

## **Push to get healthcare district dollars allocated to clinics**

By

**Steve Taylor** May 29, 2015



SAN JUAN, RGV – Should a healthcare district be formed for Hidalgo County, 20 percent of its tax revenues should go to local non-profit healthcare clinics that serve the indigent poor, according to a petition being distributed in Catholic churches in the county.

It is estimated that 40,000 people access these clinics every year. The petition has been distributed among 80 parishes in Hidalgo County with the blessing of Bishop Daniel Flores.

The aim of the organizers of the petition is to get 20,000 signatures. If they can they believe they will be able to leverage their goal when discussions begin again on creating such a healthcare district. Voters in Hidalgo County said “no” to such a district in a referendum held last November.

“This is a strong, united, presbyteral effort to stand up for and help make a huge long term difference in the lives of our poorer families,” said the Rev. Jerry Frank, of St. John the Baptist Church in San Juan.

This is what the petition says:

We the undersigned respectfully request that Senator Juan “Chuy” Hinojosa and Hidalgo County Commissioners incorporate the following items into any revised proposition purporting to create a hospital or health services district in the county:

1. Dedicate 20 percent of total annual tax receipts for the Health Services District to those local non-profit health-care clinics that can demonstrably show that they primarily serve the indigent poor in Hidalgo County. An estimated 40,000 persons access these clinics yearly.

2. That these funds be specifically directed both to attend to the most severe life-threatening and chronic ailments that affect our community, including diabetes, and high-blood pressure, and also to support much needed pre-natal care for expectant mothers and child health-care services in these clinics.

3. Since eligibility for indigent health care is now restricted to those earning 21 percent or below of the federal poverty level, we ask to increase eligibility up five percent for every one cent increase in the tax rate. And to cap eligibility at 100 percent of poverty level. This is to insure that any future changes in the district's funding takes the needs of the poor into consideration.

4. A consumers' advisory board of ten members be set up which would include members from the non-profit clinics. This helps to insure a broad perspective of community need is represented in the Hospital District.

In a letter circulated to priests in early February, Bishop Flores said he is not taking sides on whether a healthcare district should be set up. However, he said the Church has a duty to tend to the needs of the poor. Here is what Flores wrote:

Dear Father,

This past November, Hidalgo County held an election which included a proposition to create a hospital district. That proposition failed. Newspapers report that political and medical leaders plan to revise the proposition in order to improve the likelihood of its passage.

The issue is one that touches on the public good, and I would not presume to tell parishioners whether to vote for or against a proposed Hospital District in Hidalgo

County. Conscientious Catholics can disagree as to whether it is in the public interest. I do believe, though, that the Church has a responsibility to remind all concerned of the need to give priority to the needs of the poor if and when a new proposition is crafted.

With this in mind, I have decided to permit the circulation of a petition that has been developed through consultation with leaders supportive or sympathetic to the Church's teaching on Social Justice. I am grateful to Father Alfonso Guevara and Father Jerry Frank for their work on this issue.

The petition does not enter into specific ways of configuring the tax rates or tax ceilings. I think those matters are better handled in open discussion during the political process. However, the petition does put forward a realistic framework that insures that the poor indigent and expectant mothers are taken into account in any new proposal.

Some of these points have been widely discussed already. The first point would provide sustained funding for local non-profit clinics which are on the front lines of service to the poorest of our people. With diabetes, high blood-pressure, and other preventable or manageable illnesses running rampant among the poor in our community, it is important that those places that attend to the uninsured, the undocumented and the homeless have access to funding that makes their work possible.

Point Two asks that any such funding be specifically directed to help the poor and uninsured confronting the most serious health threats. It also asks that special attention be given to expectant mothers and young children.

I encourage you to make copies of the attached petition and to offer it to your parishioners to sign them after all Masses on the week-ends of February 14/15 and 21/22. Each sheet can contain up to ten signatures per side. Once you finish, please have them delivered to your respective deans from whom I will arrange to have them picked up.

I repeat that parishioners are not being asked to take a stand for or against a proposition, but rather to make known our concerns that any new proposition, should it be presented to the voters, truly take into account the health and well being of the poor.

For further clarification and/ or explanation, please call Fathers Alfonso Guevara and Jerry Frank or myself.

In a letter to priests in Hidalgo County, the Rev. Frank, said it is very clear Bishop Flores is not recommending a vote either for or against the proposition to create a healthcare district in Hidalgo County. "Rather, his concern is that, should the proposition pass, it truly gives priority to the health and well-being of the poor. Working together with the Bishop we can exert a decisive influence on how a potential healthcare district distributes its tax revenues to maximally serve the poor," Frank wrote.

"We will need a strong, united effort to acquire at least 20,000 signatures (80 parishes in Hidalgo County times 500 signatures per parish equals 20,000 signatures). That many signatures will give us a very powerful base of support in our negotiations with county and hospital leaders to address the concerns in the petitions."

Frank added that 1,400 signatures were raised at his church, St. John the Baptist in San Juan, over a two-week period