

PUBLIC COMMENTS

HB 784

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HEALTH

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Edinburg, TX

The last year was a very difficult time for many residents of Texas, particularly south Texas. The appearance of a previously-unknown virus led to an event not seen in the United States for over 100 years: a viral pandemic of global proportions. UTRGV started a diagnostic lab to help fight the pandemic. The UT Health RGV Clinical Laboratory participated in the STRAC testing program implemented by Gov. Abbott in April 2020, and operated 24/7 from April-July 2020 to test 10000s of samples flown in from all over Texas to help support the state's initiatives to fight the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In addition, the UTRGV laboratory also worked with county health departments and many other local entities to provide a high degree of reliable, rapid testing in response to the pandemic. To date, the UTRGV laboratory has tested over 100,000 samples for SARS-CoV-2 using RT-PCR and has maintained a consistent turn-around time (TAT) of 24-hours or less – arguably one of the best TATs in the state, if not the entire nation. While COVID-19 has occupied the bulk of our time during the last year, there are other pathogens and issues that have a particular impact on south Texas. My research lab was the recipient of a grant from the CDC in 2016 to monitor the transmission of vector-borne diseases in south Texas (Zika, Dengue, West Nile, tick, and flea borne diseases), and in 2019 the lab was certified by Texas DSHS as a regional testing center for mosquito-borne viruses. To date, we have tested over a million samples for the state, but the federal funding used to support this effort will formally end in December 2021. However, without a meaningful way to monitor such events, we will end up where we were before the pandemic, which is a lack of diagnostic resources and the associated negative impact on the health of the inhabitants of the Rio Grande Valley. Texas DSHS offers some support to local municipalities for this testing at no cost, but typically becomes overwhelmed with samples such that their efforts are not able to keep up with the demand within a given year. Another area where the Valley is sorely lacking in resources is for cancer testing. Identification of cancer is very difficult, costly, and technically-challenging, and much of the cancer testing in the Valley is outsourced to a few companies in California where the time between receipt of the sample and return of a result can take 12-14 days. Utilization of a local laboratory would improve patient outcomes and survival rates and allow physicians to make well-informed decisions when time is of utmost importance. A third area where HB 784 could positively impact the Valley is in the areas of environmental testing, particularly water and air quality. Without a local laboratory capable of executing environmental testing, samples must be transported out of the Valley, which further delays the determination and course of action needed to respond to such events. Thank you!