

Idaho's Medicaid budget set to jump by 7 percent

Joint budget committee recommends largest spending increase since 2012

BOISE - Higher caseloads and provider rate increases are behind the largest jump in Idaho Medicaid spending since 2012.

The joint budget committee approved a \$2.44 billion fiscal 2019 budget for the Department of Health and Welfare's Medicaid Division on Wednesday. That's an increase in total funding of \$160.3 million, or 7 percent over the current year. State general fund support is up \$52.2 million, or 9.8 percent, to \$584.1 million.

"That's a lot of millions," said Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, co-chairwoman of the committee.

Nondiscretionary adjustments - including the higher caseloads, federally mandated provider rate increases, market-based reimbursement rate increases and adjustments in the federal matching rate - accounted for \$132 million of the total budget increase and \$38 million of the general fund increase.

This was the largest increase in state Medicaid spending since 2012. However, the increase that year was anomalous: the Legislature had to boost the division's general fund budget by \$138 million in order to backfill the \$138 million in federal stimulus funding it received during the recession.

Other than the nondiscretionary adjustments, the 2019 budget includes about \$2.5 million in discretionary provider rate increases for various assisted-living and community-based personal care and disability services.

Rep. Melissa Wintrow, D-Boise, said reimbursement rates in those areas were so low the state was in danger of losing providers. If that happened, some people wouldn't get the services they need to stay at home and might have to enter a long-term nursing home.

Increasing the provider rates "is the fiscally responsible thing to do," Wintrow said. "By keeping people in their homes, we're saving a lot of money versus institutional care."

Sen. Mary Souza, R-Coeur d'Alene, said Medicaid is always a "difficult" budget.

"We wrestled with every one of these (line items)," she said. "But this is our most vulnerable population. If we didn't increase reimbursement rates, providers will lose employees and the care would decrease."

The Medicaid budget passed unanimously. It now goes to the House and Senate for further action.

The budget committee also approved a \$175 million total budget for the Division of Welfare, up 1.6 percent from the year before, as well as a \$120.1 million budget for public health services, up 2.8 percent.

The public health budget includes language directing the Department of Health and Welfare to develop a new suicide prevention plan that "includes measurable and prioritized outcomes for reducing suicide rates in Idaho."

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Sen. Carl Crabtree, R-Grangeville, noted that Idaho typically ranks in the top 10 nationwide in suicides per capita. Several groups and agencies are working on the issue, but they don't necessarily coordinate with each other.

"We're trying to coalesce all that into a unified system," he said. "This language tries to find a coordinated solution. Our hope is that, in the future, we'll have more prioritized, measurable outcomes."

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