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NEWS RELEASE

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**CASSIA COUNTY BENEFITS FROM \$17.2 MILLION DOLLAR INVESTMENT
FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & WELFARE**

Last year, Cassia County residents and businesses received \$17.2 million from Department of Health & Welfare programs that help people in need. The investment benefits every one of the county's 21,600 residents. Of Idaho's 44 counties, Cassia County ranks number 24 in per capita outlay of Health & Welfare dollars, a drop from 2003 per capita which placed the county at number 7.

The disbursement of state and federal tax dollars amounts to \$798 for every man, woman and child residing in Cassia County. Per capita in 2003 was \$1,010 in the county which includes citizens who may not receive a single direct service from the Department. The decrease is due to a large drop in Medicaid spending in the county. The statewide per capita average is \$839.

The Department distributed \$1.15 billion in Idaho communities in 2004. 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 Cassia 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 and less dependent on government assistance. 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."

Cassia County Commissioner Paul Christiansen says, “The services that the Department provides are very important. And there seems to be a growing need for services. In the last 20 years, the jobs that provided the income to sustain affordable health care have disappeared. Any cut in Medicaid would fall back on the county. That \$17 million is an investment in the county. We have people with need, and I don’t know that there’s anything better to meet that need.”

Last year, the Department’s Medicaid Division spent \$13.6 million on health care for residents of the county. A large share of the dollars go to drug stores like Kwik-Med in Burley. “Medicaid is huge. It’s a great part of our business,” says Pharmacy Manager Aleta Stringham. “We’re in a neighborhood that is largely the elderly and quite a few Hispanic families who use Medicaid. We also do weekly med-sets for the elderly so they don’t get confused over what pills to take. I usually have two techs working with me at anytime and Medicaid sure does help pay for them. It helps a lot.”

The story is much the same at Cassia Regional Medical Center. “In a smaller community hospital, the funds we receive from the state is essential to the ongoing operations,” says Hospital Administrator Ken Harmon. “Without the federal upper payment limits funds, it would jeopardize the level and type of care we can provide. We integrate the payment into our overall operations. We would be in the red without those funds. Medicaid is an important element in helping us achieve health care for residents of the Mini-Cassia area.”

Last year, Cassia Regional Medical Center received more than \$173,000 in additional payments called Disproportionate Share (DSH) which are made to some hospitals because they have a larger share of Medicaid clients than the average facility. This payment is in addition to inpatient and outpatient fees paid to the hospital to care for Medicaid clients. Medicaid payments to the hospital, including DSH, totaled more than \$2.4 million in 2004.

Cassia County residents received \$1.5 million in Food Stamps — \$300,000 above 2003. The program also served an additional 200 people bringing the 2004 total to 1,600. Nearly all of the Food Stamp spending was with local grocers, including Stoke’s Fresh Food Market in Burley, which redeemed \$140,400.

Owner John Stokes says that represents about five percent of their annual income. How important is it? “Huge,” he says. “Our budget for employment is based on sales. If we didn’t have this money, we would survive, but it would have an impact, maybe a substantial impact. If somebody else were to have Food Stamps and I didn’t, it would absolutely kill me.”

Food Stamps customers have increased with the closure of the Simplot potato processing plant and the inability of former employees to obtain new work. “Unemployment is running out for those folks,” Stokes says. “At this point, we are seeing a lot more Food Stamps customers. It’s a tight economy. We are still viable, still making money. Our sales are broken out into cash, checks, etc., and Food Stamps are pretty heavy.”

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. The 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 John Hathaway at 316-0620 for more information.)

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