

RIO GRANDE VALLEY

Indigent health committee gets members, no travel budget

BY MELISSA MCEVER
VALLEY MORNING STAR

Patients who would like a say in the future of the indigent health-care system won't get much help from the Texas Legislature.

Lawmakers this year passed legislation establishing an indigent health care advisory committee that will offer counsel to the Texas Health and Human Services Commission on indigent health issues.

The bill requires four of the committee's 11 members to be indigent patients or people representing the indigent - however, it makes no provision for those patients' travel expenses so they can attend committee meetings in Austin.

"It's going to make it very difficult for a consumer to travel to Austin. ... These are the people who don't have the means to do it," said Petra Reyna, coordinator of special programs for the South Texas Center for Rural Public Health. Reyna is submitting an application to serve on the committee. "It's shortsighted to want consumers to participate and not give them special consideration."

The committee will begin meeting in October, officials said. Its objectives, according to the legislation, will be to complete a feasibility study

and develop recommendations for a pilot program that would regionalize county indigent health-care services.

Local officials said they were baffled by the lack of provision for patients' travel expenses, and also wondered why they'd heard so little about the committee's development.

Dr. Elena Marin, director of Su Clinica Familiar, said she had not received notification about the committee and wasn't aware of anyone who had. Members of the Rio Grande Valley Health Services District board, which is planning the construction of two indigent clinics in Cameron and Hidalgo counties, also said they hadn't heard about the committee.

Paul Villas, chairman of the district's board, said he hoped Valley officials would participate.

"I think we should have substantial representation from the Rio Grande Valley on the committee," he said.

Health and Human Services Commission spokeswoman Jennifer Harris said that the commission and the Texas Department of State Health Services developed an "extensive list" of contacts throughout the state, including organizations, community groups, charities and health-care providers, who were notified about the committee's creation.

"Both (agencies) are committed to ensuring that this committee includes broad, diverse representation," Harris said in a statement.

That representation includes health-care consumers, and Harris said the agencies want to help with any financial barriers or difficulties traveling so that patients can participate. Proposed ideas include allowing some members to communicate via teleconferencing or planning meetings in other regions of the state besides Austin so members don't have to travel as far.

"We certainly want to make sure there is strong participation in the committee, so we'll do all we can to accommodate everyone's schedule and financial circumstances," Harris said.

Reyna, who read about the committee in the newspaper, said the costs of traveling won't be a hardship for her, but likely would be for indigent-health consumers.

"I hope they'll have the meetings down here sometimes or rotate them to limit the expense," she said.

Reyna hopes participating in the committee will offer the Valley a voice in policy decisions.

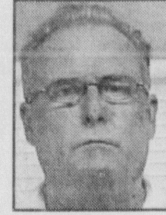
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Wright turns self in, jailed until Sept. 2 hearing

Counsel resigns after indecent exposure incident

BY SERGIO CHAPA
THE BROWNSVILLE HERALD

Former Commissioner's Court legal counsel Doug Wright was jailed Wednesday after he turned himself in to authorities for an alleged deferred adjudication violation.



WRIGHT

Wright surrendered to Cameron County Court at-Law No. 3 Judge Dan Robles and was denied bond, ordered instead to remain in county jail until a Sept. 2 hearing.

Wright, 56, resigned from his position as legal counsel for the Cameron County Commissioner's Court through a letter delivered Tuesday.

The Wednesday-morning surrender marked Wright's first public appearance since

South Padre Island police arrested him Aug. 13 for public intoxication and disorderly conduct by exposing his genitals.

According to a South Padre Island police report, Wright was drinking and his genitals exposed while he was sitting in a lawn chair within sight of other guests at The Tiki Lounge, 6608 Padre Blvd.

Prosecutors said the arrest violated the terms of a six-month deferred adjudication sentence in which Wright agreed not to violate any other laws and not to consume any alcohol for six months.

Court records show that Robles gave Wright the sentence in March as a punishment for a duty upon striking a fixed object charge for a Nov. 20 auto accident at the foot of the Queen Isabella Memorial Bridge.

Robles issued a warrant for Wright's arrest on Aug. 19 based on a motion filed by the district attorney's office saying that Wright violated his deferred adjudication.

District Attorney Armando Villalobos said his office is disputing Robles' acquittal on a weapons

charge based on arguments that a no contest plea is equal to a guilty plea.

Court records show that police originally charged Wright with DWI and unlawfully carrying a weapon after they found a handgun in his SUV during the Nov. 20 accident.

According to *Brownsville Herald* archives, Robles dismissed the charges after Wright pleaded no contest to all three charges.

The district attorney said his office filed an appeal against Wright for the unlawful carrying of a weapon charge in the 13th Court of Appeals and hoped a decision would provide resolution.

"We deal with plea bargains every day," Villalobos said. "We need to know whether someone who pleads guilty can be acquitted or not. If we're wrong, we'll change our procedures."

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Brownsville Herald reporter Sara Inés Calderón contributed to this report.

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