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## UTMB charity policy talks break down

GALVESTON - The University of Texas Medical Branch is refusing further changes to its charity policy after nearly a year of talks with a Galveston County advocacy group that says the policy is incomprehensible and unfair.

Leaders of the Galveston County Free Care Monitoring Project said it was clear that the medical school would no longer listen to the group's concerns. "UTMB doesn't have any intention of working with us," said A.J. Halvorsen, Monitoring Project negotiator.

UTMB issued a statement saying its charity policy is appropriate. "We have accommodated most of the suggestions from the community group," the statement said. "UTMB's charity policy is sound and fits within the context of our primary mission."

Monitoring Project negotiator Joe Compian said UTMB adopted only a few of the group's suggestions, including making the charity policy publicly available and posting it in Spanish. An easy-to-read patient's guide to the charity policy is on the UTMB website, but it is linked to the actual policy that Monitoring Project officials say remains unchanged.

Talks broke off temporarily in May of last year when UTMB posted the policy without consulting the Monitoring Project, which had suggested extensive changes.

The Monitoring Project issued a report in 2009 titled "Clearing the Fog" and issued updates last year that said it was impossible for prospective UTMB patients to read the policy and understand whether they were eligible for financial assistance. The group said the policy does not explain how UTMB decides who receives assistance, rejects prospective patients before they are screened for ability to pay, lacks an appeal process, and includes a residency qualification that is not required under state law.

"We don't even know who is making these decisions and we have not been able to get any rationale for those decisions," said Dr. Merle Lenihan, a Monitoring Project negotiator. "We all know that it's affecting people and people really are suffering and dying because of these policies."

### *Figures not in dispute*

The report also questioned the ethics of UTMB using the needs of its medical students to study certain illnesses as a condition for granting financial assistance or free care.

The number of uninsured patients cared for by UTMB declined from 3,182 in 2008, the year Hurricane Ike struck the island, to 233 in 2011, according to data collected by Lenihan. UTMB has not disputed the figures.

The UTMB statement said the hospital feels an obligation to provide charity care "within the primary context of our mission," which it says is medical education, research and improving the health-care system.

Halvorsen said the Monitoring Project is not asking UTMB to accept more charity cases, only that to make its policy more fair and transparent.

"All we are saying is that you owe the public the information on how and where you spend your money," she said.

### ***'Out of step,' says critic***

The Galveston County organization is one of many nationwide working with local hospitals to be more responsive to community needs, said Jessica Curtis, director of the Hospital Accountability Project for Boston-based Community Catalyst, a nonprofit advocacy group. "Over time we've seen coalition members work with hospitals and come up with solutions," said Curtis, who is familiar with the Galveston group's negotiations.

Curtis said UTMB's charity policy is "out of step and out of line with what even the hospital industry is doing."

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