

- SUBJECT:** Designating the provider of mental health services for Cameron County
- COMMITTEE:** Public Health — favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 5 ayes — Berlanga, Hirschi, Janek, Maxey, Rodriguez
0 nays
4 absent — Coleman, Delisi, Glaze, McDonald
- WITNESSES:** For — Dr. Anne S. Menz; the Rev. Dr. Charles Palmer, Volunteer Services Council; Wayne Potter; Mrs. Leland Martin

Against — Spencer McClure, Texas Council of Community MHMR Centers Inc.; Steve Womack, Tropical Texas Center

On — Don Gilbert, commissioner, Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation
- BACKGROUND:** Current law allows the Texas commissioner of mental health and mental retardation to name the local health authorities that receive state contracts for MHMR services.

Since 1982 the authority for Cameron County has been the Texas Tropical Center for Mental Health and Mental Retardation of Edinburg, Hidalgo County. The designation was made after it was requested by the commissioners courts for Cameron, Willacy and Hidalgo counties. From 1968 to 1982 the Rio Grande State Center (RGSC) in Harlingen, Cameron County, provided local mental health care for residents of Cameron County.
- DIGEST:** HB 1284 would direct the state commissioner of mental health and mental retardation to transfer all duties, functions and responsibilities of the mental health authority for Cameron County to the Rio Grande State Center. Existing contracts would not be impaired, and TxMHMR would be directed to develop a transition plan. The bill would take effect June 1, 1995, if approved by a two-thirds vote of the membership of each house, or September 1, 1995, if approved by a lesser margin.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

This bill is needed to improve the quality and continuity of care for mental health patients in Cameron County. The Rio Grande State Center is a full-service mental health facility that operates 40 beds in Cameron County, plus another 20 beds in Hidalgo County. In total, the center provides 130 beds for long-term residential care of adults with mental retardation, operates a vocational/educational unit, has a budget of about \$14 million, employs more than 500 people and admits approximately 2,100 patients a year. RGSC serves as the mental health authority for Kenedy, Kleberg, Duval, Brooks and Jim Wells counties and provides outpatient services in those counties. Before 1982 it also provided such services in Cameron County, and easily could do so again.

Mental health care in Cameron County has suffered from a lack of continuity of care and poor communication between two facilities. The present system allows individuals who are clearly in need of care to be overlooked. If RGSC were designated as the provider of services for Cameron County, services would improve, and petty turf battles between the Tropical Center and RGSC would end.

The designation of RGSC as the local authority would be consistent with TxMHMR's mandate to provide oversight of the local providers of care. TxMHMR's annual reviews of Tropical Center have not thoroughly reviewed the care provided, but rather have been a cursory spot check that minimal care is administered. A comprehensive audit of all mental health care provided in South Texas would clearly show the need for a single entity providing inpatient and outpatient mental health and mental retardation care.

If designated as the authority, the RGSC would continue to use the Tropical Center facilities and services in Cameron County through September 1, 1996. This transitional period would help to reduce the possibility of a disruption in service. All service contracts with Tropical Center would remain in effect and would be honored.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

This bill represents an attempt to undermine the statutory authority and professional expertise of the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation. It would create a narrow exception for a single county to resolve a local dispute in the Legislature and create bad precedent.

TxMHMR encourages local governmental entities to become involved in selection of the provider of local mental health care, and listened when the commissioners courts of Cameron, Willacy and Hidalgo Counties urged that Tropical Center be selected. TxMHMR thoroughly reviewed Tropical Center's ability to serve patients and agreed to designate it as the local provider of mental health care.

While care at Tropical Center could be improved, TxMHMR finds the current care satisfactory and believes the center should remain as the local authority. TxMHMR annually reviews the quality of care provided by Tropical Center and has renewed its contract for the last 13 years.

Money is not the answer to every problem, but it is important to note that Texas ranks 48th out of the 50 states in providing money for mental health care. On a per capita basis, Tropical Center is one of the lowest funded local mental health authorities among the 35 funded by the state. Half of the center's budget is provided by the state, the other half by local funds from Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy Counties. The Cameron County Commissioners Court financially supports Tropical Center. In addition Tropical Center provides services that are funded through federal grants, as well as by other state and local agencies.

OTHER
OPPONENTS
SAY:

The bill would fail to address the real problems in mental health care delivery in South Texas and would attempt to solve administrative problems legislatively. Better coordination of the delivery of services can and should be handled administratively. The new commissioner of TxMHMR has been on the job only a few months and should be allowed an opportunity to review the operations of the agency.