

Idaho suffers for a warning long unheeded

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Nearly four years ago, the Idaho State Planning Council on Mental Health issued a warning:

Continue to balance the budget on the backs of Idaho's mentally ill and reap a whirlwind:

- More suicides.
- More conflicts between the mentally ill and law enforcement.
- And more work for the hospitals, including emergency rooms, as they respond to mental illness.

Its warning disregarded, the council watched as the budget-strapped Department of Health and Welfare closed some of its satellite offices in smaller communities and laid off 35 staffers, including 28 clinicians, from its Adult Mental Health Program.

Since 2008, the amount of money Idaho spends on its adult mental health program has dropped 29 percent - while caseloads have jumped by about a third.

Legislators then sliced \$35 million from the Medicaid program that serves needy adults - which triggered the loss of another \$73 million in matching federal dollars. Much of that money - meant to help people who have been disabled by persistent mental illness - has never been restored.

One reason: Lawmakers would rather continue cutting state taxes than rebuild programs.

And there are skeptics who question why Health and Welfare - perhaps answering to Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's priorities - has not strenuously advocated a restoration of these cuts.

Whatever the reason, the results are the same:

There's no psycho-social worker available when a schizophrenic forgets to take the medications that stabilize him.

Nobody's around when a bi-polar patient goes through a 48-hour sleepless cycle, triggering an episode.

And who is going to stop a person who suffers from paranoia from watching the excessively violent television programs that only aggravate his condition?

Now the council's warning is playing out. The number of people presumably taken from the jails or the emergency rooms to the psychiatric wards - courtesy of a judicial finding that they've become a danger to themselves or others - has spiked.

According to the Idaho Supreme Court, mental health commitments reached more than 4,500 last year - up 82 percent in the five years since the budget cuts took hold.

Health and Welfare quibbles with the number. It says the number of mental health "holds" - when an individual is detained and evaluated - is up 35 percent since 2009. And the number of people judges have committed to a state or private hospital after that evaluation has increased 16 percent.

In Nez Perce County, the number of commitment hearings has jumped from 55 in fiscal year 2009 to 126 in fiscal year 2013.

Either way, Idaho's mental health program is analogous to delaying cancer treatment until stage IV.

You've neglected to spend money on prevention, detection and early treatment - which is not only more effective but cheaper.

If you talk to mental health advocates, they'll tell you some forms of mental illness can be progressive. The deeper and darker the abyss, the more difficult the journey back. The longer you wait to intervene, the greater the chance that a mental illness will become a permanent disability.

A collapsing state economy drove Idaho's abandonment of the mentally ill. But the economy is recovering. The premise behind the cuts no longer exists. If Idaho continues down this path, it does so by choice, not necessity. - M.T.