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## Pain in the pocketbook

*Due to billing snafu, Medicaid patients now being required to pay for services previously received for free*

A lot became possible for Alden Brown when he started receiving personal care services through Medicaid three years ago.

The attendant who visited his Wallace home several hours a week washed his sheets, cleaned his house, did his laundry -- just a few of the basics his two hip replacements had prevented the man in his 50s from tackling on his own.

"I was so grateful to have someone to go over there other than me to look in on him," said his older sister Starr Callies, Brown's only close relative. "The woman who came in several times a week, she was there to keep an eye on him to make sure he hadn't fallen, make sure he was taking his medication, make sure there was food in the refrigerator."

But it could all be ending. About 30 days ago, Brown received a notice from the state announcing a mistake: He should have been billed a co-pay for the services he had been receiving for free all those years.

As of Oct. 1, he would have to pay \$300 a month to maintain the same hours of service.

"At this point, he can't afford a full tank of gas," Callies said, adding that her brother isn't physically capable of holding a job, and relies on disability.

A Medicaid reevaluation deemed that he should be able to cover the co-pay, though, which Callies believes is because the state only looks at a recipient's cost of food, rent and medication.

"I had this safety net for him, and now it's gone," she said. "Now he has to cut back hours to some minimal amount so he can afford it."

Brown isn't alone. During an internal audit earlier this year, the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare stumbled across a significant billing error for recipients of its Age and Disabled Waiver, a Medicaid program that provides attendant services for elderly and disabled people so they can remain at home instead of moving into costly nursing homes.

For possibly several years, hundreds of Medicaid recipients in Idaho were never billed co-pays for their attendant services because of an improper billing code, said IDHW spokesperson Tom Shanahan. "Near the beginning of the year, (IDHW) found something that didn't quite add up, and it took them awhile to figure out, because it didn't affect everybody," he said. "Then they developed a communication plan to communicate to people, 'You need to be contributing.'"

*Medical services 1*

Recipients were notified that as of Oct. 1, the state would correct the mistake and start charging people co-pays they should have been paying all along, Shanahan said.

"Everybody should be billed accurately and treated fairly," he said.

But many attendant care providers in Kootenai County say their affected clients are shocked and confused, as they had relied for years on the understanding that they wouldn't be billed for 16 hours of care per week or less.

"With the recession and everything going on, it's really difficult for people to live as it is, and to pay a high amount of money that you don't have, what are you going to choose?" said Patricia Brook, co-owner and director of operations with A Better Personal Care in Coeur d'Alene. "You've got to pay for rent and food, you've got to have those necessities in life to get through."

With the new co-pays ranging from \$35 to \$1,700 a month, several clients are already reducing the hours they have attendants provide services like meal preparation, laundry, cleaning and transportation to doctors' appointments.

"They just said they can't afford it," Brook said, adding that income reevaluations so far haven't resulted in Medicaid reducing bills.

Two clients have dropped services entirely, Brook added, which means losing other services provided in the Medicaid waiver like medication and meals on wheels.

"They need these services," Brook said of clients who have afflictions including dementia, Parkinson's and multiple sclerosis. "If they're not able to do these things, who's going to clean their laundry, especially if they have no family?"

Cash Edwards, administrator at All Valley Home Care, another attendant care company in Coeur d'Alene, said he is seeing the same reaction among clients affected by the billing correction.

It might end up producing exactly the opposite of what the waiver intends, he said, with folks ending up in nursing homes because they can't take care of themselves at home.

"I'm afraid that the clients we think we're saving money with will cost us more," he said. "I think we'll see an increase in hospital visits and skilled nursing facility stays, as well."

Lynn Lavagnino, RN Executive Director of August Home Health, said some clients who have received care for years are cutting their hours because they can't afford the new co-pay.

"It's a rude awakening -- none of us want a new bill every month, especially when it could be significant," Lavagnino said.

If clients can't afford services, she added, it could also affect agencies' abilities to provide help.

"We can't pay people to service clients without getting reimbursed, because then we'd go broke," she said.

Only those with incomes of \$700 or more a month have to contribute a co-pay, Shanahan said.

Of the 8,000 Idaho residents who rely on the Age and Disabled Waiver, only 800 must provide a co-pay, he added, and the IDHW believes only about half of those were affected by the billing flub.

"It's pretty hard to track, because we don't collect it ourselves, the providers do," he said, adding that the state doesn't know how long the error occurred.

Recipients won't be required to pay for the years of service they received for free, he added.

"That would be difficult especially for this group of people, because we know they're low income," he said.

Co-pays are based on a sliding fee scale, he said, starting from \$4 and up.

Medicaid will reevaluate recipients' incomes if the bill is too steep, he added.

"If anybody does have a problem, we encourage them to call, because we don't want to see anyone put into a hardship over this," he said.

The number for Medicaid enrollment and assistance is: 1-877-456-1233.

About 60 to 70 percent of the 225 clients at A Full Life Agency in Hayden Lake have been affected by the billing correction, said Agency Director Kelly Marang.

"I believe we'll definitely see some issues with it," she said. "A lot of clients escaped contribution by using 16 hours of less, even though they were assessed at needing a lot more. It's going to be difficult collecting contributions, and of course we worry that the clients will stop services they definitely need."

Alden Brown will likely end up relying more on his sister, said Callies, who is already tending to her husband as he recovers from two strokes.

"He (Alden) is lucky he has an advocate, someone keeping an eye on him," said Callies, 61. "There are so many other people receiving care who have no clue of what's going to come if they cancel."