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## Paying for Health Care in Texas Prisons

Nathan Bernier - KUT News



The Briscoe Unit in Dilley, Texas is one of 112 state prisons scattered across Texas. Photo Credit: debcll (Flickr)

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**Texas has more than 150 thousand prison inmates. And for the past sixteen years, their medical needs have been outsourced to a pair of universities. The University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston handles about 80 percent of inmate patients. Texas Tech University handles the rest. As Nathan Bernier reports, the goal of these programs has been to cut costs, but some critics argue that you only get what you pay for.**

June 14, 2010 · Most of the people who run the Texas prison health care system are quite proud of how little money they spend on it. Doctor Owen Murray is in charge of UTMB's prison health care program.

"From a delivery system, it really is a well conceived model, and it has really worked out well for the state and as well for our offender patients. The fact that we have one prison hospital for the most part, that allows us to centralize our hospital and subspecialty care, really has kind of advantaged us to be able to improve our care but also be really cognizant of our costs."

Those costs are now among the lowest in the nation. Texas spends about nine-dollars per inmate, per day on health care. That's close a fourth of what California spends by comparison. One way they save that money is through telemedicine, where medical specialists can examine a patient hundreds of miles away

though an audio-video link.

"Another way is the 340 B prescription pricing, which is the lowest prescription drug pricing in the country that anybody can get."

That's Marc Levin. He's with an Austin-based free market think tank called the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

"So I think there's a lot of factors to where it's more efficient to have inmates that are really ill to go to Galveston or Lubbock, and then but there is some clinics or so forth within the units, and there's telemedicine, so you're not trying to replicate the expertise of a big medical center at every prison, because we have 112 prisons."

But even with the cost savings, UTMB is struggling to pay for prison health care. The total cost of the correctional health care in Texas is \$1.2 billion dollars. Mainly because of an aging prison population with chronic disease, Dr. Owen says his university's program is facing a loss of \$80 million dollars.

"Well that is true, but historically the way that has worked is the legislature has come back in the next session and through a supplemental appropriation, allowed the university to be paid for those health care costs."

That may be the case, but this time around, Texas lawmakers are staring down the barrel of a budget gap that could reach \$18 billion dollars. So last month, UTMB sent layoff notices to more than 300 employees. But that raises a question: Can UTMB can still provide a legally required level of prison health care when 12 percent workforce has been laid off. Allen Hightower is executive director of the state's Correctional Managed Healthcare Committee.

"I can assure you that the last thing any of us want to do is to breach what a reasonable person would think is a constitutional level of health care."

Scott Henson is a career political consultant who also writes about criminal justice at his blog Grits for Breakfast.

"In some ways, it's a game of chicken because the feds can always come in and do what they did in California and say, 'You know, you can't scale back that much.'"

Some activists say Texas has already crossed the line and is no longer providing a constitutionally mandated level of care to its inmates. Helga Dill runs a prisoners' rights group called Texas CURE.

"They just cut the medication in half. They turn patients away because they don't feel like they need to be treated. I get 20 to 30 letters a day. So I don't care what these officials say."

Almost everyone admits, providing prisoners with health care is not getting any cheaper. For example, "geriatric" inmates make up about 7 percent of the prison population. But they already account for one-third of the system's hospital costs. This population is just one of the areas that UTMB officials are targeting to cut costs.