Bill offers fix to mental health system

Legislation filed after Chronicle investigation reveals underfunding, insufficient oversight

By Alex Stuckey

A Texas lawmaker filed legislation this week that would make it easier for the state to identify gaps in the care of mentally ill people who have been accused of a crime and who sometimes wind up at state psychiatric hospitals.

Senate Bill 246 would create the Office of Forensic Services, tasked with collecting data on services provided to individuals with mental illnesses who have been accused of a crime – forensic patients.

Sen. Sarah Eckhardt, a Demo-
crat from Austin who could not be reached for comment, filed the bill about a week after a Houston Chronicle investigation, “In Crime,” revealed that the state’s mental health system has suffered for years from under-funding and insufficient over-sight.

The investigation found that the state doesn’t have enough hospital beds to serve its growing population, with waitlists that stretch on for up to a year, and it’s failing to track whether pa-tients are getting the help they need. Many find themselves in jail and over again.

Roughly 70 percent of the 2,300 beds in the 10 state-run mental hospitals are occupied by people who have been deemed incompetent to stand trial by a court or found not guilty by rea-
sons of insanity.

Greg Hansch, executive direc-
tive of the National Alliance on Mental Illness Texas, said the or-ganization was encouraged by Eckhardt’s bill, which would help improve the state’s Health and Human Services Commission make better use of state psychiatric hospitals.

“If this office is created, we can start accounting for the people who have been served through forensic services and identifying what their needs are,” Hansch said.

Legislation continues on A13

Harris County’s voting expansions targeted by Texas GOP lawmakers

By Taylor Goldstein

AUSTIN – Harris County made a big push to expand mail-in and early voting during the 2020 elec-
tion, offering options never before seen in Texas with 24-hour polling places and drive-thru vot-
ing.

Republicans in the Legislature are now moving to make sure it never happens again, targeting the county with coping voting restrictions that they hope to enact ahead of the 2022 midterm elec-
tions that they say are necessary to prevent voter fraud.

A priority Senate bill filed this week would prohibit local elec-
dion officials from sending out mail ballot applications to voters who have not requested them, an-
other step Harris County took during the 2020 election.

The bill would also ban certain early voting opportunities, in-
cluding drive-thru voting and ear-
ly voting before 7 a.m. and after 7 p.m.

The goal of Senate Bill 7 is “to make sure that the election pro-
cess is fair and, equally important, to make sure that Texas knows it’s fair,” said Sen. Bryan Hughes, R-
Blount, the author of the bill. “If people lose faith in the process, or if they think that their vote is go-
ing to be counted correctly or doubt whether the process is se-
cure, they’re going to go to discour-
age the Chron’s investiga-
tion, go to houstonchronicle.com/

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...once vaccinated...
From page A1

VACCINES

Vaccines have come a long way since the first shots were administered a century ago. But even with widespread availability, access remains a challenge for many, particularly in underserved communities. This is especially true in Houston, where the gaps in the continuum of care are evident.

"It will help identify what are and where people are slipping through the cracks," said Anne Dunkelberg, the state's director of racial equity and health policy. "What we're seeing is the outcomes vary dramatically from community to community, from social and economic factors in there are barriers to care for people of color.

"As a state agency, we are pro-

"(The office would) help those individuals. "We know that we've made so far, and we need to look at where you have the biggest bang for your buck," Terres said. "I would argue we need to prioritize those minority communities because that is where the need is greatest and where you can make the great-

in the hardest-hit neighbor-

40 percent of the county's pop-

groups because that is the group that is the most impacted by the pandemic. "A lot of our patients are public and transit dependent," said Torres, the CHRISTUS Health presi-

and more than three times as likely to obtain a first dose of a CO-

"I am not surprised," said Greg Hansch, executive director of the
center to consult on and review cases as a hub provider but oper-

She said. "I would argue we need to prioritize those minority communities because that is where the need is greatest and where you can make the greatest impact you can on the overall infection rate.

"Longstanding inequities and disparities make it more difficult when you're not fully vaccinated. The vaccine hasn't spread across the community very effectively, and there has been the brunt of the pandemic. "(The office would) help those individuals. "We know that we've made so far, and we need to look at where you have the biggest bang for your buck," Terres said. "I would argue we need to prioritize those minority communities because that is where the need is greatest and where you can make the great-

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The Houston area's hardest-hit neighborhoods, which are majority Black or Latino, have among the least vaccinated.

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File photo by Jordan Rubio

Benito Moreno, 77, gets a bandage after being vaccinated with his second dose of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine at the CHRISTUS St. Mary's Clinic. Outreach, access to vaccination sites and supply are preventing a more equitable distribution of the vaccine.

"The office would help identify(1) where people are slipping through the cracks," Greg Hansch, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness Texas told the Chron.

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Benito Moreno, 77, holds his vaccination record after receiving his second dose. CHRISTUS clinics, which cater to Hispanic and low-income communities, are struggling to get doses weekly.

"If you're talking about making a dent in this problem, you need to look at where you have the biggest bang for your buck," Terres said. "I would argue we need to prioritize those minority communities because that is where the need is greatest and where you can make the great-

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