

## **Woodward: Medicaid helps more Idahoans than you think**

**Countless Idaho families, including Tim's, have members who must cope with disabilities.**

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You might think that Idaho's Medicaid cuts will only apply to "other people."

People you don't know and never will. Certainly not you, your friends or anyone in your family.

Wrong. Those people are in families from Bear Lake to Bonners Ferry. Countless Idahoans are all too familiar with the reasons that force people to rely on Medicaid.

My family, for example. For us, the reason is mental illness. I've never written about it before because I didn't want to embarrass any family members. But I checked with them and they're OK with it. And if ever the subject was timely, it's now.

The first, as far as we know, was my mother. When she was in her 70s, her behavior went from eccentric to alarming.

She was sure people were stealing from her. She was distant with one of our daughters and fawned over the other, who called one night to say her grandmother had taken her on a plane ride. They were in a strange airport and didn't know what to do. The airport was in San Francisco.

When my father got so sick he almost died, her response was to tell him she couldn't stand being around sick people. It was her mental illness talking, but he took it to heart. She may or may not have suggested that he move out — we were never sure about that — but either way, he did. They stayed married, but he spent the rest of his life living alone in an apartment.

Deeply religious, she became convinced that a monk had fallen in love with her and they were going to be married. A woman who had always cared about appearances, she caused a minor sensation one night by building a shrine in her front yard. One of her neighbors called me at 3

a.m. to report that his once proper neighbor, wearing only her nightgown, was sitting in a lawn chair surrounded by candles and crucifixes.

Carrying your mother kicking and screaming to a mental hospital isn't something you can feel good about, but it was necessary. She got the help she needed and was more or less stable for the rest of her life.

The next family member was our son. It took a succession of doctors and most of his childhood to get a final diagnosis: a form of schizophrenia. His intelligence was above average, but his illness interfered with his thought processes. He'd stay up all night doing homework most kids finished by bedtime. No one tried harder, or struggled against greater odds.

People with mental illnesses pay a heavy price emotionally. He was 16 when he threatened to kill himself with a butcher knife. The officers who responded were cool-headed enough to talk him into dropping it, but the situation could have escalated to the point they felt their only option was to use force. Our son could easily have died that day.

Today, he's doing much better. He's a talented artist, a hard worker, a good person. He has a job and lives independently. You won't find a steadier, more responsible person. Medicaid helped make that possible. It covers counseling and medications he could never afford on his own.

The family illness, meanwhile, is now in its third generation. Our 11-year-old grandson recently was diagnosed with a form of autism. He's getting the help he needs from Medicaid, too.

In one case, Medicaid has meant the difference between normalcy and something else, possibly between life and death. In the other, it means a shot at a relatively normal life.

Without Medicaid, who knows? I try not to think about that because the possibilities are too terrible.

People with developmental disabilities, a mental health care professional told me, "need all the help they can get to stay balanced

and out of hospitals. Medicine and a few hours' therapy a month are a good deal compared to hospitals that costs thousands a day."

Thousands saved, incidentally, in taxes.

Help from programs like Medicaid are what an enlightened society does for those who weren't born as lucky as the rest of us. It doesn't just apply to "other people." It helps us all.

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