

Would you drive a Model-T on the freeway?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Obamacare works, especially in

Idaho. Health care reform has saved taxpayers a bundle of money and delivered better health care.

So say the people who have been trying to prop up the Gem State's antiquated system of providing health care to those unable to buy it.

"We've done what we can, changed the oil, given it a tune-up," Bonneville County Commissioner Roger Christensen told the Legislature's budget-writing committee last week. "It's still a Model-T Ford, and you probably don't want to get on the freeway in today's driving environment."

As chairman of Idaho's Catastrophic Health Care (CAT) board, it's been Christensen's job to deliver this message on a yearly basis:

- Under federal law, hospital emergency rooms must treat anyone who comes through their doors.
- What those patients can't afford, Idaho's counties are obligated to cover. Under Idaho law, counties pay the first \$11,000 of each claim, the CAT program pays the rest.
- Thanks to rising case loads and medical inflation, the hit on Idaho taxpayers continues to rise.

Until two years ago, that is.

Obamacare first allowed Idaho's counties to purchase insurance for people with pre-existing conditions. Then last year, subsidized health insurance policies purchased through

YourHealthIdaho, the state-based exchange, extended coverage to more than 70,000 Idahoans. That number has since grown to 84,000.

More people on insurance means less demand for Idaho's medically indigent program.

CAT case loads plummeted. Starting with 1,292 in 2012, case loads fell to 1,150 the next year. Then to 1,109 in 2014 and an estimate of only 1,000 for this year.

So the state's costs fell from \$38.3 million in 2012 to \$30.7 million the following year. In 2014, expenses again dropped to \$28.9 million.

It also translated into better health care. For example, when someone suffering from untreated diabetes showed up at an ER, he got stabilized - and the bill went to the counties and CAT. Then

he'd go home and the cycle would repeat itself. Under Obamacare, that same patient gets access to insulin and continuing care.

So what did Christiansen's audience do next?

Did Republican legislators say, "No. We hate Obamacare so much we'd rather spend more taxpayer dollars propping up your Model-T?"

Of course not. They looked at the falling column of numbers and commended Christensen on a job well done.

But here's the wrinkle: Christensen is running out of good news.

Medical inflation is still rising. CAT's average case cost is \$30,700, up 18 percent in two years.

Counties continue to spend more. In part, that's because of escalating mental health cases - which are borne entirely at the county level. Sifting through individual claims adds \$7.8 million in administrative and legal bills to the \$23 million spent on medical care.

And about 70,000 Idahoans will continue to turn to CAT because they earn too little to qualify for subsidized insurance under Obamacare. Meanwhile, Idaho's Republican-led Legislature can't bring itself to accept Obamacare's offer to extend Medicaid coverage to those people - even though the feds would pay 100 percent of the cost initially and never less than 90 percent thereafter.

Nothing moves them.

Not the prospect of saving the tax dollars.

Not the pleas of state Rep. John Ruche, D-Lewiston, a physician and former health insurance executive, who contends withholding Medicaid expansion will cost an estimated 450 Idahoans their lives each year.

Not the prospect of Idaho - along with Utah - being surrounded by states that have expanded Medicaid. Montana and Wyoming are moving toward joining Washington, Oregon, Nevada and 25 other states on that list.

Not even the arguments of Ohio Gov. John Kasich, who during his visit to Boise last week, reiterated his view that extending Medicaid is a moral issue: "Empathy is one of the values lost in this country."

All of which suggests that this time next year, Christensen will once again be compelled to urge lawmakers to put his organization out of business. - M.T.