

Idaho Statesman

The Legislature should get to work for all Idahoans

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I agree with Sen. Brent Hill (Sept. 9 Guest Opinion) that family is an important foundation for building community values. But I don't understand what programs or state policies he thinks we have put in place here in Idaho that may be fostering dependence on government handouts. Please tell me what they are, and I can support taking a hard look.

In fact, the Cato Institute reviewed all states' support programs and found Idaho's the most meager. The Institute thought Idaho was doing everything right, since if you got the most benefits you could from our welfare programs, you'd be getting the equivalent of \$5.36/hour. Their thinking was that these slim benefits should drive the slothful and lazy to go out and get to work. I don't understand our current predicament, since if we are doing such a good job with public policy here in this state we still have the highest rate of minimum wage earners. You'd think our tough love would have boot-strapped everybody to prosperity.

But Sen. Hill is right about family being important. I appreciate that some folks are working hard; making minimum wage, doing their best for their kids, but still cannot afford health insurance, or even day care. We have studied these 70,000 gap folks; 60% of whom would be eligible for expanded coverage and are already working the equivalent of full time. Would enrolling them in a health insurance program foster laziness and dependence on the government? If the moral hazard of being enrolled in a health insurance benefit is so strong, maybe we need to look at the benefit package for us legislators.

Instead, we legislators continue to pay for catastrophic health care costs with money that could be funding schools or even pre-K programs. Idahoans have demonstrated they want health insurance through enrollment in Your Health Idaho. But we in the Legislature have avoided the full investment in our state's health out of fear of the discussion; shame on us.

Family is important; so is personal responsibility. As a family doc I have found over and over that those who take responsibility for their actions are the healthiest. When I see folks in the ER, I consider the costs and do my best to make the patient aware of their choices. But that is on the personal level. There is room for Idaho public policy, not just the family, to foster responsible citizens. Insurance benefit packages should give a nudge toward responsible choices; we can craft this if we have the courage to consider the issue. So I thank the pro tem for bringing up the issue of government dependence and responsible behavior. Let's have this discussion about how to make our citizens healthier and keep them responsible. I believe it would be responsible for the Idaho Legislature to have this discussion. It would be healthy; let's do the work.