

The Post-Register

The political pulse

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Legislative limelights . . .

DHW director runs smooth operations

BY BEN J. PLASTINO

Post-Register political editor

When Gov. John V. Evans picked Les Purce to become his Idaho Department of Health and Welfare director last summer, he likely quelled what could have been a nasty political brushfire for the 1982 elections.

The governor plucked Purce, 35, from his position as director of the Department of Administration to head the state's largest department which in recent years has become a political football with the more partisan Republicans of the Idaho Legislature.

The Republicans headed by Sen. Dean Van Engelen, the abrasive legislator from Burley who took the lead in the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee in slashing state appropriation, finally achieved their aim in drastically dismantling the department by deeply slashing their funds, virtually forcing the former director, Milton Klein, to resign, and wrecking the regional management system.

Purce is something of a marvel in Idaho political history. He is the only black member of Evans' cabinet and perhaps the only black who has won such distinction in this state's political circles. He is a former Idaho State University faculty staff psychology instructor and holds a doctor's degree in education and counseling from ISU, Pocatello mayor and Idaho Democratic Party chairman.

The soft speaking Purce has gone about restructuring and revitalizing the DHW quietly but effectively. He went out of his way to seek support from many of those legislators who took a lead in waging warfare against DHW. This included most of the Legislature leadership and key members of the JFAC, even getting Van Engelen's approval.

Many DHW personnel, some of them of top quality, left state employment to seek the more lucrative private sector. Thus, Purce devoted himself to picking up the pieces and fashioning his regional management system and programs with the people he had left and the money that was available.

Morale has been lower than a grasshopper's knee at DHW but under Purce's leadership it appears to have made some comebacks in recent weeks.

Purce picked an excellent administrator, Miles Green, formerly of Pocatello and associated with the State Hospital South at Blackfoot, to head DHW Region VII in Idaho Falls. He replaced Dr. David Groberg, who resigned in disgust to enter private psychiatric consulting practice in Idaho Falls. In all, Purce replaced all but two of the regional heads because most went to greener pastures. It is noticeable he replaced the regional managers who most angered the legislators.

Purce, contending some regional management is needed, concocted one that consists of a regional supervisor, and manager for each of the four main programs of mental health, eligibility (welfare), social services for children and adults, and the child development center in each of the seven regions. He had lost some 70 regional managers or supervisors but cut the regional management from some 80 to 35. Most of this regional authority was shifted back to the central office at Boise.

Purce has downplayed controversies with the legislators, seeking instead quietly their acceptance in the way he has strived to comply with legislative intent. He has sought and won a free hand from the governor in this regards.

In his quarterly visit this week in Idaho Falls to discuss staff problems and programs as has been his policies, he divulged he has requested a 14 percent hike, or from \$64 million in state funds the current state fiscal year to \$73 million for next year.

He said he is anticipating getting federal funds on about the same basis as this year but hastened to add there could be cutbacks. A 25 percent federal grant reduction has been frequently mentioned.

It's recalled before Purce became director of the Department of Administration, it was frequently involved in political bickering. After he took charge these subsided.

It appears he can do a yeoman job in the DHW with its 2,500 staff members, the largest of the 20 state agencies. This is a more than 500 decline from five years ago, and some 350 lopped off this past year. He has rolled with the punches but faces a critical uphill battle to deliver anything resembling the necessary health and welfare services. But legislators can applaud his extraordinary effort.



Les Purce