

MINUTES
SENATE HEALTH & WELFARE COMMITTEE

DATE: Tuesday, April 13, 2021

TIME: 2:00 P.M.

PLACE: Room WW54

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chairman Martin, Vice Chairman Riggs, Senators Heider, Agenbroad, Zito, Stennett, and Wintrow

ABSENT/ EXCUSED: Senators Lee and Harris

NOTE: The sign-in sheet, testimonies and other related materials will be retained with the minutes in the committee's office until the end of the session and will then be located on file with the minutes in the Legislative Services Library.

CONVENED: **Chairman Martin** called the meeting of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee (Committee) to order at 2:04 p.m.

PRESENTATION: **American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Programs.** **Lori Wolff**, Deputy Director, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (DHW), introduced herself to the Committee. **Ms. Wolff** gave an overview of the Idaho Child Care Program, the ARPA Program, and DHW initiatives for use of ARPA Program funds. (See Attachment 1.)

DISCUSSION: **Senator Agenbroad** inquired whether the funds could be used to attract and retain child care employees by increasing wages. **Chairman Martin** asked if using one-time funds for new programs will create a need for future increased State funding.

Ms. Wolff replied that DHW plans to provide bonuses to enhance child care worker wages. She added that DHW is exploring tuition and expense reimbursement as an incentive.

Senator Wintrow asked whether child care wage levels and reimbursement rates are too low Statewide. **Ms. Wolff** answered that DHW plans to systematically review wages, but the pandemic exacerbated an existing wage problem in the child care industry. She added that the State should increase wages and also incentivize the private sector to address child care staffing challenges.

Chairman Martin asked about the \$100 million increase in child care funding between fiscal year (FY) 2021 and FY 2022. **Ms. Wolff** responded that the increase represents additional spending from federal funds related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Senator Wintrow asked how easy it is for child care providers to apply for ARPA Program grants. **Ms. Wolff** answered that the grant application is two pages and simple to complete. She estimated that 99 percent of the providers that applied were eligible for and received a grant. **Senator Wintrow** suggested making the application process extremely simple for small businesses. **Ms. Wolff** responded that it is a one-time application process, and a grant recipient is subject to federal audit.

Ms. Wolff reviewed the State's utility and water assistance programs for low-income families using Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRSSA) Act funds.

Elke Shaw-Tulloch, Administrator, DHW, reviewed the use of CARES and CRSSA funding for vaccine distribution and immunization administration Statewide, and discussed DHW vaccine initiatives using ARPA Program funds.

Senator Wintrow asked whether DHW differentiates between child care and preschool when making provider payments. **Ms. Wolff** explained that preschool is an educational activity lasting a few hours, and child care is support for parents who work that must be available during work hours.

Dave Jeppesen, Director, DHW, gave an overview of the effect of the pandemic on mental health and substance abuse issues, together with DHW's response and use of federal funding to address the issues. **Mr. Jeppesen** discussed the increased use of telehealth services and DHW's establishment of crisis phone lines for persons experiencing mental health problems and health care workers.

Chairman Martin inquired whether ARPA Program funds could be used to launch the future "988" suicide crisis hotline. **Mr. Jeppesen** answered that DHW hopes to use some ARPA Program funds to assist with the 988 hotline. **Chairman Martin** suggested using ARPA Program funds for structural improvements and one-time costs of the 988 hotline to avoid reliance on federal funding for ongoing expenses. **Mr. Jeppesen** replied that DHW is also concerned about obligating the State to ongoing costs and awaits further guidance from the federal government on use of ARPA Program funds.

Senator Wintrow asked about the status of the State behavioral health crisis centers and their financial stability. **Mr. Jeppesen** responded that the crisis centers were established just in time to help mitigate the effects of the pandemic. He stated each of the seven crisis centers Statewide receives approximately 2,000 contacts a year. **Mr. Jeppesen** explained the centers receive some State funding and were enrolled as Medicaid providers, but their budgets are lean. **Senator Wintrow** commented that spending money on crisis centers results in other health care cost savings.

Senator Agenbroad thanked Mr. Jeppesen for his leadership in addressing behavioral health and substance abuse issues. He commented that he appreciates DHW's approach to spending one-time money and looks forward to seeing results from the 988 hotline. **Senator Agenbroad** added that it is important for the public and providers to understand how State and federal funds are used.

Senator Heider commented that Governor Brad Little has hired many qualified experts and handled the pandemic well. He thanked Mr. Jeppesen for his efforts on behalf of the State.

Chairman Martin thanked Mr. Jeppesen for his work. He mentioned that in the past, federal funds flowed directly to the agencies without Legislative oversight, and he stated that it is important for the public and the Legislature to know how federal funds are spent.

ADJOURNED: There being no further business at this time, **Chairman Martin** adjourned the meeting at 2:56 p.m.

Senator Martin
Chair

Jeanne Jackson-Heim
Secretary