Idaho withholds help from real people with real faces

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

It's one thing to refuse to accept more than $50 million a year in tax savings Medicaid expansion would bring to Idaho.

What's taxpayers' money to Republican lawmakers who find Obamacare so politically toxic?

Walking away from a decade-long $4.8 billion expansion of Idaho's economy is no big deal. What's an economic equation compared to the real political pain that comes from implementing Obamacare?

And ignoring the idea that refusing Medicaid expansion means a premature death for an estimated 450 Idahoans every year isn't all that difficult, either. After all, it's only an extrapolation based on the number of lives saved in Massachusetts under Obamacare's progenitor, Romneycare.

But how do you look into the faces of real people and say, "No"?

Until now, the number of working poor Idahoans who make too little to qualify for subsidized health insurance under Obamacare has been an abstraction, a statistic tossed around throughout the Medicaid expansion debate.

Then last week, Idaho Health and Welfare Director Richard Armstrong sketched out a portrait.

First there was a precise number - 78,000, or nearly one of every 20 among us.

Next came a pattern. This is closer to home than you'd like to think. No part of Idaho is immune. For instance, the size of the Medicaid gap reaches a high of 7.3 percent in Canyon County and a low of 1.63 percent in Blaine County.

Then the lens zoomed in a little closer. The people working for Armstrong already know who receives food stamps and who has been screened for Medicaid eligibility. They know 68 percent of these people live in households where at least one member works full-time.

Armstrong's Health and Welfare staffers can show you that in Nez Perce County, there are 1,602 people being left behind.

That's more than the entire student body at Lewiston High School. It rivals the number of people who fill the stands for an Avista-NAIA World Series game.

In Latah County, you will find 994 people who are being told they make too little for health insurance and too much for Medicaid. Picture a population the size of Genesee or Potlatch.

There are 510 Idaho County residents who could use this help. Think every man, woman and child in Riggins.

Or Weippe, which is roughly equal to the 449 people this policy is jeopardizing in Clearwater and Lewis counties.

These are individuals who know lack of insurance risks losing everything they have.

People who live with a heightened fear of death and disability.

These are members of our community who avoid seeing a doctor until their diabetes or arthritis sends them into the emergency rooms.

These are employees who miss work because they can't get medical help when they're sick.

These are your friends, your neighbors and your family.

They have no voice in a state Capitol consumed with Obama Derangement Syndrome.

But you do.

If you speak up on their behalf now, no legislator in Boise can duck under the illusion that this is someone else's problem. - M.T.