

Director: One in Five Idahoans Receive Welfare Benefits

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BOISE • One in five Idahoans receive welfare benefits, almost double the level 10 years ago.

“Enrollment is going down, but not at the rate we would like,” said Dick Armstrong, director of the state’s Department of Health and Welfare, to the Legislature’s budget writers.

Armstrong shared these numbers, and his proposed fiscal year 2015 budget, with the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee on Monday.

Nearly 321,700 Idahoans are enrolled in the state’s food stamp, cash assistance, child care or Medicaid program, he said. The level has dropped by slightly less than 10 percent since January 2012.

Idahoans are going back to work since the nation’s economic downturn rippled across the state, Armstrong said, but they are working at low-income jobs. Low-paying jobs, such as those in the service industry, have replaced the high-paying jobs, primarily in manufacturing or production, that were lost in the Great Recession.

Without receiving a “living wage,” Idahoans still rely on public assistance to help pay for food medical care.

“We have become a low-income state,” Armstrong said.

A single parent with two children would need \$22.25 an hour, or \$46,272 a year, to make ends meet in Idaho, he said. Idaho’s median wage, however, is \$11.15 an hour or \$23,200 annually. The national median is \$14.20 an hour or \$29,538 annually.

Despite the increase in public assistance recipients, Armstrong said, Idaho is not becoming a “welfare state.” The state has some of the most stringent requirements in the nation.

A report from the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank based in Washington, D.C., said Idaho has the lowest welfare benefits in the U.S. The state also has the highest percentage of adults receiving benefits in work programs, Cato found.

“No one can live as a welfare king or queen in Idaho,” Armstrong said.

Armstrong is requesting a 1.6 percent budget increase for fiscal 2015, with the biggest increase to add 2.5 percent to his department’s general fund. He also requests money to start three behavioral health crisis centers. Those would not only bolster mental health care, now scanty in Idaho, but also would alleviate the burden on law enforcement and jails, where offending mental patients now are housed, as well as hospitals, to which these offenders also are shunted often.

The crisis center funding was also in Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter’s budget proposal.

Other department priorities include creating a pilot child welfare program to reduce foster care placements and continue working to transform the state’s health-care system.

Budget writers will spend the rest of the week listening to presentations on Health and Welfare’s programs and divisions. The committee will begin finalizing the state budget later in the session.

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