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T.F. Co. budget strained to meet indigent health care needs

Since fiscal year 2007, Twin Falls County's budget for covering people who can't cover their emergency health care has increased significantly. It shows no signs of decreasing. For the past two years, county commissioners have added an additional \$700,000 each year for indigent-care costs to the county budget, as applications for assistance increased by 161 from fiscal years 2008 to 2009.

Indigent funds are for emergency health care provided to people without insurance and encompass a variety of needs — from unexpected injuries and illnesses to ongoing mental-health treatment. In 2009, there were 980 indigent cases filed in Twin Falls County, compared to 819 in 2008 and 738 in 2007. The current indigent budget of \$3.74 million represents a 21-percent increase from the previous \$2.97 million in 2009.

Because the 2010 fiscal year began Oct. 1, neither the numbers of applications, nor projections for the year, are available — partially because additional cases have yet to be posted to the final November figures. "We've definitely seen an increase in applications in the first two months," County Clerk Kristina Glascock said.

As of Nov. 30, she said, the county has paid \$320,777 from the indigent fund. \$270,510 is the actual indigent cost — the remainder comprises wages for county employees running the program. The state Catastrophic Health Fund (CAT) offsets some county medical costs for indigents, but counties pay the lion's share of indigent claims because they're obligated for the first \$11,000 in medical bills, an amount the Legislature increased by 10 percent last year.

CAT cases from the county increased from 118 in 2008 to 149 in 2009. Glascock said every sign indicates that CAT cases will increase further in 2010, adding that the trend has put a "significant strain" on the county. "It's an unknown factor and it does take a lot of the overall county budget," she said.