

Idaho Legislature in danger of becoming Congresscritters

By Wayne Hoffman/Idaho Freedom Foundation

The Idaho Legislature is not Congress. Be thankful for that. But recent outrage over a vote months ago makes it appear some would prefer that Idaho lawmakers behave and think like their Congresscritter cousins.

In March, state lawmakers approved a bill creating behavioral health crisis centers, which supporters say will help people with mental health or drug addiction problems rather than subject them to jails and emergency rooms. The Otter administration asked for \$4.5 million to get centers started in various parts of Idaho, but the Legislature appropriated a fraction of that amount, setting up a competition for the one behavioral health center to be established between now and next summer.

The competition came down to Coeur d'Alene and Idaho Falls, with the latter community winning over the Otter administration "judges." The Coeur d'Alene Press wanted to know why its community lost to eastern Idaho, and here's what reporter Taryn Thompson discovered via the state's public records law: Coeur d'Alene actually outscored Idaho Falls for the crisis center, but since local legislators Kathy Sims, Vito Barbieri, Bob Nonini and Ron Mendive voted against establishing crisis centers, the Otter administration gave the edge—and the project—to Idaho Falls.

Ah, but fear not, Coeur d'Alene. More crisis centers are planned, and Otter press secretary Jon Hanian said the governor is watching for "local legislative champions." Of which, apparently, north Idaho doesn't have enough.

So now cue the outrage and the finger pointing, with behavioral health advocates saying Sims, Barbieri, Nonini and Mendive failed to "bring home the bacon."

First, I don't think the creation of so-called behavioral health centers was a good step for the state. The concept has the lofty goal of cutting down emergency room and jail commitments, but the idea depends largely on voluntary, short-term commitments to these centers.

Additionally, because the Legislature decided that no one can be turned away because of inability to pay, the government-funded services will invariably crowd out other, arguably better, non-governmental services for people with mental health problems and drug addictions.

Second, success depends on an ever-growing government bureaucracy. The Legislature created new behavioral health boards and government-funded crisis centers in order to deal with a problem that could well have been addressed through the empowerment of the private sector. Instead, this approach undermines the private sector, co-opts it and transfers resources away from providers who may offer more creative, less costly services to patients in need of care.

Finally, the Otter administration's thinly veiled attempt to punish north Idaho lawmakers for voting against the behavioral health crisis centers has long-term consequences. Last winter,

Idaho lawmakers voted to increase state spending by 7 percent, once you figure for all the accounting gimmicks. It's already difficult for lawmakers to curtail spending; most appropriations bills pass the Legislature with little opposition, except that of liberals who are looking for more spending, not less.

Now, even conservatives will have to think twice about opposing Big Government, for fear of what that might mean for some local project in desperate need of "local legislative champions." Can Idaho's most stalwart conservatives continue to vote against government programs? Can they withstand the weight of whatever may be our newest pork temptation, when critics can be expected to pile on whenever there is a no vote?

Idaho's Legislature is not Congress, but this type of political theater helps get us on the way there.