

## Time run out for Ike funds

By T.J. Aulds | Posted: Saturday, October 2, 2010 12:00 am

Thousands of Galveston County residents who were getting assistance in their Hurricane Ike recovery from local social service agencies will be cut off from help after Congress failed to pass legislation that would extend the time period the \$40 million in Social Services Block Grant money could be spent. The deadline to spend the money was Thursday.

It was expected that Congress would grant an extension to the program since it would not require extra money. While funds were allocated last year they actually were not available until February of this year. The problem was that the deadline to spend the \$50 million allocated to social service agencies in Galveston County was Thursday.

The bill passed the U.S. Senate easily late Wednesday and was sent to the House for what supporters thought would be a voice vote called unanimous consent. For legislation to be considered for a unanimous consent vote no member of the U.S. House can object to the vote.

The bill never made it to the floor because someone objected.

### Services Cut Staff Laid Off

With those funds no longer available the Gulf Coast Center's homeless day support center will close its doors the mobile mental health response team will be scuttled access to transportation for mental health patients will be reduced and the expanded counseling service offices in Texas City and Galveston will be closed Carolyn Rose of the Gulf Coast Center said.

It also resulted in 35 people mostly mental health counselors losing their jobs Rose said.

"It means 177 adults who are suffering from severe mental illness will be waiting to get in through the front door (for counseling)" Rose said. "We will have to reduce services and that creates more delays."

The loss of services comes at the same time that demand has increased and not just because of struggles recovering from Ike.

"It's been general economics the loss of jobs from UTMB the threats of job loses at NASA and the general conditions across the country" Rose said.

### Human Toll Of Inaction

The loss of the funds also means that Willie Toliver 59 will have to find another way to get his medications and blood level test strips to manage his diabetes. The Galveston resident had

depended on a prescription assistance program from The Jesse Tree to buy his test strips which cost about \$50 a month.

"I'll just have to find another way to get the strips and I will probably have to cut back how many times a day I test" Toliver said. "I am supposed to take the test twice a day. I'll probably cut that down to just once or even skip a day."

Ted Hanley The Jesse Tree's executive director called the funding stop "a huge blow."

The Jesse Tree still was trying to recover from the damage caused by Ike as well as manage the increase in people who come to the agency for assistance that ranges from health care assistance to utility assistance to prescription assistance.

"A huge percentage of people who visit us are Galveston County residents that have two incomes but can't pay their bills without extra help" he said. "There are some that can't afford to put gas in their car to get to work."

Hanley said that before the storm The Jesse Tree had on average 122 to 125 people a day come for assistance. Shortly after Ike that spiked at about 400 to 450 a day.

Now it is about 300 to 325 people which is more than double the average before the storm.

#### More Time Needed

"It's not as if we were asking for more money we were just asking for extra time to spend it" Rose said.

Like much of the federal dollars that were earmarked for this region post Ike the time difference between Congress allocating the funds and dollars actually arriving or becoming available was significant. While Congress approved the block grant funding in 2009 it set a 12-month limit for the funds to be spent.

Problem was the money actually didn't become available for the collection of social service agencies until late February.

"We just needed more time" Joe Compian of Gulf Coast Interfaith said. "There's \$100 million that could be put to good use that is no longer available."

#### The Blame Game

"It is deplorable that Congress failed to pass an extension for the SSBG funds for Ike victims" Rep. Pete Olson R-Sugar Land whose district includes parts of Galveston County said. "The Houston delegation was united in addressing the needs of Ike victims and I am appalled that any member would oppose addressing what is a minor issue for Congress but a major issue for those still recovering from Hurricane Ike."

Olson chastised leaders of the Democratically controlled Congress for derailing the assistance.

”Unfortunately Senate Democrats waited until the eleventh hour to address this problem and under the parameters that the bill came to the House — requiring unanimous consent of all 435 members — a single member can derail this process.”

But blame seemed to be crossing the aisle.

Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee D-Houston told local supporters that the Republican leadership in the House objected to the bill. Then Sen. John Cornyn’s office was quoted by several media outlets as having laid blame on the bill’s death on Rep. Todd Tiahrt R-Kansas a member of the House Appropriations Committee.

In an e-mail to The Daily News Tiahrt spokesman Sam Sackett said his boss wasn’t to blame but hinted Rep. Jerry Lewis R-Calif. who is the ranking member on the appropriations committee killed the legislation.

Not so Lewis’ Deputy Chief of Staff Jim Specht said.

”Neither Congressman Lewis nor Congressman Tiahrt made a formal objection to SB 3774 when it was sent over from the Senate at the last minute on Wednesday” Specht said in an e-mail to The Daily News.

”House Democratic leaders informally inquired of Republican leaders whether it was possible to get a unanimous consent and were told that it was not possible. Congressman Lewis was not a part of that discussion. Because they knew they could not clear it by unanimous consent Democratic leaders did not introduce SB 3774 and no floor action was taken.”

Specht did not explain why Republican leaders did not think a unanimous consent vote was possible. Olson and others pledged the legislation would be revived once Congress gavels back into session after the November elections.

”What is important is that we will continue to work with leaders on both sides of the House to get this bill passed when the House reconvenes” Compian said.