



The Senate of the State of Texas

COMMITTEES:

Health and Human Services
Nominations
Transportation and Homeland Security
Veterans Affairs & Military
Installations - Vice Chair
Subcommittee on Base Realignment
and Closure - Chair

Senator Eliot Shapleigh
District 29

September 27, 2005

MAIN DISTRICT OFFICE:
800 Wyoming Ave., Suite A
El Paso, Texas 79902
915/544-1990
Fax: 915/544-1998

EASTSIDE DISTRICT OFFICE:
1801 N. Zaragosa, Suite C
El Paso, Texas 79936
915/857-4800
Fax: 915/857-4854

CAPITOL OFFICE:
P.O. Box 12068
Austin, Texas 78711
512/463-0129
Fax: 512/463-0218
Dial 711 For Relay Calls
e-mail: eliot.shapleigh@senate.state.tx.us

The Honorable Kay Bailey Hutchison
United States Senate
Room 284 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Via: Fax Delivery

Re: Texas Border healthcare

Dear Senator Hutchison:

Recently, after the appropriation of a \$383,000 grant to the U.S.-Mexico Border Health Association for its Border Health Best Practices Program, you stated that "improving healthcare in our communities is a top priority."

I ask that you put action to your words. My community of El Paso is the least insured large city in America. We have more uninsured children and adults than any American city with a population over 500,000. We are not proud of that designation, and we hope that you, as our Senator, will do something about it.

Here are the facts about Texas healthcare: Texas has the highest uninsured rate in the nation. In 2003, while the national average stood at 15.6 percent, 24.6 percent of Texas residents were uninsured. The two states closest to Texas' poor performance were New Mexico, with 22.1 percent uninsured, and Louisiana, with 20.6 percent uninsured. At the opposite end, Minnesota and Vermont had the nation's lowest uninsured rates, with 8.7 percent and 9.5 percent respectively.

While El Paso may be the worst of the worst for the uninsured, the rest of the state does not fare much better. The recently-released report by the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, "The Uninsured: A Hidden Burden on Texas Employers and Communities," states that every major city in Texas exceeds the 15.6 percent national average of uninsured residents. Clearly, the entire state is plagued by excessive rates of uninsured residents.



If these are the facts across Texas, then imagine the situation in the Border Region, especially traditionally poorer counties like El Paso, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Webb. From 2001 to 2003, the El Paso metropolitan statistical area (MSA) averaged 33 percent uninsured - one in every three residents. Indeed, the five Border MSAs had the highest percent of uninsured during the same three-year period. The Laredo MSA averaged 36 percent uninsured, and the Brownsville-Harlingen-San Benito MSA averaged 32 percent uninsured.

Texas also fails to meet the national average in other key performance measures. For example, Texas ranks 45th and 46th in the nation, respectively, in per capita spending on public health and mental health. As a result, programs that serve children, elderly, and the needy are underfunded and cannot offer adequate access to services many must depend upon. The race to the bottom for health and human services spending has created an environment where Texas ranks 48th in the nation in the percentage of poor covered by Medicaid, 6th in the percentage of two-year olds not fully immunized, and 45th in the rate at which citizens receive treatment for drug and alcohol abuse problems.

Herein below are six substantive goals that you can undertake as a U.S. Senator to make healthcare along the Texas-Mexico Border truly a "top priority:"

- 1) Increase Medicaid and CHIP reimbursement rates by 50 percent. Texas clearly suffers from a disproportionately high number of uninsured children and adults, and an increase in reimbursement rates would allow a much greater number of residents to enjoy coverage by these programs;
- 2) Create an "Immunizations Across the Border" program where we set a 95 percent immunization rate for children in the Border Region. Preventative healthcare such as immunizations will go a long way toward providing a healthy future for Texans along the Border;
- 3) To the extent applicable, provide federal funding to help fund critical health education facilities along the Border, including the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso Campus and the Texas A&M University-Kingsville Irma Lerma Rangel College of Pharmacy;
- 4) Set a Border Federal Medical Assistance Percentages (FMAP) rate that is pegged to Border poverty levels so Texas quits supplanting Border money to redistribute Medicaid and CHIP money to higher historic use areas. In effect, Border poverty has subsidized Texas public health insurance rates for years and we want you to put a stop to this practice. This change will help to address the healthcare crisis currently facing the Border Region. Texans as a whole would benefit greatly from the increased healthcare reimbursement associated with this designation;
- 5) Create a U.S.-Mexico Border health corps where, in exchange for service in underserved areas along the Border, physicians, nurses, and other health

professionals will receive full loan forgiveness from their college and medical school debt;

- 6) Create an medical information system along the Border between the U.S. and Mexico so patients' records can transfer easily, digitally, and just-in-time.

Every quarter I will check with your office to see what actions have been taken on each of these specific recommendations. If you do not plan to undertake them, I will ask you to give me a written reason why you do not plan to do so. I note that Senator Bingaman right next door in New Mexico is very active on Border health issues. With Texas now leading the country in lack of health insurance, it is time a Texas Senator took the lead. While you have always been an ally of the Border, I have found that too often Texan politicians do not represent the Border Region of Texas, which now accounts for one in four Texans.

Along the Border, we say "*hablan mucho, pero hacen poco*," or, "they talk a lot, but they do little." We see support for tax cuts for the top 1 percent, but little support for underfunded programs that affect the lives of million of Texas children.

I know that if state and federal officials work together in an effort to improve the lives of our constituents, we will be able to achieve great things.

To further illustrate the dire situation of our state, I enclose a document titled "Texas on the Brink," which we print every two years. "Texas on the Brink" aims to highlight the effects of a regressive, inadequate, and outdated tax system, as well as a lack of investment in low and middle income working families. "Texas on the Brink" startles many readers when they realize Texas ranks near the bottom of the nation in numerous key performance measures. As the document makes clear, increasingly, Texas is not a place that sets a "top priority" on healthcare issues. I hope that you, as our U.S. Senator, will participate fully with us to do something about it.

Very truly yours,



Eliot Shapleigh

ES/de

enclosures: Texas on the Brink
The Uninsured: A Hidden Burden on Texas Employers and Communities