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Food stamps, indigent care show Idaho still under stress

KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Poor and disabled people in Idaho are still struggling despite the state's low unemployment and improving economy, officials said Monday.

High demand remains for public assistance, with more than 332,000 people receiving some sort of federal or state aid, Department of Health and Welfare Director Richard Armstrong told state budget writers.

Meanwhile, the number of Idaho families earning a living wage has steadily dropped for the past six years. Only a third of Idaho's 1.5 million residents earn a sufficient wage to provide for a family of four, Armstrong said.

"This is a reality our programs and workers are dealing with on a daily basis," Armstrong told the Joint Appropriations Finance budget committee.

Idaho's unemployment rate is currently 4.7 percent —the lowest since the economic downturn— but reliance on food stamps remains high due to the workforce taking low-paying jobs.

Food stamps are generally thought of as a barometer on a state economy and recovery. As of 2014, more than 211,000 Idahoans received food stamps.

Adding to the struggle to help those in need is the department's 13.6 percent turnover rate. Armstrong said the agency's best employees are being lured by private-sector salaries that are nearly 40 percent higher.

He urged the committee to accept a statewide 3 percent merit-based pay increase recommended by Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter in last week's State of the State address.

To top it off, the Idaho system that provides health care to its indigent population continues to falter while trying to aid the 78,000 people who don't qualify for Medicaid in Idaho or a tax credit on the state-run health insurance marketplace.

Idaho Republican leaders have balked for years at expanding Medicaid under a provision of the Affordable Care Act but not mandatory. This year, Otter is requesting lawmakers at least hold a hearing to discuss possible expansion options.

In 2014, an Otter work group recommended expanding Medicaid to allow adults making about \$11,000 a year to qualify for Medicaid coverage. They also recommended that adults earning \$11,000 to \$16,100 be allowed to purchase private insurance on Idaho's health insurance marketplace using federal dollars.

Otter said he agreed with parts of the report but has not said if he would sign-off on legislation based exactly off the group's recommendation.

Currently, the state's indigent care system has counties pay the catastrophic medical bills of patients who can't pay their own bills in five years. The state pays anything above \$11,000.

"The current indigent program does not work," Armstrong said. "I think we can do a better job than what we have."

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