Idaho exceeds national average for growth in disability payments

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As record numbers of Americans have joined the ranks of the countries disabled rolls, growth in Idaho's federal disability payments has exploded at a pace unmatched even by the national average.

According to Social Security Administration (SSA) records, the number of Idahoans on disability payments grew by 66 percent between 2003 and 2012. In that same span, the national rate grew by just slightly more than 50 percent.

In 2003, the SSA recorded 25,517 Idahoans on disability payments. That number jumped to 42,382 last year. Nationally, the SSA paid out benefits to 5.87 million Americans in 2003 and 8.82 million in 2012.

Across the country, numbers continue to climb. According to federal records, more than 10.9 million Americans received disability payments last month.

To meet eligibility requirements and receive cash, applicants must prove they have a physical or mental impairment that prevents them from keeping a job. The ailment must be terminal or expected to last longer than a year.

The average recipient takes in just under $1,000 each month.

If disability recipients comprised their own state, that group would be the 12th-largest in the union. The imaginary state would trail Michigan and North Carolina in population, but beat out New Jersey, Virginia and Washington state.

Disability payments ring up a high toll for taxpayers. In 2012, the SSA doled out more than $137 billion to beneficiaries. The Cato Institute projects the feds will pay out $144 billion in benefits this year, a number that has effectively doubled since the turn of the century.

So, why are program costs exploding? Myriad reasons, experts say.

Some suggest that the slumping economy—down since the start of the 2007 recession—should shoulder much of the blame. Others finger the Baby Boomers as the cause as they age and experience more health problems.

Certain parties lay blame at the federal government's feet, which critics say has loosened qualification criteria, thereby allowing more people onto the program.

Whatever the cause, the reality is that more and more Americans are dependent on the government for subsistence.

Rep. Steven Thayn, R-Emmett, counts himself among those worried about the ballooning of the program's ranks.

"The approach we're taking is problematic," he told IdahoReporter.com. "We're only redistributing wealth, not helping people help themselves."

Thayn, a former teacher and farmer, said he believes governments should expend time and resources helping beneficiaries find ways to become productive members of society, thereby creating opportunities for those receiving payments to raise their own standard of living.

That, he said, is an admirable goal for government. "The highest form of charity is to help someone take care of themselves," he said.

Other critics have sounded the alarm over the disability payments for other reasons.

The Cato Institute's Tad DeHaven said in a report released just last month that the disability program, originally created as a temporary safety net for workers, has become nothing more than a "general welfare program."

DeHaven said that without a reform effort or cash infusion, the disability trust fund will run out of cash in 2016. That scenario would trigger an automatic 20 percent benefit cut for program recipients.

The Cato analyst warns against tax hikes that would harm the economy and delay much-needed program restructuring.

"In sum, SSDI (Social Security disability insurance) is a classic example of a well-intentioned effort to provide modest support to truly needy people that has exploded into a massive entitlement that is driving up the federal deficit," DeHaven concluded. "Federal policymakers should pursue major cost-cutting reforms to SSDI, but they should also begin considering ways of moving the provision of long-term disability coverage to the private sector."

Reform or moving the program to the private sector might cut down on waste and abuse for taxpayers. This week, the Government Accountability Office released a report detailing more than $1.3 billion in improper payments to 36,000 program recipients between December 2010 and January.