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Mental health coalition faces uphill funding battle

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Legislators asked to fund improvements in treatments

By [Dan Boyd](#) - Journal Writer

BOISE - Members of a trail-blazing new coalition say mental health issues in Idaho are finally being brought to the forefront after years of lingering in the shadows.

"We know this is not just a correctional issue, it's a community issue," said Tom Beauclair, director of the Idaho Department of Corrections.

By bringing such issues into the light, the recently assembled, 67-member Idaho Mental Health Coalition hopes to change what most experts regard as an abysmal system for treating the mentally ill in Idaho.

But, as a group of about 30 legislators saw in Boise on Friday, there's a lot of work to be done.

"We have a mental health care infrastructure that's really deficient," said Rep. John Rusche of Lewiston during a luncheon at the Joe R. Williams Federal Building. "But I'm really pleased to see an attempt to tie what we do have together so we have less seepage between the cracks."

The "seepage" Rusche referred to includes some staggering statistics.

According to the Department of Corrections, 26 percent of the inmates in Idaho's prisons have a mental illness as do 44 percent of juvenile offenders.

Prisons in Idaho currently treat those with mental illness more than mental health hospitals do to the tune of about \$1.3 million per year.

"We re-invent the wheel every time someone walks in the door," explained Amy Parra, mental health coordinator for the Department of Corrections.

The new coalition, which first met in September, is trying to add some cohesion to an unorganized system in which many of those who suffer from mental illness aren't diagnosed until after they commit a crime.

Coalition members said if prisons, law enforcement, hospitals and other entities enhance their communication and help educate the public, a change for the better will likely be on the way.

To achieve that, they also hope the Legislature will allocate funds to accelerate the process.

Starting Monday, officials from the Department of Health and Welfare will appear before the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee to state their case.

While financial resources are tight, many legislators say it's about time mental health issues are examined.

"Unless we get on the front end ... I don't think we're ever going to get on top of this," said Rusche, who worked for 15 years in pediatrics and another 10 years in the insurance business.

Sen. Bert Marley of McCammon agrees.

He said he'd like to see more community based mental health and substance abuse programs to help many people before they end up in prison.

An estimated 5,000 (or slightly more than 5 percent) Idaho adults have serious mental illnesses and, on Friday, legislators seemed to be able to personally relate to the issue.

Rep. Janet Miller of Boise said her cousin suffers from bipolar disorder and odds are she wasn't the only one on Friday with a family connection.

Only three days after a Moreland man who suffered from mental illness allegedly killed his wife and two children before turning his gun on himself, there was, at the least, dialogue.

"It's a wonderful first step," Rusche said.

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