

FROM THE OFFICE OF
STATE REPRESENTATIVE RUTH JONES MCCLENDON

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**Deuell-McClendon Legislation to Prevent
Spread of Infectious Diseases PASSES**

(San Antonio) -- State Representative Ruth Jones McClendon (House District 120, San Antonio) announced today that a legislative proposal has passed which would allow a pilot program so that public health care providers in Bexar county can evaluate the effects of a safe needle-exchange program as one means of combating the spread of hepatitis, HIV, and other infectious diseases. Her proposal was presented as an amendment to Senate Bill 10, a lengthy bill authored by Senator Jane Nelson (State Senate District 12, Lewisville), which addressees various aspects of examining state and local Medicaid and uncompensated health care costs in Texas. After signature by the Governor, it will take effect on September 1.

This Session, Senator (and physician) Robert Deuell (Senate District 2, Greenville) and Representative McClendon and filed companion bills (S.B.308 and H.B.856) to help prevent the spread of infectious diseases such as hepatitis and HIV, and reduce the drain on local health authorities for the enormous costs of treatment. Nelson Wolff, Judge of the Bexar County Commissioners Court, said enthusiastically, "Last year Bexar County spent more than \$4 million on HIV/AIDS services. A needle exchange program will not only save lives but also taxpayers' dollars. We appreciate Rep. McClendon's courageous leadership, which could mean the difference between life and death for hundreds of Bexar County citizens." Studies show that the life expectancy of a person with HIV has risen to 24.2 years, and lifetime treatment costs are at least \$385,000.

Representative McClendon said, "The public health and safety of Texas requires that we offer public health programs that prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Fiscal responsibility also requires that preventive programs be made available, and this is just one way that we can begin curbing the spread of hepatitis and HIV in geometric proportions." This development would permit Bexar County health authorities and their contracting agencies to establish and administer a safe-distribution and exchange programs for syringes and needles. Such programs have proved highly successful across the nation, including Hawaii, New York, Connecticut, and have helped cut the spread of HIV infections dramatically.

Texas has long awaited authorization for this type of disease-prevention program: Texas Monthly reported in its April, 2007 issue that Texas was the *only* state that did not allow this type of measure to help prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Opponents object to needle exchange programs (sometimes called NEP's or SEP's), on the basis that they allow users of intravenous drugs to continue an addictive habit; however, those who favor the programs emphasize that when a person can exchange dirty needles for clean ones, this helps keep uninfected persons stay that way. Also, NEP's offer the program sponsors with recurring opportunities to make rehabilitation and recovery available to the needle user; this has also has proved highly successful. As Representative McClendon emphasized, "This is not about increasing the number of intravenous drug users or helping them perpetuate an unfortunate addiction; it is about helping people stay free from infection. The Texas Medical Association, the Texas Hospital Association, the Texas Pharmacy Association, and many local officials and health care providers who treat infectious diseases supported this legislative concept."

Representative McClendon serves on the House Committee on Appropriations, Pensions & Investments (on which she holds a seniority appointment and serves as Chief Budget Officer). Additionally, she is Chair of the House Committee on Rules & Resolutions. She also serves on the Sunset Advisory Commission, which oversees all agencies under the auspices of the State of Texas. Representative McClendon invites constituents with comments on legislative issues, or who may have ideas for legislation, to contact her at the Capitol office at 512-463-0708. The District office will remain open during the 80th Legislative Session and may be reached by calling 210-225-2107.