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The 1982 Idaho Legislature

Indigent care offers worry to legislators

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the sixth in a series of 16 articles giving the views of east Idaho legislators and the leadership on the salient issues shaping up for the coming session. This one deals on indigent medical care.)

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Although most east Idaho legislators favor more stringent eligibility rules for indigent care, they are aware that most lawmakers in other sections of the state are not that enthusiastic and such proposals face an uncertain fate.

Rep. Elaine Kearnes, R-Idaho Falls, chairman of the House Health and Welfare Committee, said she favors some kind of a catastrophic fund, one which could be financed from the general fund and would be available to those counties which have extremely high indigent bills, such as those in east Idaho for migrants, many of them illegal Mexican aliens.

Sen. Mark G. Ricks, R-Rexburg, a member of the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee, likely spelled out the general view by saying "the program needs the attention of the Legislature—change in law or something. It appears that under present law, almost everyone can qualify as being indigent if their circumstances should be such. The catasrophic plan has both pluses and minuses."

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Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho, does propose a solution, suggesting legislation which would require that hospitals make a greater effort to collect bills and less convenient for them to collect unpaid bills from the counties. He declared it has been determined that many persons declared indigent would pay their hospital bills if given more time.

Legislator after legislator agreed something should be done, most of them favoring a catastrophic funds.

Among those in this category are Sens. William L. Floyd, R-Idaho Falls, and J. Marsden Williams, R-Idaho Falls; and Reps. Wayne E. Tibbitts, R-Lorenzo; Kurt L. Johnson, R-Idaho Falls; Ray E. Infanger, R-Salmon; Melvin L. Hammond, D-Rexburg; Martin Trillhaase, R-Idaho Falls, and Gary L. Paxman, R-Idaho Falls.

Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, also a JFAC member, observed the problem has been before the Legislature most recent session. He expressed hope the interim committee will have specific recommendations.

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Rep. John O.Sessions, R-Driggs, said "under existing laws, Idaho counties could become bankrupt by so-called 'indigent care' claims. The laws should be changed to more clearly define indigent, regular and normal fees, and to provide some type of limitations on indigent claims."

Assistant House Majority Leadern Darwin Young, R-Blackfoot, noted he sponsored a catastrophic fund bill the last session which failed to win approval. He suggests legislation could be introduced that would change the wording in such a law from "regular hospital care" to "reasonable hospital care."

Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, asserted this is a problem that counties must resolve among themselves, either by region or statewide.

"We (state) cannot afford a third social program like Medicaid and Mediicare. This responsibility must remain on the county level."

The legislators who has an influential voice comes up with his own idea. House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, endorses legislation for insurance programs for the catastrophic fund in each of the 44 counties. He adds that "indigent care is in good hands," meaning the counties.