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Medicaid user fee proposed

State Rep. Janice McGeachin has proposed Medicaid "user fees" or "sliding-scale premiums" as a deterrent to Medicaid patients who use emergency rooms instead of clinics to obtain care for non-life-threatening illnesses or injuries.

McGeachin, a Bonneville County Republican, is chairwoman of the House's Health and Welfare Committee. She made the comments during Friday's Idaho Falls City Club legislative preview luncheon and added that new fees could help state officials improve the bleak budget picture. "The best way to control costs is to control utilization," McGeachin said.

Medicaid is a state- and federally funded program that provides medical benefits for the poor and disabled. In Idaho, the program covers approximately 213,000 people. The vast majority -- about 150,000 -- are children, which raises questions about who would be responsible for paying any new premiums or fees. "The federal government puts restrictions on what you can and can't charge," McGeachin said. "With children you have the least flexibility of all, so I am not sure how much would apply to children."

Other Medicaid recipients include seniors, expectant mothers and impoverished adults with certain permanent disabilities. McGeachin still is developing the proposal, but suggested it could mirror co-pay programs. For example, a Medicaid recipient might be required to contribute \$20 for a \$100 medical visit. McGeachin also suggested applying fees on a sliding scale based on a patient's ability to pay.

Any legislation aimed at adding fees or premiums would need to clear both legislative chambers with a simple majority vote. During the forum, McGeachin; Sen. Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls; and Rep. Dennis Lake, R-Blackfoot, fielded questions and offered a preview of the upcoming legislative session.

Lake, chairman of the House's Revenue and Tax Committee, committed to sponsor a tobacco excise tax that could raise \$50 million in revenue. Lake said he plans to advance the tax as a health care measure. The tax would add an extra \$1 or \$1.25 to the price of a pack of cigarettes in Idaho. "Studies show a \$1 increase in the tax reduces the number of those who start smoking by 10 percent," Lake said.