



IDAHO HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES OMBUDSMAN OFFICE



Brad Little-Governor
Trevor Sparrow- Ombudsman

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN
Boise, ID 83720

Spring 2026 Statewide Tour of Residential Facilities

Prepared by the Idaho Health and Social Services Ombudsman Office (HSSO)

Purpose and Scope

The Idaho Health and Social Services Ombudsman Office (HSSO) conducted a statewide tour of residential treatment programs, group homes, and transitional youth facilities during spring 2026. The objective was to observe operations, engage with administrators and staff, and identify systemic strengths and challenges affecting Idaho's continuum of residential child-welfare services.

Overview of Facilities

Twelve residential programs were visited across multiple regions of the state, representing a range of service models including therapeutic group homes, transitional living programs, and specialized youth treatment centers.

Facilities Visited

The following residential facilities and programs were visited as part of the Spring 2026 statewide tour:

- Safe House – Twin Falls
- Bannock House
- MK Place
- Hinge Point
- East Idaho Youth Homes
- Snake River Family Services
- Canopy Village
- Patriot Center
- Idaho Youth Ranch
- Transition House
- Mimi's House
- Bubba's House (Foster N Heart)





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Executive Summary

During the Spring 2026 statewide tour, HSSO staff visited a range of residential treatment programs, group homes, transitional living facilities, and specialized youth services across Idaho. The tour's objectives were to observe facility operations, consult with administrators and frontline staff, document effective practices and areas of concern, and identify statewide trends affecting residential child-welfare services to inform oversight and policy recommendations.

Findings

The Spring 2026 tour identified multiple recurring themes across residential providers; the following highlights represent a selection rather than an exhaustive list:

- **Strong staff commitment:** Frontline personnel and administrators consistently demonstrated dedication in supporting youth.
- **Workforce instability:** Various facilities reported significant staffing challenges, notably high turnover among direct-care staff and difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified employees.
- **Communication and coordination gaps with DHW:** Providers described deficiencies in transparency, timely information exchange, and collaborative planning with the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.
- **Billing and reimbursement issues:** Multiple facilities reported ongoing problems with billing processes, payment delays, and reimbursement challenges involving managed-care arrangements involving Magellan.
- **Financial pressure:** Various facilities have reported significant challenges when confronting the combined pressures of low reimbursement rates and escalating operational costs. This convergence is leading to sustained financial strain across these organizations.
- **Trauma-informed innovations:** Providers are implementing creative, trauma-informed approaches to increase youth engagement and reduce the use of restraints.
- **Reduced census levels:** Several facilities are operating with lower census, contributing to operational and staffing instability.
- **Intake information shortfalls:** Insufficient or delayed information provided at placement regarding youth needs was frequently cited as a concern.



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General Observations and Positive Practices

Facility Environment and Atmosphere

Many facilities presented warm, welcoming, and home-like environments, emphasizing structured yet supportive living arrangements that include shared responsibilities, independent-living preparation, recreational activities, and educational support for youth. Several facilities demonstrated sustained leadership continuity, with some administrators serving for decades; this stability appears to contribute positively to organizational resilience and staff culture. Several homes demonstrated exceptional teamwork and communication among staff members, including the use of communication platforms and ongoing staff training systems.



Staff Commitment

Across nearly all facilities, Ombudsman staff consistently observed dedicated personnel who appeared deeply invested in the wellbeing and success of the youth in their care; even in programs experiencing staffing shortages or financial hardship, staff consistently demonstrated commitment to supporting children with significant behavioral, emotional, developmental, or

family-related challenges. Staff demonstrated a clear, sustained commitment to the wellbeing and progress of the youth in their care; even amid staffing shortages and/or financial constraints, employees continued to provide attentive, compassionate support to children with complex behavioral, emotional, developmental, or family-related needs.



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Trauma-Informed and Therapeutic Practices

Several providers reported implementing trauma-informed or therapeutic intervention approaches intended to reduce the use of restraints and improve behavioral outcomes. Providers also described individualized incentive systems, mentorship models, respite services, the use of therapy animals, and recognition traditions for youth completing programs.

Examples of practices observed included:

- Use of therapeutic intervention models to reduce physical restraints.
- Reward and incentive systems tied to positive behavior and reduction in property destruction.
- Some facilities have implemented the use of therapy animals to support emotional regulation and connection.
- Opportunities for youth to participate in cooking, chores, and independent living skill development.
- Symbolic recognition activities (e.g., graduations, ceremonies) that foster belonging and acknowledge achievement.
- Programs specifically designed to preserve sibling placements and reduce separation trauma.



Several providers also noted efforts to expand preventative and respite services intended to prevent children from having to go into foster care placement.



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Systemic Concerns Identified

Workforce Challenges

The most consistent concern raised statewide pertained directly to staffing difficulties, particularly among direct care personnel.

Providers reported:

- High turnover rates.
- Difficulty in recruiting qualified staff.
- Challenges retaining employees due to low reimbursement rates.
- Delays in onboarding are attributed to background check processing timelines.
- Difficulty in effective mentoring and training of new employees due to a high level of employee turnover.

Many providers indicated concern that low daily reimbursement rates significantly limit their ability to offer competitive wages and benefits.

