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## **Jeff D. lawsuit settlement will lead to improved mental health services for Idaho children**

An estimated 9,000 Idaho children with serious emotional disturbances could have better access to community-based mental health services as a result of the settlement of a federal class action lawsuit initially filed in 1980, known as the *Jeff D. lawsuit*.

Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter applauded the leadership and staff at all the State agencies impacted by the Jeff D. case for their perseverance and dedication to doing the right thing for the children of Idaho throughout a long and difficult legal process.

“I’m proud of our people. I’m proud of the processes and priorities they have put in place. And I’m very pleased that their hard work and determination has brought us to this day,” the Governor said. “The Jeff D. case has been part of Idaho’s political and public policy landscape for decades. Changing cultures and overcoming tough challenges often takes time, but we understand that realizing success will mean a continuing commitment to upholding the letter and spirit of this agreement.”

The settlement provides an opportunity for the state of Idaho to resolve the long-standing lawsuit. “The settlement gives Idaho a clear path in delivering needed community-based mental health services,” said Ross Edmunds, administrator of the Division of Behavioral Health at the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (DHW). “Most importantly, it provides an effective system to treat youth with serious emotional disturbances and their families. Our success with this settlement will ultimately bring an end to the Jeff D. lawsuit.”

“The Governor should be applauded for supporting collaborative improvement of Idaho’s children’s mental health system,” said Patrick Gardner, an attorney with Young Minds Advocacy Project who helped negotiate the settlement. “Idaho is a model for other states in its commitment to serve children in need using a coordinated system of care.”

The settlement aims to address the gaps in Idaho's mental health system, making it more effective and efficient in meeting the needs of children with serious emotional disturbances and their families. The settlement commits the state to taking a number of concrete steps to develop and implement a sustainable, coordinated, and comprehensive mental health system, including:

- Creating a statewide process, across all child-serving systems, to identify and screen youths for unmet mental health needs
- Providing a comprehensive array of community-based services and supports to children when medically necessary
- Delivering services using a consistent approach that engages families, youths, and their support systems
- Monitoring and reporting on service quality and outcomes for youths

“The settlement outlines a plan for Idaho to create an effective and meaningful system of care,” said Howard Belodoff, the attorney for the children. “When successfully implemented, the agreement will lead to children throughout the state having access to a comprehensive array of mental health services and supports in their own homes and communities.”

The settlement is the result of more than a year of negotiations. Participants include key community stakeholders representing parents, advocates and private providers, along with representatives from DHW, the Idaho Department of Juvenile Corrections (IDJC), the Idaho State Department of Education (SDE), as well as attorneys representing the class members.

“This is a positive step forward for coordinated community based mental health services,” said Sharon Harrigfeld, Director of the Idaho Department of Juvenile Corrections. “We know that collaborative efforts at the community level have positive outcomes for youth and we look forward to continuing these efforts to meet the needs of youth with serious emotional disturbances and their families through this Agreement.”

Access to appropriate mental health services is a critical component of children's healthcare systems. Research shows that half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14 and three-quarters by age 24. The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare estimates that 20 percent of all youths will have a diagnosable mental disorder during childhood.

Studies have shown that many children can experience long delays before their mental illness is identified and treated, which often result in negative outcomes for children. Early assessment, intervention and the delivery of community-based services and treatment will allow children to remain at home with their families, lessen the need for hospitalization resulting from a mental health crisis, and lead to improved functioning for children in their communities and schools.

“When mental illness is treated, it can have a positive impact on all areas of a child's life, including their ability to learn, play, interact with others and handle emotions,” Edmunds said. “Serious emotional disturbance in children can be treated effectively, especially when identified early. With treatment, these children can lead productive lives and succeed in school, at home, and in their adult lives.”

Family members with children who suffer from mental illness praised the settlement as an important step forward in Idaho.

“Our family experienced a lot of challenges and frustration as we tried to get our daughter appropriate care,” said Jennifer Griffis, parent and chairwoman of the Idaho Behavioral Health State Planning Council. “The agreement provides a promising structure for Idaho’s mental health system to be more responsive to the needs of children and families.”

“This settlement offers a service array that is broad enough to allow mental health service providers to better tailor treatment plans to their clients’ individual strengths and needs,” said Kelly Keele, president of the Mental Health Providers Association of Idaho. “We expect that, over the long run, the number of children hospitalized or needing expensive out-of-home placements will decrease.”

Advocates offered similar praise: “Working with parents of children with complex health disorders is often heartbreaking as Idaho has not had the services to support these families,” said Carol Dixon, family support specialist for the Idaho Federation of Families. “The Federation of Families views the *Jeff D.* settlement as a very promising solution that has the potential to create a new and effective children’s mental health system in Idaho. It will have the capacity to address the challenging mental health needs of our children and provide needed support to families.”

The settlement anticipates implementation over a four year period with three additional years of monitoring to ensure sustained performance of the service delivery system. Upon successful completion of implementation and monitoring, the lawsuit will be dismissed. The settlement agreement must be approved by the federal district court.

***Editors: Please contact any of the following people involved with the settlement for interviews:***

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