

Millions for indigent care unspent

By Harvey Rice | December 17, 2011

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Photo By Melissa Phillip

MELISSA PHILLIP : CHRONICLE SEES THE NEED: David Darrow is a fourth-year medical student at UTMB who volunteers at St. Vincent's House free clinic, 2817 Post Office in Galveston, giving him a firsthand look at the needs of Galveston County's indigent population. Photo: Melissa Phillip / © 2011 Houston Chronicle

More Information

2009

Applications 713

Denied 264 or 37 percent

2010

Applications 1,021

Denied 470 or 46 percent

2011

Applications 1,348

Denied 526 or 39 percent

Efforts to publicize the available money have been directed primarily at physicians, **County Community Services** Director **Lanny Brown** said.

But some potential patients, such as **Gabriel Ochoa**, 57, of Galveston, don't know how to apply. Ochoa, who has a heart condition and other medical problems, ran a meat market that was put out of business by Ike. He now has no income and lives with relatives.

"Other than Jesse Tree and St. Vincent's, I don't know what I'd do," he said, referring to social service agencies. Ochoa has received primary care at a county clinic, but he didn't realize the clinic is distinct from the County Indigent Health Care Program, which handles money from the fund and requires a separate application.

The Indigent Health Care Program, created by the Legislature in 1985 to be used statewide, has so many problems that a special advisory commission called for an overhaul in 2006. The Legislature has not acted on the commission's central recommendations.

Fund set up after Ike

The Galveston County fund was a response to the Legislature's refusal to provide money to rebuild UTMB after Hurricane Ike unless Galveston County created a hospital district. Legislators said the county was getting a free ride by sending its poor to UTMB. The Legislature also wanted the county to raise the income limit to qualify for its indigent care program, from 21 percent of the federal poverty level to 100 percent.

Because the creation of a hospital district would have required a popular vote but lacked political support, Commissioner **Pat Doyle** proposed a 6-cent tax increase devoted to indigent care.

"We thought we were actually going to spend that," Doyle said. After raising more than \$11 million in 2009, commissioners switched the tax proceeds in 2010 to pay for a

GALVESTON - About \$8 million in a special fund to provide hospital or specialized medical care for Galveston County's poorest residents will go unused this year, perplexing social service agencies that say the need is great.

Commissioners imposed a special tax in 2009 that raised about \$11 million, part of a deal with the Legislature to save the **University of Texas Medical Branch** in the wake of Hurricane Ike.

The county has spent less than \$4 million over the two years since the fund was created, despite a convergence of factors that has increased the need for its services.

Thousands suffered financial loss from the hurricane that struck in September 2008, the nation remains in the grip of an economic downturn and UTMB has dramatically decreased its charity care.

"The situation in Texas is grim, it's embarrassing, and any politician who says we are providing health care in Texas is misleading or misinformed," said **Neal Lane**, senior fellow at **Rice University's James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy** and co-author of the 2006

Code Red report on Texas health care. "We have some of the poorest health care in Texas despite having some of the best medical centers."

Galveston County health officials say they are helping everyone who qualifies, but social service agencies don't understand why the money continues to go unspent in the face of the need they see.

"I have people coming to **St. Vincent's** every day that need (hospital) care - women who are bleeding constantly and need a hysterectomy ... people with chronic gall-bladder problems," said **A.J. Halvorsen**, clinical liaison for St. Vincent's **House in Galveston**.

The reasons for the unused funds are unclear, but social service providers say it's often difficult for the poor to provide the extensive documentation required to qualify. They also complain that the system is designed to root out the undeserving rather than to provide prompt care for people with serious medical conditions.

bond issue.

As the county prepared to increase its spending on indigent medical care, UTMB was cutting back. Once known throughout the state for dispensing medical care to the poorest Texans, UTMB's charity care as a percentage of gross revenue fell from 20.6 percent in 1999 to 3.3 percent in 2010, according to a report by Dr. [Merle Lenihan](#) for the Galveston County Free Care Monitoring Project.

Computerized system

Screening for the indigent care program is done by the Galveston County Health District, which operates the primary care clinics.

[J. Carlos Diaz](#), district director of patient access, said applications are screened by computer with no human intervention. Appeals consist of checking to see if information from the application was correctly entered into the computer, he said.

Ted Hanley, executive director of the Jesse Tree social services agency, said health officials are often unaware of the extent of the need.

"When you are in the ivory tower, it's easy to say that everybody who needs help gets it," he said.

The application process can be daunting for the poor, Hanley said: "Who will pay for your identification, your birth certificate, who will run down the copies of your prescription?"

Calls for compassion

Health officials at many institutions appear to feel no ethical obligation to provide care, he said.

"Every single day I'm meeting somebody who is shown the door with no compassionate direction to get the help that's truly needed," he said.

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