

Florida inks deal to temporarily fix AIDS Drug Assistance Program

By [Travis Pillow](#) | 02.03.11 | 12:28 pm

The Florida Department of Health has reached an agreement that will provide drugs to patients relying on its cash-strapped AIDS Drug Assistance Program.

The program [was set to run out of money this month](#). Under the agreement, Welvista, a charitable group set up by pharmaceutical companies, will provide drugs to 6,500 patients till April, when the next round of federal funding is set to arrive.

The health department has enough money to provide for the remainder of the more than 10,000 patients who currently rely on the program, according to department spokeswoman Michelle Dahnke.

Dahnke said the new system should be up and running by Feb. 14, but officials are still working out the logistics.

“They’ve been in meetings pretty much nonstop with all the different parties,” including Welvista, drug companies, pharmacies and county health departments, she said.

Officials [have been working around the clock](#) to find a solution to the funding crisis. Drug companies were worried about setting a precedent in which states would rely on the industry to fill gaps created by funding shortfalls, according to people familiar with the negotiations.

“It took a lot of convincing,” said Murray Penner of the National Association of State and Territorial AIDS Directors, who helped broker the agreement.

Groups like Welvista already provide medication to patients on waiting lists for drug assistance programs, which [have been growing](#) since states starting limiting access this year because of funding shortfalls.

What next?

Demand for the programs, which provide medication to the uninsured and the working poor, has been rising, fueled by a slow economy.

Daniel Montoya of the National Minority AIDS Council said there are concerns among patients and advocates that funding shortfalls may be “taxing the private infrastructure.” How long will private companies be able to provide drugs to an growing number of uninsured patients unable to get government assistance?

Montoya said the council, [along with other groups, is pushing](#) for a \$100 million increase in federal funding for AIDS Drug Assistance Programs, which would help bring patients off waiting lists and prevent future shortages.

Florida has “by far the worst situation,” accounting for nearly half the patients on waiting lists nationwide, he added.

Lynda Dee, a spokeswoman for the Fair Pricing Coalition, which was involved in the negotiations with Welvista, said Florida provides a relatively low level state funding — \$9.5 million, roughly equal to 10 percent of the funds it receives from the federal government — while many other states provide 20 percent or more.

The state has found a solution to the current funding gap, but “the bigger problem” is that in a matter of months, “Florida is going to have this happen again,” she said.

“This is only a quick, temporary Band-Aid,” said Michael Rajner, a Florida HIV/AIDS advocate who himself relies on the program for medication. “This will happen again next year if the state doesn’t provide more money.”

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