

State pumps nearly \$5 million into new HIV drugs for poor citizens

The Texas Health Department will help nearly 5,000 Texans purchase medication

AUSTIN (AP) — Most of a \$5 million state health fund will be used to purchase new drugs to combat HIV, according to a plan announced by state health officials.

The Texas Health Department faced a decision this month whether to focus an anti-HIV program for the poor on the latest drugs to fight the virus that causes AIDS.

missioner was able to find to continue supplying certain drugs to the indigent HIV population," said Tom Sheffield, chairman of the Austin Area Comprehensive HIV Planning Council.

ication purchasing through the end of the year. The latest treatment for AIDS is a combination of two to three drugs that can cost into the hundreds and thousands of dollars per patient each month based in part on dosage.

"We are grateful and pleased for the additional funds the commissioner was able to find..."

— TOM SHEFFIELD
chairman, Austin Area Comprehensive HIV Planning Council

Smith said. The department was searching for other funds to continue the additional med-

According to the department, between 49,400 and 71,100 Texans have HIV.

Indictment of Hidalgo officials pared down

County Judge J. Edgar Ruiz had 66 counts dismissed, the most of the five defendants

LAREDO (AP) — A federal judge dismissed part of a 102-count indictment against five Hidalgo County officials Tuesday as their bid-rigging trial wound to a close.

charges against all the defendants as well as an additional 59 mail-fraud counts against Ruiz. Bribery charges against two defendants also were dropped.

turn, prosecutors allege, Gonzalez paid them more than \$25,000 in bribes in the form of cash and airline tickets.

ly nothing to do with the cash deposits, because it doesn't make sense," Surovic said.

Gonzalez pleaded guilty to a lesser charge in exchange for his testimony.

Defense attorneys locked on a common theme during their closing arguments, repeating their contentions that Gonzalez plotted the bid-rigging scheme and carried it out without the officials' knowledge, then turned them in to save himself.

In his closing argument, Assistant U.S. Attorney Greg Surovic tried to steer away from complex issues such as competitive bidding and purchasing policy, telling the jurors, "The facts are pretty simple."

"These individuals on trial today had nothing to do with that scheme," Cisneros said. "Perhaps the only thing (Ruiz) may be guilty of is having met the devil himself."

Cisneros said the additional charges were dropped against his client because of lack of evidence.

Cisneros contended the government's entire case hinged on "a thief, an admitted felon."

"(The government) was just piggybacking Ruiz with the other fellows, and there was really no evidence to support it," he said.

"This is about whether or not you believe that rat. ... Do you believe him. Do you really believe him?" he quietly asked the jurors, peering into their eyes.

Kazen indicated Monday he planned to slim down the indictment to simplify the case for the jury. His action didn't help the other defendants as much, dropping the number of counts they face by three at most.

This is the second time the officials have faced trial on the charges. The first trial, held in Hidalgo County, ended in December with a hung jury. The retrial was moved to Laredo because of extensive publicity.

The officials are charged with awarding about \$1 million in county business at inflated prices to companies represented by former county purchasing agent Ramiro Gonzalez. In re-

The first trial last two months, while the retrial wrapped up after just two weeks.

Affirmative action halted at Houston Transit Agency

A U.S. District Judge signed an order Monday that bars race or sex from being used as factors in awarding contracts

HOUSTON (AP) — A transit authority program that awarded \$41.4 million worth of contracts to businesses owned by women and minorities last year has been temporarily shut by a federal judge.

fore completion of the project, even if the information is volunteered.

Metro board Chairman Billy Burge said he was "embarrassed" because he thought the transit authority and the contractors association had a "firm handshake agreement" to settle the lawsuit in early March.

U.S. District Judge Lynn Hughes signed an order Monday that bars the Metropolitan Transit Authority from considering race or sex as factors in awarding contracts until the constitutionality of using such criteria can be reviewed.

Additionally, Metro may not require staff approval of a bid on non-technical grounds, nor may it base acceptance of bids or payment on contracts on sex or race.

Burge blamed the settlement's collapse on the appeals court ruling in the UT case.

According to Metro's 6-year-old Disadvantaged Business Enterprise program, bidders on prime contracts must attempt to use DBE subcontractors and suppliers for at least 21 percent of the gross contract price.

The constitutionality issue will be decided within 90 days. The judge will either issue a permanent injunction, rescind the temporary injunction or consider the merits of the case at the June 4 trial.

"I think this UT ruling let these guys say, 'Hey, we can whip these guys big-time now,'" he said.

When bids are submitted, prime contractors must identify subcontracted businesses owned by minorities and women, their work and their price.

Transit authority attorneys had expressed concern that complying with the court's order might endanger federal funding. Hughes said that was unlikely, but agreed to adjust the preliminary order if it becomes a serious threat.

Metro attorneys had sought to show that the DBE designation is not really a program but rather an expression of goals. They also asserted that minority partici-

After two days of hearings last week, Hughes ruled that preliminary evidence indicates the program unfairly discriminates against nonqualifying contractors and subcontractors.

The federal ruling was the second this month that could strike down an affirmative-action program in Texas.

But Hughes pointed out that program materials specify participation levels and threaten contract cancellation for noncompliance.

"No government may redress an injury it inflicted by giving its victim the rights of another," the judge wrote.

In March, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans rejected the admissions process at the University of Texas' law school because it relied partly on race. That ruling was temporarily stayed last week.

In addition, the program administrator testified that contractors are required to submit forms showing payments to approved subcontractors and suppliers in an effort to ensure compliance.

Hughes ordered Metro not to accept data about the participation of disadvantaged business enterprises in bids or contracts be-

The Houston Contractors Association, which contested the Metro policy, was jubilant over Hughes' ruling.

Fitzhugh submitted evidence of contracts denied and higher subcontractor costs because of the program.

Some people come into our lives and quickly go. Some stay for a while and leave footprints on our hearts and we will never be the same.

- Melanie Allen
- Tiffany Ashley
- Jill Allby
- Julie Averett
- Allison Barker
- Becky Baur
- Leslie Boutell
- Michelle Bryan
- Tami Cagle
- Kim Casey
- Kim Gallmore
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- Cristie Gill
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