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**Idaho State Journal**

Pocatello, Idaho

**Thursday, March 29, 2018**

**Kendra Evensen**

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## Pocatello area to get crisis center

The Pocatello area will be getting a behavioral health community crisis center in the near future, thanks to newly approved state funding and the efforts of local officials driven to find a better way to help people struggling with drug addictions, mental health issues and other crisis situations.

State Sen. Mark Nye, D-Pocatello, said the Senate and the House passed a bill providing the funding needed to start the center, and Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter signed it this week.

The crisis centers receive \$1.5 million annually for the first few years, Nye said, adding that local resources are expected to contribute a portion of the funds after that.

The Pocatello center will receive a lesser amount to begin with because it is starting midyear, but Nye said it will still receive the full amount of funding in the future.

Nye said he appreciates the nonpartisan approach that helped the bill move forward, and the efforts of local mental health organizations, hospitals, law enforcement and government officials, educational facilities and others who have been working hard to pave the way for a center here.

"I was pleased to spearhead it for our region in concert with a great team that made up the steering committee," Nye said.

Bannock County Sheriff Lorin Nielsen is excited about the center he says will be a giant leap forward when it comes to helping people in crisis.

Currently, the only place they have to take people is to hospital emergency rooms or jails, neither of which can help them address the real issues they are dealing with. There is a need for a better alternative.

Nielsen says they have seen on average one suicide attempt a day over the last few years and there have been many crisis situations involving drugs. The county was recently designated as a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area due to heroin, opioid and other drug activity occurring here.

Bannock County asked for a multimillion dollar bond last year that would have expanded the jail and created a crisis care center, but the bond failed.

The county is now working with U.S. Marshals on an agreement that could help fund a jail expansion, and the state funding will make it possible to start a crisis center in the area after all.

Local officials believe the center could give people the immediate help they need in a crisis situation and resources for further assistance in the future.

Officials with the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare agree. They say such centers help cut costs and provide a better alternative for people in crisis.

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“Since 2014, the establishment of behavioral health community crisis centers in Idaho has saved millions in emergency department and inpatient hospitalization costs, helping first responders and law enforcement by providing a place for Idahoans to go in times of emotional or psychological crisis,” according to information that the department provided to the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee in January as part of its budget recommendation. “Thousands of people in Idaho Falls, Coeur d’ Alene, Twin Falls and, most recently, Boise, have been able to avoid incarceration or inappropriate hospitalization for their behavioral health needs while working in a stable environment to develop a treatment plan, receive referrals for future assistance and learn how to avoid or manage recurring crises.”

Based on such results, the department sought funding this year for three new centers throughout the state, including one in Pocatello.

“Each community already has strong support for the effort in place, as well as planning coalitions working to lay the groundwork for the centers,” according to the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare information.

Bannock County will serve as the fiscal agent for the funds coming to the Pocatello area and will ensure the money is spent appropriately, but Commissioner Ken Bullock said the county doesn’t want to run the facility alone.

“Ultimately, we will lean heavily on those who have experience in mental health and outside contractors and vendors to help carry this out,” Bullock said.

He said they are already looking at possible locations for the center.

“Our goal, hopefully, is to have it up and running by the first of the year,” he said.

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