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**NEWS RELEASE**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
July 15, 2005

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**BONNER COUNTY BENEFITS FROM \$29.3 MILLION DOLLAR INVESTMENT  
FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & WELFARE**

Last year, Bonner County residents and businesses received \$29.3 million from Department of Health & Welfare programs that help people in need. The investment benefits every one of the county's 39,000 residents. Of Idaho's 44 counties, Bonner County ranks number 26 in per capita outlay of Health & Welfare dollars.

The disbursement of state and federal tax dollars amounts to \$747 for every man, woman and child residing in Bonner County. This includes citizens who may not receive a single direct service from the Department. The statewide average is \$839 per capita.

The Department distributed \$1.15 billion in 2004 statewide in Idaho communities. These funds came from Medicaid, additional payments to hospitals, Food Stamps, the Idaho Child Care Program, the Women, Infants and Children nutritional program, foster care and a variety of other assistance programs.

"This is an investment for all Bonner County residents," says Health & Welfare Director Karl Kurtz. "These are tax dollars put to good use because they are used to help people become healthy and productive. This money goes go to foster care for children in crisis, substance abuse treatment for adults and adolescents, improvements and operations at the local hospital, and dozens of other badly needed services."

"This is as much about sustaining communities as it is investing," adds Kurtz. "By providing programs that support people, we are helping communities and their residents build the endurance and strength they need to remain vital. Everyone profits from this investment, not just those who use Department programs. This isn't just me pounding my chest. That's what community leaders tell us."

Bonner County Commission Chair Marcia Phillips says, “Supporting the family is really important and (Health & Welfare) programs support that. The programs give us a chance to keep our economy and population stabilized. (The programs) provide emergent care especially in the area of indigent care. It’s a very good partnership between state and county level government to provide for our citizens.”

Last year, the Department’s Medicaid Division spent \$24.3 million on health care for residents of the county — a \$2 million increase over 2003. A large share of the dollars go to drug stores like White Cross Pharmacy in Priest River. “Medicaid is about 23 percent of my business,” says pharmacy owner Gary DeBlaquierer. “It means quite a bit to us. Almost all of this money comes to the community. It directly impacts the community. Much of the Medicaid population is not mobile, so the money stays right here.”

The story is much the same at Bonner General Hospital. In addition to regular inpatient and outpatient fees paid for Medicaid clients, the hospital also received \$232,000 in extra payments called Disproportionate Share (DSH). This program compensates hospitals for having a large number of Medicaid patients. The extra money can be used for any purpose so anyone using the hospital can potentially benefit from those dollars.

“It’s extremely important to us. It makes a huge difference,” says Chief Executive Officer Cheryl Rickard. “Being a small hospital, we really have to balance our funds. Trying to keep up with salaries and making up for low reimbursement is difficult. Sometimes we need it for operations and sometimes technology, but everyone benefits. The (DSH) is a huge shot in the arm for us.”

Last year the hospital received \$2 million for inpatient and outpatient care bringing the total Medicaid payments for the hospital to more than \$2.2 million.

Bonner County residents received \$2.3 million in Food Stamps to feed their families — up \$400,000 from 2003. Yoke’s Fresh Market in Sandpoint redeemed \$343,800. At corporate headquarters for the 12-store chain in Spokane, Vice-President of Grocery Operations Joe Hanson says, “Obviously, all sales are important to us. We consider any and all sales critical to our survival.”

While that amount represents less than two percent of the Sandpoint store sales, “Nevertheless, you could be talking about a lot smaller number, but they are important,” Hanson says. “It’s a difficult business, sales are hard to come by, it’s very competitive, and any business we earn, we realize how fragile it is, we work hard to retain that business. We are thrilled to be getting our share of that.”

There are 120 full- and part-time employees at the store. This money allows them to sustain the workforce and create more jobs. If they didn't have that money, it would cause them to adjust operations. "There would be a trickle-down effect," he says. "We are going to operate that store on a budget model. If sales are not going to be there, we adjust. It would affect the employee base on some level, and hours and wages."

Department spending helps people, and it has an upside for business, according to Idaho economist John Church. "This is not lost money. The spending is an investment. It goes back into the economy. If an employer came to town and spent this much money we would be elated. People need to remember that a big chunk of this is federal money which is a huge return on our taxes. This comes back and helps stimulate the economy and it helps people."

Kurtz says, "Not only is the Department money a human investment, but it creates jobs and maintains healthy businesses. These dollars recycle numerous times in each community and help us keep the high quality of life we enjoy in Idaho. This is a wise use of taxpayer dollars because the money spent in the community often stays in the community. These dollars are spent again and again to help create jobs and an infrastructure that provides healthy and safe neighborhoods."

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(**Editors:** Interviews are available on request. Contact Ross Mason at 334-0693 or Regional Director Michelle Britton at 755-3772 for more information.)

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investment in every Idaho County  
can be found online at  
<http://www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov>**