally ill clients is critical to them and their families. Many clients with serious or ongoing mental illness are not up to the challenge of changing health care providers and are vulnerable to substance abuse.

"It's a huge loss for people who are struggling with organizational skills," said Campbell, whose son is schizophrenic. "There is only so much as a family member that you can do."

The cuts made in the Caldwell and Payette clinics were made after employees left for other jobs or retired and were not replaced. The staff remaining is just too small to pick up the extra caseload duties, said Tom Shanahan, spokesman for the Health and Welfare Department. "We have a lot of panicked people out there and a lot of disarray," said Dr. Larry Banta, a Caldwell psychiatrist who contracts with the Idaho Bureau of Mental Health and Substance Abuse to see state patients. "We worry as providers that without sufficient funding of the mental health centers, we are going to have more tragic outcomes."

Shanahan said the department has been forced to prioritize services and in many cases direct support to those with the most severe mental illness. Payette Family Services, which has offices in Payette and Emmett, is a private provider that could fill the void. Melissa Paller, owner of the provider, said the clinic has taken inquiries in the last month from several patients dropped from state clinics. She said the agency is prepared to handle up to 100 displaced patients with private insurance.