

## Valley lawmakers say they too want AG's opinion on how indigent health care money is being spent

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McALLEN - Rio Grande Valley lawmakers say they too would like to see an attorney general's opinion on whether there has been any misuse of the Valley's indigent health care funds.

On Tuesday, Valley Interfaith and El Milagro Clinic wrote to McAllen City Manager Mike Perez to question whether the Rio Grande Valley Health Services District had "exceeded its authority" in allowing \$6 million in indigent health care construction funding to be taken from the Valley.

They also questioned whether RGVHSD was pursuing an administrative facility in Hidalgo County, rather than an ambulatory care clinic. They asked the city of McAllen to request an attorney general's opinion through Sen. Eddie Lucio, D-Brownsville, author of the legislation that led to the setting up of the RGVHSD.

Lucio told the Guardian he would be happy to ask Attorney General Greg Abbott for a legal opinion, if asked by the City of McAllen. The City currently funds about 35 percent of El Milagro's costs.

"I'd be happy to ask for an attorney general's opinion if asked," Lucio said. "If there are any legal questions that need to be answered, we need to pose those to the attorney general. I want to help Hidalgo County to improve its indigent health care."

Rep. Veronica Gonzales, D-McAllen, said she had been kept apprised of the correspondence between Valley Interfaith, El Milagro and the City of McAllen.

"It is important to have an attorney general's opinion, not just because of what has happened in the past but also to avoid any future problems," Gonzales said.

"Health care is critical to the Valley, particularly indigent health care. It is important to know whether we can reroute that \$6 million back to the Valley. It certainly makes no sense to send the sickest patients in Hidalgo County to Brownsville for treatment."

The \$6 million referred to in the letter was part of \$16.6 million earmarked for the construction of indigent health care clinics in the Valley and approved by Texas voters under a constitutional amendment referendum in 2001.

In its Over-Arching Operating Plan, published April 1, 2005, the RGVHSD board said it could build two clinics in the Valley for roughly \$10 million.

The programs identified for the Cameron County facility included an ambulatory surgery center, a specialty care clinic along with educational programs, and the contracting of most primary care. As a result, the size of the proposed building was reduced from 35,643 square-feet to 30,935 square-feet, thus saving \$1.15 million.

The programs identified for the Hidalgo County facility included contracting out most primary care, retaining a few clinic operations and establishing a medical management system for Valley-wide patient management and control. As a result, the size of the proposed building was reduced from 35,643 square-feet to 10,080 square-feet, a saving of \$4.85 million.

Dr. Paul Villas, chairman of the RGVHSD, there was no need to seek an attorney general's opinion on the financial decisions taken by the RGVHSD. Villas said the decision to remove \$6 million out of the \$16.6 million allocated for

the Valley was taken by the Texas Department of State Health Services. He said disputed claims that the RGVHSD was spending the indigent health care funds in Hidalgo County on an administrative building.

Dr. Linda Villarreal, an Edinburg physician and member of the RGVHSD board, agreed. She said she wished all those interested in providing care for the indigent poor of the Valley would work together.

But, Ron Tupper, El Milagro's board chairman, said written communication from DSHS proved that the state agency's decision to spend the \$6 million on San Antonio's Texas Center for Infectious Diseases rather than the Valley clinics came only after RGVHSD had submitted its Over-Arching Operating Plan to DSHS.

"The health services district has a major public credibility problem that merits inquiry, and only serves to remind the public of the crushing influence of special interest on public money that sets a dangerous precedent when our elected officials from the city, county and state are repeatedly ignored," Tupper said.

"The public is then entitled to know why a Texas Constitutional Amendment providing millions of dollars for working poor families of McAllen and Hidalgo County were lost."

McAllen Mayor Richard Cortez told the Guardian that he was aware of the Valley Interfaith-El Milagro letter and was seeking more information.

"El Milagro Clinic plays a very critical role in our community and I support what they are doing," Cortez said.

"Ultimately, the responsibility for the indigent poor is the responsibility of the state. But the state is struggling to cope with the needs. We are going to have to see what avenues exist to find the best solution."