

Medicaid expansion is exception to the rule

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Contrary to what you may have heard - or even read on this page - the GOP-led Idaho Legislature is not totally enslaved to rigid ideology.

In fact, when lives are at stake, lawmakers show a remarkable ability to make rational, humane choices.

Take immunizations, for instance. About 70.2 percent of kids ages 19 months to 35 months have been vaccinated, a sliver behind the national average of 70.4 percent and the 25th best rate among the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Not bad, but certainly this is no time to back away from the public health commitment - especially with reports of measles outbreaks.

So lawmakers had no problem extending for another two years a program that spends federal dollars to provide vaccinations to children without health insurance. The same bill continues the practice of allowing the health care community to purchase vaccines in bulk to help keep prices in check.

At the same time, lawmakers set aside their traditional distrust of government intrusion into personal privacy by allowing health care providers to access a registry of vaccination records.

All in the name of saving lives.

How about the war on drugs?

After Washington and Colorado voters legalized recreational marijuana use, Idaho lawmakers passed a measure promising they would never ever under any circumstances follow suit.

Then they confronted the plight of children suffering from Dravet Syndrome, an ailment that causes severe, debilitating seizures. Pleas from anguished parents looking for any hope led House and Senate members to dangle their collective toes in the waters of medicinal marijuana.

A majority in each chamber approved the use of oil extracted from hemp which was high in cannabidiol, which alleviates seizures, but low in THC, which gets people high. They did so over the objections of police, prosecutors and Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's drug office. Otter ultimately vetoed the bill.

Again, lawmakers acted to end human suffering.

Then came the sharpest diversion from conservative orthodoxy when Republicans pushed through more than \$95 million in gas tax and vehicle registration fees to begin fixing Idaho's crumbling highway and bridge network.

Public safety helped motivate at least some of them to pass the bill.

In 2013, 213 Idahoans were killed in traffic fatalities. It translates into an estimated economic loss of \$1.36 billion.

Assume for the sake of argument those highway improvements lower fatalities by 10 percent. You'd save 22 lives and about \$136 million.

For most lawmakers, raising taxes to save lives was an easy choice to make.

Yet lawmakers went home forfeiting a chance not only to save more lives but also to lower - not increase - taxes while the giving the state economy a real shot in the arm.

Under Obamacare, 78,000 working Idaho adults who make too little to qualify for subsidized health insurance would get Medicaid as long as the state agrees.

Initially, the feds would cover 100 percent of the cost but never less than 90 percent.

Whatever the state's share comes to, it's far less than covering the entire cost of county and state programs that pay the medical bills of those deemed medically indigent.

Last year, those bills totalled \$52 million.

On top of that, Medicaid expansion would inject \$653 million into Idaho's economy during the next decade.

Most importantly, it would provide people suffering from chronic illnesses with ongoing, preventive care. Based on the experience of Romneycare in Massachusetts, it would lower Idaho's death rate by about 3 percent - or save 450 lives a year.

Last year, Otter's Medicaid task force twisted itself into a pretzel coming up with a hybrid program Idaho Republicans could live with.

Said Idaho GOP lawmakers:

No to Obamacare.

No to helping taxpayers.

No to taking federal money.

No to saving lives.

When you're in the throes of Obama Derangement Syndrome, who cares about being consistent?
- M.T.