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The political pulse

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The 1983 Idaho Legislature

Most back medical indigent law changes

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fifth in a series of 14 articles giving the views of east Idaho legislators on issues shaping up for the coming session. This one is on indigent medical care)

BY BEN J. PLASTINO

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Legislators of east Idaho all agree there has to be some changes in indigent medical care funding or else counties will go broke.

However, they are perplexed exactly on what to do.

Most said a stricter law is needed to reduce the eligibility for indigent medical care.

The Legislature passed a medical catastrophic fund measure last session which provides for counties to set up such a system but counties have found the insurance cost too prohibitive and as a result it had not functioned.

Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, commented on this very problem, saying the catastrophic insurance fund available for counties passed in the last session "has not gotten off the ground."

"There are some federal dollars I available under the Federal Medical Need Program which should be explored," he said.

Senate Majority Leader Mark G. Ricks, R-Rexburg, said he would like to see the statute changed from "shall" to "may" and from "full" to "reasonable" medical costs.

Bulk of the lawmakers echoed approval for such alterations.

"Under the present system, the counties seemingly have no recourse but to pay the full hospital costs," said Ricks. "They negotiate with collection agencies but not counties."

State Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, said in view of the fact the group insurance plan did not work out "some type of an authority for

review and approval of claims or a limitation of amounts is needed."

"For some counties this is the most critical problem," commented Rep. Kurt L. Johnson, R-Idaho Falls. "Finding the funds for providing indigent and catastrophic cases relief will absolutely have to be counter balanced with resistance to cost."

House Minority Leader Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, suggested self insurance.

Rep. Rich Orme, R-St. Anthony, proposed a law that will give counties bargaining power.

Sen. J. Marsden Williams, R-Idaho Falls, suggested workers or their employees carry medical care insurance.

Rep. Ray E. Infanger, R-Salmon, said a law change would be preferable to a catastrophic fund, adding the present law in practice lets too many be termed "medically indigent."

Counties should be required to provide only the "real and actual costs of indigent health care," said Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls. "Greater accountability should be required from hospitals on questions of cost. The state should not assume total responsibility in providing indigent health care and it would cost more in the long run."

State Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, said he favored a stricter law of accountability for insurance on employees so that less people are indigent. He opposes a catastrophic health care fund, saying "we have Medicare and Medicaid, both multi-million dollars boondoggles. We don't need another."

Sen. Vearl C. Crystal, R-Rigby, said he favored a stricter law and also possible state assistance.

Rep. Martin Trillhaase, R-Idaho Falls, said "I favor repeal of the law forcing counties to accept this burden."