



**For Immediate Release**

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## **Smith County to Invest \$4.5 million for Retention of COVID-19 Medical Workers**

The Smith County Commissioners Court on Tuesday approved to allocate \$4.52 million – 10 percent -- of its American Rescue Plan Act funding to local hospitals and emergency rooms to be used to retain local medical personnel directly working with COVID-19 patients at medical facilities located in Smith County.

The Smith County ARPA funds will not be used to pay for traveling or contract nurses.

Of this \$4.52 million in ARPA funding, \$2 million is designated to UT Health East Texas and another \$2 million is designated to Christus Trinity Mother Frances Health System to continue their efforts to retain staff and fight COVID-19 at the point of care, Smith County Judge Nathaniel Moran said. The Commissioners Court also approved \$100,000 in funding for each of the three freestanding emergency rooms in Smith County, each of whom have also been affected by the medical staffing shortages and each of whom are working on the frontline of treating COVID-19 patients. These include: Exceptional Healthcare Tyler, Hospitality Health ER and Tyler Complete Care.

The money will be used for local nurses and other health care staff “who are involved in the deepest point of care for COVID-19 patients,” Moran said. “We recognize and honor all of the medical community’s work and response to the pandemic and we wish we could do it for everyone in the medical field. But we don’t have enough dollars to do that. Our approach here is to help retain local staff critical to treating patients with COVID-19, where there is a critical supply shortage by rewarding them for continuing to work in Smith County facilities over the next two months rather than chase contract work outside of the County.”

Vicki Briggs, CEO of UT Health East Texas, said by giving to the hospitals, the Commissioners Court has an opportunity to recognize the very loyal and committed health care workers who have stayed with them throughout the pandemic. She said it won't solve the problem of their employee shortage but will make "such a statement that you support them...and that you care."

The types of medical staff that the funding would be given to as incentives include Registered Nurses, Licensed Vocational Nurses, Respiratory Therapists, Nursing Assistants, Patient Care Techs, EMS Paramedics and EMTs. Christus would also include its Flight for Life RNs.

Jason Proctor, president of Christus Trinity Mother Frances, said anything Smith County considers to do to help them is appreciated. The caregivers and nurses who have been working around the clock with COVID-19 patients and experience the patient deaths carry that burden. "Our staff has not backed down. They're not going to back down. This is something to say that we stand behind you," he added.

Proctor said the Commissioners Court is charged with making decisions that impact Smith County residents. And Smith County is leading the way in health care, providing the highest level of care offered in East Texas.

Both hospitals have put together specific incentive plans unique to their systems, and there are additional parameters required by the County before the entities can receive an allowed reimbursement for retention compensation paid out to qualifying positions over the months of October and November.

This is the third recent attempt by the County to help ease staffing issues faced by the local hospital systems. At the beginning of August, Judge Moran issued a request to the state through a STAR request for the state to provide COVID-19 critical staff, including nurses, to each of the hospital systems like it did in 2020. Of the 160 medical staff requested for UT Health East Texas only 51 nurses were provided by the state. And, of the 230 medical personnel requested for Christus Trinity Mother Frances, the state only provided 52.

As a second measure to relieve hospitals of critical COVID-19 patients, Smith County requested through the Texas Division of Emergency Management a Regional Infusion Center to treat COVID-19 patients. The state-supported infusion center, which treats patients with monoclonal antibody treatment, opened August 30, at UT Health North Campus Tyler. It is currently treating 60-70 patients per day. Despite this, COVID-19 hospitalization numbers still remain ten times higher than they were in June 2021.

According to Judge Moran, "Because our first two steps did not sufficiently solve the staffing shortages faced by the Smith County medical providers on the frontlines of treating COVID-19 patients and because hospitalization numbers remain extraordinarily high, we are taking this next step to utilize ARPA funds at the highest point of impact – that being patient care. The partnerships we have with our hospitals have always been strong. We value their efforts immensely over these past 18 months, and want to continue to stand with them through this critical time while they fight for the lives of our friends and neighbors."