

Medicaid dental bill awaits Otter's signature

Preventative-care measure easily passes Senate, following close vote in House

BOISE - Legislation restoring preventive dental services for adult Medicaid patients passed the Senate on a 28-7 vote Monday, after barely surviving a 36-32 House vote in February.

Sens. Dan Foreman, R-Moscow, and Carl Crabtree, R-Grangeville, both opposed the measure.

"It's not a bad bill, but it's time to hold the line on increased welfare funding," Foreman said after the vote. "It's time to shift away from welfare programs that empower the state to ones that empower people. Education and jobs are the key."

The measure restores preventive dental services to about 29,000 Idaho adults who have children and who earn less than 26 percent of the federal poverty level.

Sen. Maryanne Jordan, D-Boise, said preventive care - including teeth cleaning and filling cavities - can help maintain physical health and reduce the need for pain medications or emergency care.

Idaho previously provided these services to certain Medicaid patients, but eliminated them as part of a broader cost-saving effort in 2011. At the time, the state was struggling to maintain social safety net programs following the 2007-'09 recession.

"This was one of many difficult decisions we made during the downturn," said Sen. Bert Brackett, R-Rogerson. "We made the decision with the understanding that these services would be restored in the future, (when the state could better afford them). We restored emergency dental procedures in 2014, but prevention is much more cost effective."

Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston, said he supported the bill for the same reason.

The estimated general fund cost of the bill is \$1.1 million per year; that would be matched by another \$2.8 million in federal funding.

However, Jordan said when people don't receive adequate preventive services, their only option is more expensive emergency care. Consequently, she estimated the state could save \$2.5 million per year from reduced emergency dental services - more than offsetting the general fund cost of the bill.

Foreman suggested there was a "lot of smoke and mirror" used in developing the fiscal cost estimate.

"The only prediction we can count on is that this is going to cost the state more money," he said. "And the over-arching concern isn't dollars; it's people. The more free money we provide, the less incentive there is for people to get off welfare. Our focus should be on shortening the length of time people remain on these programs, reducing the number who qualify and emphasizing getting them back on their feet."

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Page 2 of 2

Although the bill simply restores services to people who already qualify for Medicaid, Crabtree - who represents Idaho, Clearwater, Shoshone counties and part of Bonner County - said he voted against the measure because people in his district oppose Medicaid expansion.

"The word 'Medicaid' inflames a lot of people in my district," he said.

During the House vote in February, Reps. Margie Gannon, D-St. Maries, and Caroline Troy, R-Genesee, supported the bill; Reps. Thyra Stevenson, R-Lewiston, Priscilla Giddings, R-White Bird and Paul Shepherd, R-Riggins opposed the measure. Rep. Mike Kingsley, R-Lewiston, missed the vote.

The bill now goes to Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter for his signature.

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