

Twin Falls Times News, Wednesday, Aug. 5, 2009 – by Ben Botkin

## Otter: State will buy childhood vaccines for year

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter announced Tuesday that the state will purchase all required childhood vaccines through January 2010, a decision that will require taking \$2.1 million from the state's rainy day fund.

The Legislative Health Care Task Force had asked the governor to transfer funds to cover vaccine purchases after the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare announced that it would no longer pay for vaccinations for children already covered by private insurance. An attempt to set up a voluntary state vaccine purchasing pool to reduce immunization costs failed to garner attractive bids.

For now, the state's decision means that all children - even those with insurance - will have access to free vaccinations. At the same time, state officials agree that the issue will need a permanent solution before January 2010.

"I hope by then - with your Task Force's good efforts - we have developed a long-term solution that shares the responsibility for the cost and distribution of vaccine to Idaho's children between insurance companies, physicians, and the people they serve," Otter wrote in a letter to lawmakers overseeing the Legislative Health Care Task Force. A \$20 million shortfall had led Health and Welfare to halt the program.

"It was a budget issue, plain and simple," said Emily Simnitt, spokeswoman for the state agency.

But there were also concerns about access and providers opting not to purchase vaccinations for privately insured patients, she said. Additionally, the state already has a low vaccination rate and officials were wary of discouraging vaccinations.

The South Central Public Health District welcomed the news on Tuesday. "It's a lot of burden off of our shoulders because we were trying to find money in our budget," said Cheryl Becker, a registered nurse for the health district.

The district had spent about \$80,000 on vaccinations and was only ordering supplies in two-week increments. The district plans to send some of its unopened, packaged vaccinations back to the supplier. "We were trying to use it as cautiously as we could," Becker said.

Susie Pouliot, CEO of the Idaho Medical Association, said some providers who invested in vaccines are concerned about whether they will be reimbursed now that the state-funded universal vaccine program for children is in force.

At the same time, the association also is supportive of the state making a move in favor of all children getting immunizations, she said.