

Lewiston Tribune, Tuesday, Aug. 16, 2011 – by Kathy Hedberg

Idaho Co. official takes aim at indigent med system

GRANGEVILLE - An Idaho County commissioner says the indigent medical care system needs a major overhaul to prevent abuses and give taxpayers the tools to clean up the system.

Commissioner James Rockwell said taxpayers must be able to demand responsibility from abusers of the system, including requiring they attend counseling or rehabilitation programs, get job training and possibly carry their own high deductible health care insurance.

"We're not doing anything for the indigents themselves," Rockwell said Monday. "We just write them a check and there's no accountability for that check. It's odd that we don't attempt to do right by these citizens. It's odd to me that we don't try to help them, that we don't have the ability to attempt to get them off drugs or booze, or get them a job. We're not given those tools."

Rockwell said the Idaho County commissioners attempted to introduce the matter in last year's legislative session and probably will try to do that again next year.

One issue includes requiring hospitals make a first attempt at collecting a bill before turning to the county for indigent payment. The county is involved in a lawsuit with St. Joseph Regional Medical Center for more than \$48,000 the hospital claims the county owes for a man treated for stab wounds.

In December 2009, Bryan Stark of Elk City was treated for stab wounds in his groin after a domestic dispute with his girlfriend, Margaret Mendendall. Mendenhall told investigators Stark fired two shots at her before she picked up a knife and stabbed him. Stark gave conflicting stories to investigators and doctors who treated him about how he suffered the cuts, and Idaho County denied his indigent claim because of the contradictions in his accounts. The case is pending.

Rockwell said twice in the recent past people have threatened to sue the county because they were declared indigent after hospitals where they were treated tried to collect payment from the county. The people were infuriated they had been declared indigent without their knowledge. Rockwell said in both cases the commissioners called the hospitals and asked whether the patient had been contacted about paying the bill and the hospitals said no.

"They said, 'We assumed.' You can't assume this," Rockwell said. "The population can't be the first line of defense. Out of respect for the customer you have to ask them first - 'Can you pay this over five years?'"

"For whatever reason the care providers have defaulted to the big dumb government and nobody ever questions it. They just sign off. And when we started questioning it, the hospital got their dander up." Rockwell said last year Idaho County paid more than \$2 million in indigent health care claims. For that kind of money, he said, the county should hire its own doctor and nurse, rent an office and equipment and require indigents go there.

"The abuses of this thing are pretty profound," Rockwell said. "And we need to fix that. We ought to have the tools to pay the bill and then put the patient in care for substance abuse, (require they) look for a job, to make them responsible. "Part of our job should be promoting the dignity of people. Instead what this does is, it destroys the dignity of people. You automatically declare them indigent because you want your money immediately."