

Proposed Maniacs plate prompts protest

Mental health advocates want to stop plan for specialty licenses featuring Orofino High mascot



Tribune/Steve Hanks

Mental health advocates across the state are planning to protest a bill that would put the Orofino Maniac mascot, shown above, on a specialty state license plate. Opponents say the mascot stigmatizes people with mental illness.

Kathy Hedberg/Lewiston Tribune

Mental health advocates across the state are planning to protest a proposal to feature the Orofino High School Maniacs on Idaho state license plates.

A hearing will be held at 1:30 p.m. Mountain Time today in the Idaho House Transportation Committee room to review a bill proposed last week by Rep. Paul Shepherd, R-Riggins.

Shepherd did not return a request for comment on the issue.

Stephen Graci, executive director of the Idaho Federation of Families, said Wednesday that the Maniacs mascot stigmatizes people with mental illnesses or disabilities and their families.

"We just think it's kind of a ridiculous way to put those kinds of stigmatizing ideas onto a license plate where you would hope that there are alternative methods to raising funds for a group," Graci said.

Shepherd sponsored a similar bill last year but it died without a hearing. He has said money from the Maniacs plate would go to the Clearwater Community Foundation to pay for various youth programs.

Maria Ward, head of the Orofino-based foundation and pastor of the Covenant House Christian Center, also did not return phone messages seeking comment.

Orofino is the home of State Hospital North, one of the state's two mental health hospitals. Some people in the community have argued that the Maniac mascot was adopted by the high school long before the state hospital was founded there, but the issue remains controversial.

Graci said he can't second-guess people who say the mascot has nothing to do with the state hospital, and he does not know the history of it.

"But that is really not relevant," he said. "What's relevant to me is now and the words that we use. And to have that kind of wording in statute in a bill and creating license plates, it just seems to me is over the top."

Kathie Garrett, a former Republican state senator from Meridian, now represents the Idaho chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

She said the stigma "is one of the worst barriers for people when they have a mental illness. They try to hide it because they would rather admit to any other thing than to have a mental illness. It's truly a devastating illness."

She noted that about 25 percent of people who have mental illnesses have their first symptoms before age 14. About 75 percent have their first symptoms before age 24. There are about 18,000 children in Idaho and about 50,000 adults who have been diagnosed with mental illness or disabilities, she said.

"So we're looking at a school mascot of people in that age range. So it affects a lot of our population and some of the most vulnerable people that we have," Garrett said.

"We can't address the issue with Orofino and their mascot. That's a decision for their community," Garrett said. "But what we don't want to see happen, we don't want to see the Legislature sanction and put into Idaho Code the word 'maniac' and to sanction license plates with that symbol on it."

State Hospital North operates on about a \$9 million budget and employs about 95 people. She said there is a request in the Legislature this year to add five more positions at the hospital.

"I told Rep. Shepherd last year when he tried to bring this forward, the best thing he could do for his community is to support that hospital because that's a lot of money in that community and a lot of jobs in that community," Garrett said. "I don't think we need to support their school by making a statewide license plate."

Garrett said other lawmakers have mentioned that the state cannot have license plates for every high school in the state, "So why start with this one and deny somebody else's request to have their mascot on the license plate?"

Jim Rehder, chairman of the Region 2 Behavioral Health Board, said he could not offer an opinion about Shepherd's proposal. The issue has been put on the board's next meeting agenda, set for 1:30 p.m. next Thursday on the third floor of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare building in Lewiston.

"I have concerns about stigma and that's something that the (board) works to correct," Rehder said. "So anything like that that's sensitive and has potential for perpetuating the stigma, we would be looking at it and making an appropriate recommendation."

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