Financial and Reimbursement Concerns

A substantial number of facilities reported various concerns regarding financial sustainability. Common themes included:

- Delayed or problematic billing and reimbursement processes.
- Difficulties obtaining timely payment for submitted claims.
- Rising insurance and operational costs.
- Reliance on private fundraising or grant funding to supplement services.
- Pressure to seek higher daily reimbursement rates due to new regulatory requirements

Several providers indicated that, unless reimbursement and billing processes are addressed and operating costs stabilized, ongoing financial pressures may jeopardize their ability to maintain current service levels or expand to meet community needs.

Communication and Transparency Concerns

Multiple providers raised concerns regarding communication and coordination with Idaho's Department of Health and Welfare (IDHW). Concerns included:

- Incomplete or delayed information about youth at intake.
- Difficulty obtaining timely communication from case workers.



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- Frequent turnover among assigned case workers.
- Feeling excluded from decision-making processes regarding youth care and discharge planning.
- Concerns that placements are sometimes made due to lack of alternatives rather than clinical appropriateness.

Several providers specifically emphasized that inadequate information sharing can directly impact safety, medication management, and the ability to appropriately care for youth.

Placement and Resource Limitations

Providers consistently identified broader statewide resource shortages affecting children and families, including:

- Lack of community-based services.
- Limited preventative services.
- Shortages of foster homes and placement options.
- Increasing placement complexity.
- Difficulty accessing specialized services for high-needs youth.

Some providers indicated they are routinely asked to accept individuals whose needs exceed the intended scope or level of care of the facility.

Safety and Operational Observations

Most facilities visited appeared clean, organized, and appropriately supervised. Several facilities had extensive camera coverage and structured monitoring systems in place. However, HSSO personnel along with various facility personnel noted a limited number of operational concerns, including:

- Concerns regarding unsecured access points.
- Several concerns involving transport coordination and custody transfer practices within various facilities. This involves DHW contracted transport providers dropping off children at facilities and leaving, sometimes due to being over hours, without all the proper paperwork completed and intake finalized.
- Concerns regarding notification of required medical information regarding intake (e.g. individual medication or required doctors' visits).



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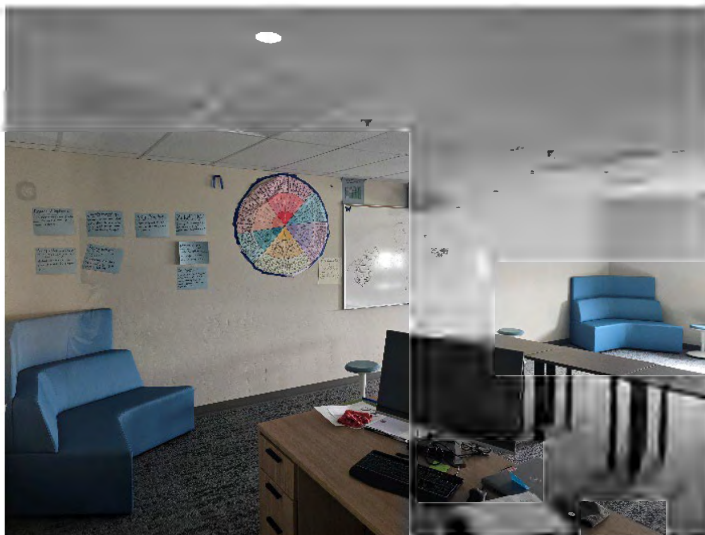
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- Several facilities exhibited environments that appeared highly institutional or detention-oriented.
- Some concerns were raised about appropriate behavioral expectations in less-structured independent living settings.

Several providers also reported challenges related to managing youth with significant behavioral or developmental needs, including property destruction and crisis response management.

Emerging Themes and Opportunities

HSSO conducted visits with an emphasis on familiarity and awareness, prioritizing introductions and relationship-building rather than investigative review. In doing so the statewide tour identified several opportunities for system improvement and collaboration.



1. Improving transparency and information-sharing during placement and intake processes.
2. Addressing reimbursement and billing process that are directly impacting provider sustainability.
3. Expanding preventative and respite services to reduce foster care placements.
4. Supporting workforce recruitment, retention, and training efforts.
5. Exploring strategies to reduce restraint use and expand trauma-informed interventions.
6. Strengthening continuity and communication between providers and Department of Health and Welfare case management staff.
7. Increasing community-based resources and placement options for both high-needs, and high-risk youth.
8. Evaluating background check and timelines to improve onboarding and staffing capacity.



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Conclusion

The Spring 2026 statewide residential facility tour served primarily as a familiarization effort, emphasizing introductions and relationship-building while also gathering substantive observations. The visits highlighted the dedication of Idaho's residential care providers and the significant operational pressures facing the system: providers are serving increasingly complex youth populations while managing staffing shortages, financial strain, and coordination challenges.

Providers across the state are acting as pioneers, implementing innovative initiatives grounded in trauma-informed practices to improve youth outcomes and reduce restrictive interventions. These efforts reflect a strong commitment to ongoing partnership with the Department of Health and Welfare and collaboration with policymakers and oversight entities to strengthen Idaho's child-welfare system and expand less-restrictive, evidence-based care options for vulnerable children and youth.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Trevor Sparrow".

Trevor Sparrow
Health and Social Services Ombudsman