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TEXAS LAWMAKER PROPOSES \$3 BILLION PLAN TO FIGHT FUTURE PANDEMICS

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With the coronavirus pandemic still raging nationwide, at least one Texas lawmaker is advocating a leading role for the state in trying to head off such public health calamities in the future.

State Sen. José Menéndez, D-San Antonio, has proposed creating a state agency – funded with up to \$3 billion in taxpayer-backed bonds over 10 years – to provide grants for research into emerging infectious diseases and development of vaccines and other treatments for them.

The new agency would be modeled after the state’s cancer-fighting agency, the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas, commonly known as CPRIT. In 2007, Texas voters initially approved the issuance of \$3 billion in bonds, in increments of up to \$300 million a year, to fund CPRIT grants, and they renewed the effort in 2019 by authorizing an additional \$3 billion.

“Texas likes to pride itself in being forward-thinking and being a leader, so let’s be a leader in response to any global pandemic or virus,” Menéndez said. “If we could have short-circuited this pandemic, how many lives would we have saved and how many fewer Texans would have died?”

His proposal – detailed in Senate Bill 264, which he filed in advance of the state legislative session that began this week – would create an agency called the Texas Research Consortium to Cure Infectious Diseases, or TRANSCEND for short, based loosely on its initials. As with CPRIT, issuing bonds to pay for the agency’s grants would require voter approval.

In addition to helping accelerate research overall, Menéndez said the effort potentially would provide Texans with first dibs on newly developed treatments, because it would enable the state to take ownership stakes in entities that receive the grants.

A spokesman for Gov. Greg Abbott didn’t respond to an American-Statesman request for comment. But Menéndez said he has been in contact with Abbott’s office about the plan, and he characterized the governor as interested in it.

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Larry Schlesinger, president of the nonprofit Texas Biomedical Research Institute, said the proposed new agency would be a “game changer” for Texas because of its potential impact on the overall pace of research into

infectious diseases, as well as on the life sciences industry in the state.

Schlesinger, whose San Antonio-based organization has been involved in development of COVID-19 treatments and vaccines, had a hand in helping Menéndez shape SB 264, and he also said he has spoken to Abbott about the broad idea.

“Infectious disease threats are increasing – it is not an ‘if’ but a ‘when’ situation” in terms of the emergence of another new deadly virus, he said.

But “at the current time, we have been a reactive society to infectious disease threats,” Schlesinger said. The proposed state agency would help change that, he said, representing “an unprecedented opportunity for the state of Texas to be the epicenter for infectious disease research and development to avert pandemics in the future,” similar to CPRIT’s prominence in fighting cancer.

CPRIT – which has made Texas the nation’s second-largest source of public money for cancer research behind only the federal government – is credited with fostering multitudes of promising treatments and with attracting researchers and biomedical companies to the state.

But the price tag to Texas taxpayers hasn’t been cheap. State officials estimated in 2019 that the issuance of new CPRIT bonds would cost the state’s general fund about \$246 million combined from 2020 through 2024, a figure that doesn’t include debt service on previously issued CPRIT bonds.

Such numbers could make creation of a similar taxpayer-funded agency aimed at fighting infectious diseases a hard sell during the 2021 legislative session, when government coffers have been drained by the economic fallout from the current pandemic.

“This may not be a time the state needs to be expanding (its financial commitments) even though this is a noble and very worthy cause,” said Justin Yancy, president of the Texas Business Leadership Council. “I just don’t know that the timing is really right – when we’ve been knocked down (economically) and are trying to get back up.”

But Menéndez said the whole point is to prevent a repeat of the economic and health disaster.

“I know how hard times are financially, but we are in this mess (nationwide) because we didn’t have a better response,” he said. “What would we all be willing to pitch in if the next time a horrible pandemic was about to kick off, that we could shorten the time frame that we all have to go through this” by a substantial amount?