

Legislative limelights...

DHW is now political target at Legislature

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Whenever financing becomes tight, there's a penchant among the legislators at the Statehouse to turn to the Department of Health and Welfare for cuts.

That's because DHW represents the largest appropriations in the state governmental budget — about 15 percent — second to education with 70 percent. This leaves only about 15 percent for the remainders of the state agencies.

Education, particularly public education, is close to home and the lawmakers get considerable flak from the people back home when they talk of trying to slash those programs, such as is seen in the present moves to abolish kindergartens.

There isn't much to pick in the 20 other departments, which slice the remainder of the 15 percent pie so DHW becomes the bird for plucking.

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The ones who suffer the most in the DHW when there are reductions, are the disabled, sick and elderly. They don't have much political clout and thus are prime targets among many of the legislators.

The legislator who has taken a leading part in seeking cuts is Sen. Dean Van Engelen, R-Burley, who is known among his fellow lawmakers as the prime enemy of DHW. He had already drafted bills or they are in the process of being constituted that would leave many of the DHW programs in shambles.

One bill would discontinue funding for mental health as of July 1, totally abolishing all mental health services, including court emergency and commitments, shelter homes and outpatient services.

Another would underfund mental health by more than \$400,000 statewide and disband the services a year hence.

Even more startling is another measure that would slash some 80 positions or more to abolish all regional administration, such as the regional directors and the managers. Van Engelen said this would save \$1.2 million.

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DHW is the largest of the 21 departments in the state with about 2,500 employees, but this is a cut-back from the peak of 2,941 in 1977. This shows

DHW has significantly trimmed personnel in recent years. Van Engelen's proposals would, in effect, not only cut social human services, but also shift control back to the central office at Boise, hardly in keeping with the tenet of more, not less, local control.

Already DHW has been battered so that it is forced to reduce its funding to the Aid to Dependent Children programs. The Joint Finance Appropriation Committee only a couple weeks ago refused supplemental funding. As a result, a family with a mother and two children gets the monthly stipend cut from \$322 to \$286 beginning in March.

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Van Engelen said his measures will come under consideration in the powerful JFAC this week. He appears to have an unusual influential voice with the more conservative members of his committee. These include those from East Idaho, Sens. Mark Ricks of Rexburg; Vearl Crystal of Rigby and Dane Watkins of Idaho Falls; and Rep. Ray E. Infanger of Salmon, all Republicans. Some of these may balk at such extensive cuts. Only Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, has shown by his votes his warm support for human services programs.

House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, who hopes to become governor, appointed a so-called Citizens Advisory Voluntary Effort Committee, or CAVE, to look into DHW operations and come up with the recommendations for regional management cuts. It is significant that all members of this committee are from Boise, headed by Rep. Jack Kennevick, R-Boise, and consisting largely of Boise business executives.

There's also another bill tossed in the House hopper to eliminate the Public Health District on the local level for a year. Yet, ironically, there is talk to transfer local DHW administration to public health districts, although the proposal is not taken seriously.

In the Public Health Districts, Home Health Agency is self-supporting in giving aid to the elderly in their homes, while the public health nurses offer wide community health services.

DHW, for the most part, has been cut to the bone in recent years. These further slices now appear to be aimed at the heart and death.