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## South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

### Florida sidesteps AIDS drug crisis – for now

#### 6,500 would have lost access to medications

By Bob LaMendola, Sun Sentinel

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Florida has averted a major crisis that would have forced the state to drop 6,500 uninsured HIV/AIDS patients from a cash-strapped state program that supplies their life-saving drugs, activists said Tuesday.

State health officials were finalizing a first-of-its-kind rescue in which drugmakers would temporarily donate medicine to two-thirds of the 10,000 Floridians in the AIDS Drug Assistance Program. Half of them are in South Florida, and about one in eight are in Central Florida.

Activists who helped arrange the deal said they were relieved, but they scolded Florida for cutting money for AIDS drugs and letting the program get into deep trouble. The rescue will drain money from programs that supply drugs to other uninsured patients.

"None of us is happy with the Florida fiasco," said Lynda Dee, a spokeswoman for the Fair Pricing Coalition, a national advocacy group. "This inequitable use of industry [charity for Florida] could have a very significant, negative impact on other patients from other states."

Tom Liberti, AIDS chief at the Florida Department of Health, who has been struggling with funding shortages for a year, issued a brief statement saying only that the state is grateful for the help.

Without the deal, the 6,500 patients would have been left without AIDS drugs, which cost \$10,000 per year. Interrupting drug therapy is a problem because studies show that missing even 10 percent of doses can allow the virus to become resistant.

The drug program's woes stem from rising unemployment that left more HIV/AIDS patients uninsured. Federal funds that pay for most of the program remained flat at about \$83 million last year, and a budget crunch led Florida legislators to trim the state share by \$1 million, to \$9.5 million.

The state responded by starting a waiting list last summer that is now at 3,000 people, as well as covering fewer drugs and dropping 350 moderate-income patients. Even so, the program stood about \$14 million short of making it until April 1, when a new year of federal funds starts. The state expected to drop the 6,500 as of early February.

"They were up against the wall," said Murray Penner, deputy executive director of the National Alliance of

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State and Territorial AIDS Directors, who helped broker the rescue.

Under the plan, five drugmakers will donate \$14 million in drugs to a South Carolina nonprofit group, Welvista, which will distribute them to same locations where the 6,500 receive their drugs, Penner said.

The rescue will stop on April 1, when Florida will take back the 6,500. Penner said the drug companies were initially reluctant to participate, in fear of encouraging other states to shortchange drug programs.

"This is a one-time, emergency, not-to-be-repeated transaction," Penner said.

The rescue averts the emergency but does not eliminate the waiting list or solve the money shortfall. That will be up to Gov. Rick Scott and the state Legislature, Penner said.

"Florida dodged the bullet, short term," Penner said. "I would not say that the answers are there long term."

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