

Illegal immigrant health: \$650,000,000 a year

Contributed by Will Lutz
Fri, Dec 12, 2008, 01:34 PM

The Health and Human Services Commission estimated this month that Texas spent \$81.2 million in fiscal year 2007 on free health care for illegal aliens, mostly through the children's Medicaid program.

Additionally, the HHSC report said, Texas county hospital districts spent an estimated \$596.8 million in 2006 on mandated, uncompensated health care for illegal immigrants.

The commission had to prepare the report as a result of Rider 59 to its budget, placed there by former Rep. Dianne White Delisi (R-Temple).

The report's results are certain to intensify the debate over illegal immigration. "I'd like to take that information and use it to bill the federal government," said Rep. Leo Berman (R-Tyler), who has filed many bills to try and curtail illegal immigration, "and let them know that they have hit us with one of the largest unfunded mandates in the history of our country by requiring that we provide free health care and free education to illegal aliens."

"I think the study will help in the upcoming session to show member of the House and Senate the costs of supporting illegal aliens in Texas. We've got to do something about it, and the time is now … All we need is for elected officials to obey their oath of office, and we can get this done [curtailing illegal immigration]."

Because hospitals do not ascertain immigration status when someone requests emergency care, the agency used data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey to guess the proportion of emergency Medicaid used by illegal immigrants. In addition to the \$80 million in state payments, the study estimated that the federal government provided \$120 million for emergency Medicaid expenditures for illegal immigrants. (The remaining \$1.2 million in state expenditure comes from the family violence program.)

The commission used a variety of data sources, notably a computerized study on the uncompensated care population conducted in Travis, Hays, and Williamson counties, to estimate how much Texas hospitals provide in uncompensated emergency care to illegal immigrants.

A federal law called EMTALA – the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act of 1986 – requires hospitals that receive federal Medicaid and Medicare funding to accept all emergency patients regardless of citizenship and ability to pay. It effectively has become one of the largest unfunded or underfunded mandates in American history, resulting in American hospitals rendering billions of dollars in services for which they are not compensated by the patient.

These mandates are unfunded, in that an illegal immigrant is generally not eligible for federal health care programs like Medicaid except in some emergency situations. There are some adjustments to the federal Medicaid formulas for states like Texas that have a disproportionate share of uncompensated care, but they do not fully reimburse Texas health care providers.

In effect, every user of a Texas public hospital pays – through hospital bills – for free health care given to illegal immigrants. This is a particularly serious problem, because illegal immigrants often work for cash or work for employers who do not offer health insurance (using the taxpayer-backed county hospital districts, in effect, as their health care plan).

The top five hospitals for delivery of uncompensated care for illegal immigrants are not particularly surprising. They are as follows: Ben Taub Hospital Houston (\$204 million), Parkland Hospital Dallas (\$135 million), John Peter Smith Hospital Fort Worth (\$133 million), R.E. Thomason Hospital El Paso (\$37 million), and University Hospital San Antonio (\$25 million).

The Texas Conservative Coalition argued that the information presented in the study demonstrates the need for action. "The cost estimates underscore the imperative for the state to take reasoned effort by the state to abate illegal immigration," said policy analyst Brent Connett. "Taxpayers should never have to bear the cost of illegal immigration, especially in tough economic times."

The Lone Star Foundation, publisher of this newsletter, conducted a study of the costs of illegal immigration to Texas released June 2006. The study estimated the total cost at \$3.5 billion net. Of that amount, \$572.5 million was due to health care. But the study's uncompensated care figure — \$393 million – was based on 2002 data. The 2006 data released by the Health and Human Services Commission shows how rapidly the problem has grown.