Keep ball rolling for children’s mental health

Last June, Gov. Butch Otter signed an agreement designed to finally put in place a set of comprehensive mental health services for the children of Idaho. The plan to create these services is known as the Children’s Mental Health Reform. As we did last year, we commend Gov. Otter for taking this visionary step. Now Idaho needs to keep the ball rolling. We call on Gov. Otter and the Legislature to fund the reform this year and put enough resources in the budget to make sure that the plan becomes a reality.

Today, Idaho ranks 42nd out of the 50 states in access to mental health services. Fully 70 percent of our children with a major depressive episode never receive a mental health visit. One of every five Idaho children has seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months. Between 2010 and 2014, 96 Idaho schoolchildren (ages 18 and younger) died by suicide, making it our state’s second leading cause of death. The children of Idaho need help.

In signing the Jeff D Settlement Agreement last summer, Gov. Otter took the first step in implementing the reform, a plan conceived under the watchful eye of the federal Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. The agreement spells out the specific steps the state must take — and the court-ordered dates by which it must take them — to start providing these mental health services. Before any of these steps can be taken, two things must happen — and they must happen soon. By Sept. 1, 2016, the governor must put forth a budget for the reform to let the state Legislature know what resources will be needed over the next several years to implement the plan. Then the state must dedicate more resources to build the program that will be critical to successful implementation in the timeline set by the court.

Children’s Mental Health Reform delivers critical mental health services where children and families need them most — in their communities. And it changes the way that we deliver mental health services to children by putting the child and family at the center of the team and wrapping services around them. These services will be delivered by mental health providers who can treat mental illness, prevent crises, support parents and keep children functioning well in their communities. By doing this, the reform will reduce costs to the state by preventing crisis hospitalizations or emergency room visits, avoiding placement in the juvenile justice system, and reducing the need for placement in residential treatment centers outside of the state.

We understand that the Legislature has many pressing matters before it this year. But we must act now if we want to ensure a bright future for our children.

We encourage Gov. Otter to keep the ball rolling that began last year when he signed what will be a historic agreement. If we take advantage of this opportunity, our growing, dynamic state can build a premier mental health care system for children that will improve our communities, prevent suicides and incarcerations, and keep Idaho families together.

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