

Chairman Martin, members of the Health & Welfare committee:

My name is Mary Ann Reuter, director of the Idaho Rural Health Association, comprised of rural healthcare providers and facilities - professionals, students and educators. Our nearly 200 members support Senate Bill 1204.

Medicaid Expansion gives our state the chance to improve the lives of RURAL Idahoans, many of whom are working or unable to work. In Idaho and across the country, health disparities hit rural communities hard, where residents often live sicker and die sooner than their urban neighbors.

Unnecessary and costly barriers to coverage, such as the mandatory work reporting requirements in House Bill 277, will do nothing to help rural residents get or keep a job – or their health care. In contrast, a voluntary workforce promotion program, such as the one in Montana for Medicaid enrollees, can help those who are looking for work or who are seeking better jobs. And it is much less expensive for the state.

Work requirements ignore the reasons people are not in the workforce, such as personal finances, lack of transportation or poor physical health. On the other hand, linking rural residents to services such as career counseling, on-the-job training and educational opportunities can help them overcome these barriers to employment.

Montana's *Health and Economic Livelihood Partnership (HELP)* program has had many economic, health and employment benefits for the state in just three years. HELP-Link participants are employed at a higher rate and are earning better wages than those not in the program. In fact, the average wage increase was \$8,712 a year.

If we are serious about helping our fellow Idahoans out of poverty and able to afford their own private health insurance, this is the way to go. Rather than spending state money on enforcing work requirements that are ineffective - or facing the possibility of expensive litigation - our tax dollars could be better spent on *reducing barriers to work* for low-income residents. This is a real benefit to rural economies and healthcare providers as well.

Please give our rural communities a chance at better health by implementing Medicaid Expansion without mandatory work reporting requirements. Give rural Idahoans a helping hand by reducing barriers to employment and health care, instead of increasing burden and blame.

Thank you for your time.

Mary Ann Reuter
Idaho Rural Health Association
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