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Prospects dim for full funding of AIDS drugs for low-income Texans



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A Senate Finance subcommittee charged with spreading budget cuts across social services programs took a step Thursday toward possibly restricting free drugs for about 14,000 Texans with HIV or AIDS.

The Texas HIV Medication Program, which supplies life-sustaining anti-retroviral drugs to people with HIV or AIDS who can't afford them, will run out of money in the next two years and be forced to cut off enrollment, tighten eligibility or stop covering some drugs unless the state provides an additional \$19.2 million, officials have said.

But in trying to decide which proposed cuts should be halted if senators can scrounge several billion in "non tax revenue," the Subcommittee on Medicaid gave a "priority two" to the Department of State Health Services' request for the AIDS drugs funds. It's too early to say there's no way lawmakers will find some money, but it's at least a temporary -- and big -- setback. Basically, it didn't make the cut to be in a group of \$4.5 billion in items in social services recommended for restoration. It's in a second tier of some \$2.6 billion worth.

Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, the panel's chairwoman, noted that Senate GOP leaders' two-year budget includes \$109 million for the AIDS drugs program. In the current cycle, it received about \$110 million, said department chief David Lakey.

The recession, a continuing drop in the percentage of Texans with insurance and the drugs' astonishing success at keeping patients alive have stoked enrollment in the program. About two-thirds of the cost is covered with federal funds.

On Thursday, Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, said she doubts "priority one" items will be funded, much less ones given a lower ranking.

"We are basically making a decision on who lives and who dies," she said of the AIDS drugs.

Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, said failing to fully fund the drug program could speed the spread of AIDS, as people don't get their illness stabilized. Sen. Bob Deuell, R-Greenville, asked Lakey if local and private groups could take up the slack. Lakey said that would be difficult. The drugs cost the program about \$6,700 per person a year, he said, and for someone other than the state to tap federal Ryan White Act funds would be complicated, he said.

Last fall, we did a story about possible retrenchments in the program that loomed with Texas' budget crisis.

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We should care more about sexual health. It says on Positivemate.com, that is the most trusted STD support and safe dating community, there are currently 33 million people living with HIV in the world. No consternation there're 600,000+ members on Positivemate, some celebrities also find support and love there.

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