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Patients plead for their lives

Health board implored to keep funding for HIV medicine

By POLLY ROSS HUGHES

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AUSTIN -- Not every day do Texans stand before the state Board of Health and accuse it of contemplating "mass murder."

Thursday, however, the rhetoric grew hot as 250 patients with HIV/AIDS and their advocates pleaded with the board not to save money by throwing thousands of Texans off life-sustaining HIV medications.

The Texas Department of Health, saying its HIV medication program will run \$37 million short over the next three years, has asked the Board of Health to approve a proposed plan to cut funding for some 4,200 Texans dependent on the drugs. The board oversees the Department of Health.

"I am the mother of a longtime survivor. I am going to get emotional," said Mary Ellen Featherstone, whose son has survived HIV/AIDS for 16 years. "To me, taking away the medications is nothing short of mass murder."

The board meets Feb. 27 to decide whether to implement the cutbacks. Rep. Garnet Coleman, D-Houston, said the board should delay action to give the Legislature the chance to find the money to keep people alive.

"These are very expensive medications. Without them, people die," he said.

"In this state of Texas, the decision should be made on life and death by the members of the Legislature and the governor, the lieutenant governor, whoever (was) elected by the people, not the Board of Health," he said.

The life-and-death battle unfolds as the Texas Legislature confronts tough questions over how to close a nearly \$10 billion budget shortfall.

"I think you're making a doomsday scenario out of information that may or may not be true," Gov. Rick Perry said when asked about the gravity of the situation.

"I'm sure there will be lots of horror stories that people either come forward with or would like to drive the budget with over the course of the next four-plus months," he added.

The proposed rule change at the heart of the controversy would limit funding for the life-sustaining drugs to people who make no more than \$12,404 a year, 140 percent of the federal poverty rate.

"I do not know how to explain to them that their lives cost too much," said Wayne Bockmon, medical director of the Montrose Clinic, which serves 1,000 HIV patients, some 40 percent of whom would lose the drugs.

"We will not stop," he vowed. "This issue will not go away."

Health Commissioner Dr. Eduardo Sanchez conceded that it isn't easy to be told by countless witnesses that health officials are deliberately taking steps that will cut short their lives.

"This is very, very hard. It's tough to accept that charge. We're trying to do the best we can do," he said, adding that health officials have discussed the problem with the governor's staff.

David Daily, a former EDS software engineer from Houston's Montrose neighborhood, has survived 16 years since his diagnosis. He asked the board to pause in silence and consider what the rule means.

"My experience tells me to speak from the heart. I've been in business. I worked for a large Texas company. I know the bureaucracy," he said.

"I think when I'm hit emotionally, when I'm hit in my heart, I have more impact on other people when I carry that message," he said.

Susan Sievers, who lives in a rural setting on the outskirts of Houston, turned 41 on Monday and is putting her 18-year-old son through college.

She works full time, educating people about the HIV/AIDS virus and said she would be forced to quit her job in order to keep her drugs.

She said she contracted AIDS from her late husband. In 1979, he was in a car accident and required a transfusion.

"Neither of us knew it," she said of the early stages of his illness. "Remember my face, because I will be one of the people you cut off. I probably wouldn't live a year."

Yolanda Marshall of Fort Worth said someone needs to speak up for women and children.

"Who will take care of my children? The state?" she asked.

Tracy L. Wilson said 72 people from Houston clinics attended the hearing, arriving in two buses.

"These medications have saved my life. We know where the larger picture lies. It's at the state Capitol. By passing these guidelines, I think it sends a premature and wrong message to the Legislature," he said.

Chronicle legislative intern Jennifer McInnis contributed to this report.



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