

Idaho State Journal, Thursday, Nov. 19, 2009 – by Kendra Evensen (2 pages)

Association: Hospitals drive local economies

POCATELLO — As legislators resume discussions about health care reform and budget cuts, the Idaho Hospital Association is hoping to inform both lawmakers and the public about the important roles hospitals play in driving their local economies.

According to a recent economic impact study completed by the association, Idaho hospitals had \$245 billion in revenue in 2008, paid \$1 billion in salaries and provided 23,000 jobs. Locally, Eastern Idaho hospitals earned \$465 million, paid \$196 million in salaries and provided 4,706 jobs.

“We’re trying to educate the public on what hospitals are all about. A lot of people think they are buildings with people in them where you can go to get help,” said Steve Millard, president of the Idaho Hospital Association. “They don’t have a face like their personal physician. We’re trying to put a face on hospitals and show how important they are to the economy.”

Hospitals are typically the largest employers in their town and are also large economic drivers in the community providing significant tax dollars and drawing federal funding for programs including Medicare and Medicaid, Millard said. And many of the state hospitals, which were built in the 1940s and 1950s, are now providing additional jobs for construction workers as they replace and update their facilities.

In addition, due to the state’s nursing shortage, hospitals have been able to provide work for nurses looking for employment after their spouses were laid off.

“(The nursing shortage) went from being pretty significant to nil almost overnight,” Millard said, adding that hospitals have a lot of hiring potential because they are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The association is hoping lawmakers will consider the impact of hospitals as they look at the annual budget. Due to the economy, hospitals have recently had to take on Medicaid costs that were for’s responsibility, he said. And he worries about the effect of more changes on the horizon, especially as lawmakers look at health care reform.

The association agrees that the health care system needs significant change, Millard said, but members believe current proposals will only make the problems worse.

“(The current system) is unsustainable, too costly and there’s too much waste,” he said, but reform needs to happen in the right way.”

Rather than trying to insure everyone in the nation, the association believes there could be significant savings in streamlining care itself. For instance, Millard knows a woman who recently had back surgery.

She told her doctor that she was also having trouble with her lungs, and although he had the knowledge to help her, he wouldn’t do anything about it. So the woman had to go to another doctor for more treatment.

“That’s crazy,” Millard said. He believes physicians should work together to create places where people can go to receive all of their treatment and not have to pay for expensive test duplications.

One advancement doctors are making right now is through electronic medical records, which can be accessed at any location, Millard said. That way a doctor who is unfamiliar with the patient can access his or her records to find out what has been done for treatment and the results of any recent tests.

Millard hopes lawmakers will consider both the impact hospitals have on the economy and the best avenues for change as they move ahead with the legislative session.

“We’re for reform,” Millard said. “It’s just got to be done right.”