TuSalud

Florida Governor Blocked $70M in AIDS Funds Amid State's HIV Crisis

"I think Rick Scott fueled the epidemic in Florida."

September 12, 2019 By Trent Straube

In 2017, Florida saw 4,783 new HIV cases—more than any other state and 13% of the year's national total. From 2015 to 2017, Florida returned $54 million in unspent federal grants to fight the epidemic, and state administrators effectively blocked nearly $16 million in HIV dollars from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Unbelievably, the administration of then-Governor Rick Scott turned down this $70 million in HIV funding on purpose, according to an investigative piece in The Guardian penned by POZ editor-at-large Ben Ryan.

Scott, a Republican, served as governor from 2011 to 2019; he is now the junior U.S. senator from Florida. A spokeswoman for Scott told The Guardian that the assertions in the article were incorrect.

What is not disputed is that Scott rejected the opportunity to expand Medicaid in Florida, which would have brought vast amounts of federal dollars to provide health care to the state's poorest residents.

The Guardian article spells out how Scott's administration also forced the state to return millions in funds to the Health Resources and Services Administration.

"I think Rick Scott fueled the epidemic in Florida," Marlene LaLota, a 28-year veteran of the state health department, told the newspaper. "How many infections could have been prevented with that money? How many lives could have been saved? Shame on them.

"Rick Scott had us all on lockdown," she said. "It didn't used to be like that with previous governors."

The Scott administration blocked the potential federal funding from reaching the state by forcing local health departments to rescind applications for specific CDC grants. Broward County, which has one of the highest HIV rates in nation, was on track to receive nearly $9 million before the grant application was rescinded. Similarly, Miami could have received nearly $8 million.

Meanwhile, in 2019, under Trump's "Ending the HIV Epidemic: A Plan for America" initiative, federal funding is earmarked to go to the counties and cities with the highest HIV burden. In Florida, that includes Broward and Miami-Dade counties plus five others.

When asked about the Guardian article, Florida's current governor, Ron DeSantis, said he has met with federal health officials and plans to boost HIV funding in his state.

Federal officials "are interested in providing a lot of funding for the effort," DeSantis told the Florida Phoenix. "As soon as they figure out how much money they can give, when we can go ahead and announce it, our hope is that we'll be able to go with a really robust program that will have the potential to dramatically reduce HIV/AIDS."

Read more about the federal HIV plan on POZ.com and on HIV.gov. In related POZ news, read "What Convinced Florida Republicans to Expand a Needle Exchange Program?" and "Florida Gets Federal Help as Part of Trump's Plan to End HIV [VIDEO]."

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