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FOR YOUR INFORMATION
The Lewiston Tribune
Lewiston, Idaho
Wednesday March 15, 2017
by William L. Spence
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Idaho agency to face scrutiny this summer

BOISE - Ongoing concerns about the Department of Health and Welfare's licensing and certifying process sparked a request for an in-depth legislative study this summer.

The request was submitted by Rep. Caroline Troy, R-Genesee. It was co-signed by Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston, Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill, R-Rexburg, House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, and several other legislators.

The proposal stemmed from the department's decision to revoke the license for the Northwest Children's Home in Lewiston, following an investigation of several incidents of inappropriate sexual behavior and lax supervision.

After the revocation decision was announced in December, Northwest Children's Chief Executive Brian Pope suggested the facility was being unfairly targeted by a state inspector who had a "personal agenda." The revocation has been appealed; a decision in that case is pending.

Nevertheless, Troy said as she learned more about the situation, her concerns expanded to include the licensing and certification procedure for nursing homes and other residential care facilities.

In a meeting of the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Tuesday, she said retirees are the fastest-growing demographic group in Idaho. In her letter requesting a legislative study, she noted there's a need for more skilled care beds, yet the supply is declining.

"The number of residential care homes/beds for Idahoans with behavioral, physical and age-related issues is decreasing, while the demand for such living arrangements is increasing," she wrote. The Department of Health and Welfare's licensing and certification process "seems to be at the center" of this concerning trend.

Idaho's process appears to be "much more punitive than in other states," Troy said, both in terms of the number and severity of the citations issued for facility deficiencies, as well as the extended time period needed to license a new facility.

"There is an urgent need for an independent and unbiased evaluation of the licensing and certification process of the Department of Health and Welfare," she wrote.

The oversight committee agreed to authorize the study, which will be conducted by the Legislature's Office of Performance Evaluation.

Among other issues, the review will look at how long it takes to license a new facility and evaluate the extent to which state procedures are affecting the availability of skilled care beds.

The hope, Troy said, is to develop a better partnership between the agency and providers, while ensuring quality care and the safety of residents.

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In other action, the oversight committee also:

- Approved three other requests for studies. One will provide an update on the activities and challenges facing the Idaho Commission on Pardons and Paroles; the other two deal with different aspects of the state's foster care system, including how to keep kids from entering the system in the first place and how to support them better once they age out.
- Declined a request from Rep. Priscilla Giddings, R-White Bird, to study the workings of the Idaho Professional Engineers and Land Surveyors Board.

The proposal relates to ongoing problems landowners in Idaho County and other areas have when surveyors disagree on the location of property boundaries and boundary markers.

The only way to resolve such disputes currently, Giddings said, is to go to court - a process that costs landowners thousands of dollars. She'd like to find a better path forward.

The request was co-signed by most of the lawmakers from the region, including Sens. Carl Crabtree, R-Grangeville, and Dan Foreman, R-Moscow; and Reps. Troy, Paul Shepherd, R-Riggins, and Paulette Jordan, D-Plummer.

- Declined a request from Rep. Jordan to evaluate the benefits of creating a full-time tribal liaison position within the governor's office.

Jordan said the relationship between the state and Idaho's five recognized Indian tribes has become strained of late, as indicated by some of the activities this session - such as an effort to change state statutes related to tribal video gaming machines.

"I believe a liaison to the tribes of Idaho is long overdue, given (that) many states already have an official state office relating to tribal matters," Jordan noted in her request.

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