

# THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

## Idaho welfare rates remain low despite enrollment spike

[Betsy Z. Russell](#)

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BOISE – Idaho is no welfare state, legislators were assured Monday, even though 20 percent of the population now receives some form of government assistance.

Idaho's benefits remain paltry compared to most states, and even after big jumps in the state's food stamp rolls through the recession, Idaho's food stamp rate remains below the national average.

"No one can live as a welfare king or queen in Idaho," state Health and Welfare Director Dick Armstrong told legislative budget writers on Monday, as they opened a week of hearings on health and human services budgets in the state.

The Cato Institute published a report in August comparing state welfare programs by calculating the dollar value of benefits; Idaho's ranked last, with its benefits calculated to be worth the equivalent of working for \$5.36 per hour. Mississippi ranked next-to-last. The highest state was Hawaii, at \$29.13 an hour; Massachusetts was second at \$24.30. Washington was 16th at \$13.87.

Idaho had the highest rate of adults on assistance participating in work programs, at 88 percent. "Other states should learn from Idaho," the libertarian institute's report author, Michael Tanner, wrote.

Idaho has seen big increases in the past decade in some of its public assistance programs. For example, only 4.6 percent of Idahoans received food stamps in 2001; in 2013, it was 14.2 percent. But that's still below the national average of just less than 15 percent.

Idaho's Medicaid enrollment has jumped from 10.3 percent of its population in 2001 to 15.5 percent in 2013. But the last national comparison by the Kaiser Family Foundation, reflecting July 1, 2010, figures, showed Idaho was tied with Wyoming for 9th-lowest in Medicaid participation. Washington matched the national average at 20 percent.

And as far as cash assistance, Idaho's welfare program is among the stingiest in the nation. According to the U.S. Administration for Children and Families and the U.S. Census Bureau, as of June 2013, less than a tenth of 1 percent of Idaho's population was receiving benefits. The national average was 1.2 percent; Washington was at 1.5 percent.

"This measure, along with the low amount of benefits available, shows very plainly that Idaho is not a welfare state," Armstrong told lawmakers.

Armstrong said Idaho Department of Labor figures show that the problem is that the state lost large numbers of high-paying jobs during the recession, and the jobs it's since gained back are mostly lower-paying, service-sector jobs. The result: People are working again, but not making as much as before, and still qualifying for aid like food stamps to make ends meet.

As long as wages remain low, Armstrong said, "We are going to see high utilization of public assistance programs. Our public assistance programs are not to blame for the increased use. They are about as lean as we can make them. And our citizens are not to blame," as they're working; Idaho has the nation's highest rate of people working more than one job. The answer, Armstrong said, is better work opportunities. "When we get to that, the high utilization of public assistance will take care of itself."