

Idaho lawmakers not rushing to preserve these lives

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

While the Idaho Legislature dances around the question, more children have fallen victim to faith healing.

In other words, their parents declined to obtain the basic medical care that would spare their lives.

And Idaho won't remove a loophole in the law that lets those parents off the hook because they claim a religious-based aversion to modern medicine. On the books since the 1970s, Idaho law says any "parent or guardian who chooses for his child treatment by prayer or spiritual means alone shall not for that reason alone be construed to have violated the duty of care to such child."

In its third annual report, the Idaho Child Fatality Review Team found that in 2013 - the last year for which information is available - five newborns died for lack of medical care. Their ailments included meconium aspiration, intestinal blockages and sepsis.

That's compared to two Idaho children who died from faith healing in 2012 and three deaths in 2011.

And there's a graveyard in Canyon County filled with the children of the Followers of Christ. Of the 130 people buried at the Peaceful Valley Cemetery, 40 are children - or 10 times the number you'd expect.

The picture may be incomplete. Although the review team relied on death certificates and coroner reports, it added: "Since Idaho Vital Statistics does not compile the number of deaths to children who are not treated medically on the basis of religious beliefs, it is difficult to estimate the actual number of preventable deaths to religious objectors."

This comes about three months after lawmakers once again left Idaho among six states that would prefer to sacrifice young lives rather than stand up to their parents.

Earlier this year, state Rep. John Gannon, D-Boise, thought Senate Health and Welfare Committee Chairman Lee Heider, R-Twin Falls, would give his reform bill a hearing. But Heider went back on his word, saying, among other things, "I don't think that states have a right to interfere with religion."

At least legislative leaders - following up on Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's request - formed a "working group" to look into the matter. Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston, and Rep. Joe Palmer, R-Meridian, are the co-chairmen.

But, as the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell noted this week, it has yet to schedule a meeting.

Now's the time, if ever. Convene in the Capitol's main auditorium and give Idahoans at least an opportunity to shine a badly needed spotlight on this tragedy.

Bring members of the Child Fatality Review Team to the table. Ask them:

- Why are there more children dying from faith healing? Is Idaho's loophole attracting practitioners from states that have reformed their laws?
- What kinds of cases, if any, are eluding detection?
- Where did these children die? Is there a pattern or a cluster?
- What kind of medical care was withheld? Was it something as basic as an office visit and prescribed medication or was hospitalization required?
- Assuming the trends documented in 2011-13 hold, how many more Idaho children will die because their parents chose faith over medical care during 2014-16 - in other words, before the Legislature gets its next opportunity to act?

But don't stop there.

Have the legislative panel consult with law enforcement, prosecutors, coroners and child protection workers. Let's find out: Is there a pattern of child abuse and neglect that Idaho's religious exemption tolerates?

Finally, bring in representatives of Idaho's faith-based community. Let them ponder this question: Where does a parent's religious freedom end - and their child's right to life begin? - M.T.