

- SUBJECT:** Establishing the South Texas Center for Rural Public Health
- COMMITTEE:** Higher Education — favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 7 ayes — Rangel, F. Brown, Farabee, J. Jones, Morrison, E. Reyna, West  
1 nay — Uher  
1 absent — Goolsby
- WITNESSES:** For — Dr. Ramiro R. Casso, South Texas Community College; Mike R. Perez, City of McAllen  
Against — None  
On — Dr. James J. Cole and Dr. Ciro Sumaya, Texas A&M University System Health Science Center
- BACKGROUND:** The 74th Legislature in 1995 established the Texas A&M University System Health Science Center (TAMUS-HSC) School of Rural Public Health as part of an initiative to address rural health concerns. The South Texas Center for Rural Public Health, located in McAllen, is an extension of the health science center. Through outreach programs, the center focuses on public health programs that assist people in the Rio Grande Valley, especially people living in colonias.
- DIGEST:** HB 910 would require the board of regents of the Texas A&M University System to establish the TAMUS-HSC South Texas Center for Rural Public Health. The center would be charged with developing and providing community-based instructional sites to educate public health professionals and to deliver health education outreach programs. The center could include public or private medical, dental, nursing or other health care or educational institutions for participation in its programs. It could conduct research programs related to education, outreach, and local public health issues. It could operate educational facilities located throughout the Rio Grande Valley area as determined appropriate by the board of regents.

The center could be used to provide public health graduate education or other levels of health education in the area served by the center in connection with any component institution of the Texas A&M system. It could use community outreach programs to provide people receiving education at the center with necessary experience.

The board of regents could execute affiliation or coordination agreements with other educational entities or institutions in the region, or with health-service providers, to help establish or operate the center. The board would have to assign responsibility for managing the center to TAMUS-HSC. The center would be subject to continuing supervision by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

The center's operating costs would be paid from operating funds of TAMUS-HSC. The board could solicit, accept, and administer gifts and grants from any public or private person or entity for the benefit of the center.

The board would have to implement the center only if the Legislature appropriated funds specifically for that purpose. If the 77th Legislature appropriated funds specifically to implement the center, the Texas A&M system would have to establish and operate the center not later than January 1 of the first fiscal year for which the appropriation was made. Not later than August 31, 2002, the coordinating board would have to prepare an impact statement that examined the initial implementation of the bill's provisions and would have to deliver it to the board of regents and to the chairs of the standing higher education committees of each house of the Legislature.

This bill would take effect September 1, 2001.

**SUPPORTERS  
SAY:**

HB 910 is needed to establish the South Texas Center for Rural Public Health in statute. Currently an extension of the TAMUS-HSC, the center is a community-based partnership with the Colonias Program at Texas A&M University, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, and the South Texas Community College.

The center is operating on funds from Texas A&M, which has provided about \$300,000 over the past two years. It is an active program that has

accomplished a great deal with local and university support and is designed to meet the needs of the border area. The center has 16 students earning credits toward a master's degree in public health. Classes are delivered via distance-learning technology and local adjunct faculty.

The center does not intend to compete with or duplicate programs with the University of Texas Regional Academic Health Center (RAHC) in Brownsville. The border area is dramatically underserved. Having two entities would enhance the research needed to find solutions to the multitude of health problems, such as tuberculous and diabetes, that are related to poverty and lack of information and knowledge about what promotes health and prevents disease.

The local medical and business communities and the city of McAllen are committed to supporting the center financially and have expressed a willingness to help the center expand and continue its success. The city of McAllen has contributed \$250,000 in support for the past two years and has donated land worth nearly \$2 million in the McAllen medical complex for a permanent facility.

The center's outreach program is integrated and actively works through a large mobile van unit with local partners such as Head Start, migrant health promotions, and school districts. It addresses the serious lack of access of rural residents in this area to public health professionals. It focuses on programs such as health education and learning programs in nutrition, immunization, prenatal care, and risky behavior.

The programs assist citizens in the Rio Grande Valley who historically have encountered barriers to health-care providers and programs because of their geographic isolation, economic constraints, and transportation challenges. If allowed to expand, the center's goal would be to develop additional resource centers that would continue to target rural health issues and promote comprehensive prevention. The center already has secured several grants, including a Texas Department of Health Diabetes Consortium Grant, which screens patients in the colonias and ensures referrals to local clinics.

OPPONENTS  
SAY:

Texas already has a high-quality, extensive medical education system. The University of Texas RAHC in Brownsville will begin offering public health classes in fall 2001 and also offers public health services. Establishing the South Texas Center for Rural Public Health would create a very similar medical entity only 50 miles from the RAHC. This would be duplicative and a poor use of state funds. Inevitably, it would bring about increased costs for the state. Texas should not undertake a financial burden of an undetermined amount during times of economic uncertainty.

NOTES:

According to the bill's fiscal note, establishment and operation of the center would cost about \$5.3 million in general revenue-related funds in fiscal 2002-03 and about \$3.4 million each year thereafter.

Article 11 of the House-passed version of SB 1 by Ellis, the fiscal 2002-03 general appropriations bill, contains a \$6.5 million appropriation for TAMUS-HSC to establish the South Texas Center for Rural Public Health.