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Lawmakers protested new bone marrow goals

Idaho delegation's effort was in vain, which led St. Luke's to close its donor registry.

All four members of Idaho's congressional delegation urged a federal agency to reconsider a requirement that a Boise bone-marrow program boost its minority participation dramatically by 2011. But the program kept aggressive minority-recruitment goals in place, leading St. Luke's Mountain States Tumor Institute this week to say it could not meet them and would close the program.

Sens. Larry Craig and Mike Crapo and Reps. Mike Simpson and Bill Sali, all Republicans, warned in a Jan. 17 letter to the Health Resources and Services Administration that the minority quotas set by the National Marrow Donor Program "will result in closures of registration programs in some states."

Their letter said the donor program wanted St. Luke's to enroll 500 minorities next year and 1,000 in 2011. The letter said the St. Luke's donor center recruited 700 white people last year and 54 minorities. St. Luke's said Friday that it actually recruited 1,000 white people and 100 minority people last year.

Idaho's population is 91 percent white, the lawmakers said. "The one-size-fits-all approach of your new minority registration goals will present significant challenges for states such as our own," the letter said. A task force then looked into the issue, and the result was a goal of 575 nonwhite recruits by 2009, said Dr. Jeffrey Chell, CEO of the donor program. St. Luke's said Friday that the target would rise again to 661 in 2010, but Chell said no new goal had been set for that year or 2011.

St. Luke's earlier this week said it would have been required to add 1,000 minorities to its registry in 2009. The hospital corrected its figure Friday. With St. Luke's closing its registry program, the local program likely will be absorbed into a bigger registry based in Spokane by Oct. 1. Local white people could be required to pay \$52 for tissue typing through cheek swabs they now receive free.

Bone marrow transplants are often the best or only hope for patients suffering from leukemia, lymphoma or other life-threatening diseases. Chell insisted that no one at the National Marrow Donor Program forced St. Luke's to close its program. "The goal would be 575 for this market. There is no penalty for not achieving the goal, but I think there is a lot more diversity in the Boise area than people realize," Chell said.

A new estimate released Friday by the U.S. Census Bureau said Ada County is 6.6 percent Hispanic and Canyon County 20.9 percent Hispanic. Because tissue types are inherited, patients are more likely to match someone from their own race or ethnicity. "Anything we can do as a national program to stimulate minority growth of the registry will save more patients' lives," Chell said.

But St. Luke's said earlier this week that it would have had to hire another staffer to comply with the program's requirements - an expense the hospital said it could not afford. Boiseans still can donate through the Internet, without leaving town. The requirement that all Caucasians pay \$52 per typing, as reported in the St. Luke's news release, is not entirely accurate, according to the national bone marrow program. It is true that, on average, tissue typing to add a donor to the registry costs \$52, but in many cases a sponsor or grant covers all or part of those costs, program officials said in an e-mail to The Statesman. Minorities get on the list for free.