

Idaho legislators wrestle with faith-healing laws

Lawmakers mulling over five proposals

BOISE — Legislative leaders are currently considering several options to change Idaho’s faith-healing laws, but details about what’s being discussed are being kept under wraps.

Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill, R-Idaho Falls, said that he had met with Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter and legislative leaders over the past week to discuss whether Idaho’s statute that allows families to cite religious reasons for medical decisions without fear of being charged with a crime should be repealed.

Earlier this month, Hill and other key lawmakers received five recommendations from four Republican senators. They varied from doing nothing and leaving the exemption in place, expanding the state’s faith healing exemptions to removing the exemption entirely.

Hill declined to mention what options are being reviewed, but he said he was confident a faith healing-related bill would be introduced this legislative session.

“I expect we will see something before we adjourn,” Hill said. “Right now, the point of meeting with everyone was to get to the language and see what it looks like in bill form.”

Focus on the exemption has exploded over the past year in Idaho as more attention has been placed on the deaths of children among members of the Followers of Christ in southwestern Idaho from treatable conditions, including pneumonia and food poisoning. Many children are buried at a cemetery overlooking the Snake River.

A handful of Idaho’s few Democratic lawmakers have repeatedly called for a full repeal of the exemption, but the Republican-controlled Legislature has refused to allow such proposals to move forward. Instead, legislative leaders agreed to form an interim committee to review the topic last summer at the request of Otter.

The legislative panel met only twice, with members often straying from focusing on the merits of the law and listening to testimony criticizing the use of vaccines, warning of the dangers of Western medicine and urging lawmakers to limit abortion. The group adjourned without finalizing a recommendation to the Legislature.

In 2015, a governor-appointed working group found that the deaths of two children occurred because the families withheld medical assistance for religious reasons. One death was related to complications of diabetes, and the other followed a prolonged gastrointestinal illness. The report concluded the deaths could have been prevented.

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