

# Local victim of Medicaid cuts testifies before JFAC

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If a society is judged by how it cares for its most vulnerable citizens, Idaho could be seen as less than ideal.

That's because the state legislature is considering not reinstating \$35 million it cut from Medicaid last year under House Bill 260. Should those cuts remain, coupled with the loss in federal matching dollars for Medicaid, funding for the state's most vulnerable individuals could drop by more than \$100 million in the upcoming fiscal year.

Now some individuals who can are speaking out about the harm these cuts cause.

Dakota Parsons of Victor, who has autism and Asperger's Syndrome, spoke before the state Joint Finance Appropriations Committee during Disability Advocacy Day at the state capitol Feb. 3.

He would not have been capable of doing that without the help of Bruce Mason, his psychosocial rehabilitation therapist (PSR) for six years, and others who stepped in and helped the 14-year-old to learn to cope with his world socially, emotionally and academically.

The youngster wasn't able to speak until he was five years old.

"I talked about how my services with Bruce were cut down to four hours," said Dakota. "House Bill 260 really impacted my life. The cuts became law, which means they are decreasing the hours Bruce can see me, which makes me really sad. We did fun activities together."

Activities like building model rockets helped build confidence between Dakota and Bruce and helped the youngster grow by reinforcing the things kids are interested in and get their questions answered, said Dakota's mother, Debra.

He's learned to make videos and to express himself that way, Mason said.

"We can read books and do homework on my PSR's computer, which helps me academically," Dakota said, and Mason has helped him get through homework assignments.

"I'd like to get those Medicaid cuts reversed," said Dakota.

Those cuts included slashing group PSR programs "right at the height of the suicide epidemic we had in the valley [last year]," Mason said. "How do you justify that?"

Mike Ferguson, former Idaho chief economic analyst and now executive director of the Idaho Center for Fiscal Policy, estimates the cuts to Medicaid cost Idaho 4,000 jobs. He said the state's projected revenues allow for the reinstatement of much of the funding cuts, but lawmakers have no plans to do so.

Ferguson said 2,000 of the jobs are directly related to Medicaid services and another 2,000 are a ripple effect from money out of the economy when the 2,000 jobs were lost.

"We've cut public services worse than proved to be necessary," Ferguson said, during a panel discussion in Boise Jan. 18. "We're in a situation where we're in pain. The question is who bears the brunt of that pain."

"We are pulling the rug out from under our most vulnerable citizens," said Debra, "and leaving them with no support. That's just not acceptable."

Many of Dakota's gains could be lost due to budget cuts and other maneuvers that declare Mason no longer qualified to be paid under rewritten Medicaid rules. Those rules have effectively stripped away the help and assistance Dakota needs, said



TVN Photo/Ken Levy

Dakota Parsons is flanked by his mom, Debra and Bruce Mason, who served as his psychosocial rehabilitation counselor for six years. Changes to Medicaid rules mean Mason is no longer qualified as a PSR, he said. Mason volunteers his time with Dakota to maintain continuity with the young man's progress.

Debra, who adopted Dakota when he was two.

Debra adopted two other children with disabilities and is completing her first three-year term as a governor-appointed member of the Idaho Council on Developmental Disabilities, where she was trained in its Partners in Policymaking program.

"The kids used to get 20 hours a week of PSR therapy services, then it went down to 10, then five, then it went down to four, with Bruce no longer being paid for any collateral contact, being able to talk to me and fill out paperwork and be paid to do that," Debra said. "Just the four hours with the kids, and the paperwork is enormous."

"The Medicaid rules to reimburse the agencies that I worked for kept changing," said Mason. "They became more and more restrictive, making the paperwork more detailed. But it wasn't the kind of detail meant to help anybody, it was like an obstacle course meant to trip people up so that Medicaid could deny payment."

Finally, he said, the state required new and expensive classes and tests for him to continue to serve as a PSR for reimbursement purposes, despite the fact that he has been working successfully with kids for 30 years.

"So now I'm unqualified," he said, and can no longer bill the state for his work. Mason is now working for free with Dakota, and "I've been promoted to favorite uncle."

Success with youngsters such as Dakota requires patience, continuity and consistency, said Mason.

"Having been with Dakota for six years, and to have that suddenly change because I was no longer qualified would have been a huge setback to him, and I couldn't let that happen," Mason said.

"PSR is about integrating people with disabilities into the community. We look at areas like social interaction, sometimes academics and trying to get past the original diagnoses that there'd be no regular school or becoming a functional part of the

community," he said. "We're doing that."

Changes have already taken place in HB 260 from last year, said Debra.

"They radically affect adults with disabilities," Debra said. "The cut in PSR hours and the forced choices people have to make between taking care of their developmental disabilities and their mental health issues [mean] you can no longer bill for both."

That means that if an individual is suffering from depression and has Down syndrome, you have to decide which therapy you'll have, she said.

Often recipients of Medicaid mental health care whose services have been cut end up in the hands of law enforcement, said Boise Police Sgt. David Cavanaugh, at the Jan. 18 panel discussion.

"The fact that PSR workers are having less hours spent with clients dealing with mental health issues and developmental disabilities is going to cause more problems for emergency rooms, jails and even cause problems for suicide issues," said Debra. "We do not have a state-funded suicide hotline, and the issues may come together very soon."

"It just rearranges where the money is spent," Cavanaugh said about Medicaid cuts. "If anyone thinks these folks are going to get better with less medication and less support, they're just deluding themselves."

Idaho's Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee is scheduled to set the budget for Medicaid and related programs on Feb. 22.

"Call [your representatives] and make your voice heard at the legislative session and be aware that your friends and neighbors are hurting," Debra said. "If it isn't going to come from the state we're going to have to help each other out, by being more volunteers because the needs are still there. These people's diagnoses don't go away just because the money to support them does."

*Idaho Press Tribune reporter Mike Butts contributed to this story.*