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## The disabled and their families will feel sting of Idaho cutbacks

*Health and Welfare says it will be forced to trim services for thousands of the state's most vulnerable people*

Rusty Fleischman relies on the social skills he learns and the friends he spends time with five days a week at a Boise center for developmentally disabled adults. His father and mother rely on the center's help.

His father, Dale, worries that budget cuts at the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare will hurt his son and thousands of others among Idaho's most vulnerable residents.

Gov. Butch Otter has ordered state agencies to have a plan ready by Monday to trim an additional 3 percent from this fiscal year's budgets - on top of the 1 percent cut he ordered in September - and to put an additional 2 percent in reserve for possible future cuts. That's 6 percent in all.

Last month, the state informed Dale Fleischman that budget cuts mean his son will get less help. Hours at the All Developmental Disability Services center, 1350 S. Vista Ave., where Rusty Fleischman goes, and at other centers are being cut from a maximum 30 hours to 22 hours each week.

And that's based just on the 1 percent cuts ordered earlier. More cuts could follow.

Rusty Fleischman is mentally retarded. He is short, with a mop of brown hair and an easy smile. He looks much younger than his 32 years. He talks easily with people he knows, but not with strangers. For six hours each weekday, he works with instructors on practical daily skills - new words, writing his first and last name, telling time. He learns social skills by going to the grocery store or bowling.

"He loves coming to the center," said Tiffany Bennis, a technician there. "(His parents) say that's all he talks about on the weekends."

More than 4,900 Idahoans went to developmental disability agencies last fiscal year for help. Most of the cost was paid by Medicaid, the federal-state medical program for low-income and disabled people.

The state cuts will affect about 55 percent of the children and adults receiving Medicaid-funded services through developmental disability agencies statewide, said Katherine Hansen, spokeswoman for the Idaho Association of Developmental Disability Agencies.

"It's a pretty significant hit," Hansen said. "We are concerned how this is going to impact many of the kids and adults throughout the state - especially those in the more rural areas."

The organization of 35 agencies says 13 percent of their 3,000 employees could lose their jobs and an additional 22 percent could face cuts in benefits.

As of October, about 185,000 people in Idaho were eligible for Medicaid. Of those, 72 percent were children.

"That is what Medicaid is there for - it's a safety net for people with disabilities or mental-health issues, low-income pregnant women, and children," said Idaho Health and Welfare spokesman Tom Shanahan.

Otter's cuts add up to \$21.8 million for the department. Its state funds are typically tied to matching federal funds. When state funds are cut, the damage is multiplied by a loss of even more federal money. In general, for every \$30 the state spends on Medicaid, it gets another \$70 from the federal government.

Medicaid accounts for about 74 percent of the department's roughly \$1.9 billion budget. The state's general fund share adds up to \$587.3 million. About 95 percent of Medicaid dollars are spent on benefits.

"We can't talk about holdbacks unless we talk about Medicaid," Shanahan said. "You always look to have the least impact on services you can provide. You look to low-hanging fruit - travel, training, cell-phone use. They do add up. But you have to look at some of your significant cost drivers if you want to make the cuts you need to make."

The department may also cut what it pays hospitals for services to low-income patients. It pays about \$330 million a year in Idaho hospital costs. Cuts also are likely in long-term and nursing care for the elderly.

The cuts worry Kelly Buckland, executive director of the Idaho State Independent Living Council. Buckland fears they will drive more people into institutions that cost more than the community-based services being trimmed.

"The developmental disability services are to help people so their children and adult children can stay with them in the community," said Kristi Pedersen of McCall, the mother of a severely autistic son. "When they cut programs like this, there is a concern that more of these families will have to put more of their children or adult children in state institutions."

Pedersen is upset by the cutback in services to families with disabled children in rural areas. Families have to get services somewhere, she said.

Buckland said developmentally disabled people who are eligible for Medicaid have "an absolute right" to move into an institution to receive services. "It's going to put people back in a more expensive system, and we will lose the capacity to serve them in the community," he said. "It is going to take a long time to rebuild that."

Pedersen said such benefits are "crucial" because her son is learning basic skills, like potty training. Dale Fleischman agrees.

"It breaks my heart to see this happening," Fleischman said. "A lot of people who work, parents, will take (children) to a center and then go to a job for four or five hours a day. We are looking at possibly cutting into some people's livelihoods."