

Twin Falls Times News, Friday, July 10, 2009 – by Nate Poppino

## State, Blue Cross break off vaccine program

*Lack of bids doomed attempt to blunt cuts*

An agreement between the state of Idaho and a major insurance company to patch up cuts in a childhood vaccine program has fallen through after bids for the vaccines came up short.

Tom Shanahan, spokesman for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, said Thursday morning that the state received only one bid in its search for a manufacturer to provide vaccines for use by Blue Cross of Idaho clients. That bid didn't cover everything officials asked for and wasn't a competitive price, he said, leading the agency and the insurer to drop their plans for the program.

"If we can't offer cost savings for the parents and convenience for the providers, then we might as well not proceed," he said.

Blue Cross spokesman Stewart Johnson said the decision was "disappointing" for his company.

The arrangement, set to start in August, would have soothed part of nearly \$3 million in cuts to a program that previously provided free vaccinations to all Idaho children under the age of 19. As of July 1, the state now only participates in a basic federal program that provides vaccines for children with Medicaid, who are uninsured, whose insurance doesn't cover vaccines or who are American Indians or Alaskan Natives. The federal program still covers about 60 percent of Idaho kids. But Susie Pouliot, CEO of the Idaho Medical Association, said she worries what the cuts will do to Idaho's vaccination rates - already "woefully low" compared to other states.

For doctors, the cuts mean they're on their own to secure vaccines and bill patients. Providers also have to purchase separate equipment to store and dispense vaccines for insured patients, among other requirements. Doctors aren't enthused about the changes, and Pouliot said it's entirely possible some may choose to forward insured children on to health districts and other sources. "That's quite likely to happen," she said.

Rene LeBlanc, director of the South Central Public Health District, is preparing for just that. Judging by feedback the district's collected so far, he said, he's guessing as many as half of his region's doctors may decide to not even bother with the nonfederal vaccines.

In an attempt to soften the fee increase for people - nearly \$300 for all immunizations that schools request for kindergartners - the health district will only charge a 20 percent payment up front and then bill patients' insurers, receiving the rest once those people are reimbursed. Billing will still be tricky for people not using Blue Cross or Regence Blue Shield of Idaho, LeBlanc said. And he's still working out just what budget he's going to raid to cover the costs of the extra vaccines.