

# New hope after 36 years

By KATHY HEDBERG of the Tribune | Posted: Monday, June 6, 2016 12:00 am

GRANGEVILLE - It is anticipated the recently settled Jeff D lawsuit - a process 36 years in the making - will bring new hope to parents like Jennifer Griffis whose children suffer from mental illnesses.

The class-action lawsuit, originally filed in 1980 by parents who alleged their children suffered abuse at State Hospital South in Nampa, is intended to address the gaps in Idaho's mental health system and make it more effective in meeting the needs of children with serious emotional disturbances and their families.

A settlement agreement was signed last June and an implementation plan was accepted by the court April 29. It is expected to lead to improved access to community-based mental health services for an estimated 9,000 Idaho children.

This shift in mental health services comes none too soon for Griffis, an educator, and her husband, Danny Griffis, who is a physician at Syringa General Hospital and Clinics in Grangeville.

Of their seven children, four have been diagnosed with mental health problems ranging from anxiety and attention deficit hyperactive disorder to a more serious condition.

Finding adequate health care for their children - especially a daughter who is most severely afflicted - has been a long haul for the Griffises.

"As my husband and I walked through the system of trying to get help and realized how hard it was and how many walls you hit trying to get help and how much we had to push we knew the answers were out there. We just kept pushing," Griffis said.

Parents who aren't as aware of the possibilities, she added, often stop pushing.

"Because they've gotten a 'No' and they've gotten a 'No' from somebody who seems to know what they're talking about. So they will stop pushing and just feel like there's not an option," she said.

"I wanted to be able to share my story with other parents so that they would know they weren't alone because it's a very lonely road."

Two of the Griffises children are adopted and while Jennifer Griffis declined to discuss the particulars of



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Jennifer Griffis of Grangeville hopes change will come soon for improved access to community-based mental health services for her children and an estimated 9,000 Idaho kids in need.

their cases she noted that many children who come from adoptive backgrounds have some basic trauma, which might include genetic problems.

Idaho's mental health system for children, up to this point, has been what is sometimes known as a "fail first" system, Griffis said.

In order for a child to receive a higher level of services they have to have failed from attempts to treat their conditions at a lower level of service.

The reason for that, she said, is to make sure that a child is not in a more restrictive level of care than necessary.

In the Griffises' case, their daughter had been examined by multiple professionals who recommended a residential therapeutic treatment center. But because she hadn't been tested at a lower level of care, the Griffises were denied the chance to place their daughter where she needed to go.

"It surprised us, in the beginning," Griffis said of learning they could not place their daughter in the treatment center of their choice. "We both worked around systems in our professional careers. When we reached the point where we knew we needed help, it was definitely a shock for us that we started hitting all of these barriers."

Eventually the Griffises agreed to place their daughter in a therapeutic foster home with a family that had been trained to handle children with serious mental health issues.

That lasted about six months. A couple more placements were tried until eventually Children's Mental Health Services agreed that the daughter needed the higher level of care.

"The problem is, when systems start to look at the services a child has been through instead of the needs of a child it becomes system-focused rather than child-focused," Griffis said.

"In order to get services for her, any help at all, we had to accept services that were not at the level that she needed just because the system was focused on itself. It's a hard thing. It's not the people within the system. It was the system design itself that created the barrier."

The Jeff D settlement is designed to overcome those obstacles. The agreement commits Idaho to take a number of concrete steps to develop and implement a sustainable, coordinated and comprehensive mental health system.

In a process that will be rolled out over four years this includes creating a statewide system to identify and screen youth for unmet mental health needs; provide community-based services and support to children when medically necessary; deliver services that include their families, the youth and their support systems; and monitor and report service quality and outcomes.

Eventually the Griffises were able to place their daughter in a treatment center where she receives the services required for her condition. It's not cheap - even though Medicaid covers the cost of her medical treatment, all additional costs, such as traveling to the treatment center, overnight stays and other incidentals, are paid out-of-pocket by the family.

As a result of her involvement in her own children's situations Griffis has become an active member of several mental health boards and committees around the region and the state.

She is the parent representative on the Region 2 Behavioral Health Board and chairwoman of the parents' subcommittee; she also is on the board of directors for Idaho's Federation of Families for Mental Health and chairwoman of the Behavioral Health state planning council.

With the Jeff D settlement in hand Griffis said she is optimistic mental health services for children and others in the state will improve.

But there's no question that numerous challenges remain ahead.

"As far as the system overall I think the biggest challenge is not criminalizing mental illness," she said. "Just providing support for those who need support before they have to get involved with our criminal justice system.

"It's fairly easy to recognize someone who's at risk for that. Figuring out what it looks like to provide those services for people that want services; people that need services and they just can't afford it before we hit that criminal justice piece is huge."

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