Louisiana denied $15 million grant for cancer tests

By PETER SHINKLE
Advocate staff writer

Louisiana has been denied a $15 million grant to screen uninsured women for breast and cervical cancer, aid that state officials say is needed to detect those cancers sooner.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention apparently rejected Louisiana in favor of other states that are larger and have more medical “infrastructure,” said Shirley Kirkconnel, administrator of chronic disease control at the state Office of Public Health.

“I can’t tell you how disappointed we were,” Kirkconnel said. “We will try until we are blue in the face.”

The grant had drawn support from Gov. Edwin Edwards, who overrode one of his cabinet members to approve a Medicaid program necessary to apply for the grant.

Private and public hospitals and the LSU School of Medicine offered a total of $1 million per year in services and salaries in order to meet CDC requirements for the grant, Kirkconnel said.

The news from the federal agency in Atlanta was not all bad. The CDC awarded the state a $300,000 grant to carry out public education about cancer.

Breast cancer strikes women in Louisiana at a rate that is 20 percent lower than the national rate, Kirkconnel said. However, women in Louisiana die of breast cancer at the same rate as they do nationwide, research has shown.

Researchers at the LSU Medical Center in New Orleans have said they believe the discrepancy between the occurrence of breast cancer and the mortality from the disease is largely due to late diagnosis.

“We are losing a hell of a lot of opportunities to save lives, and it is most likely related to the lack of screening,” Kirkconnel said Wednesday.

The grant would have provided $3 million per year over five years for educational efforts and for diagnostic services, Kirkconnel said.

The grant would have provided mammograms and pap smears for women who do not qualify for Medicaid, the government’s health insurance plan for the poor, and are unable to buy private insurance, Kirkconnel said.

In South Louisiana, breast cancer accounted for 25 percent of all new cases of cancer diagnosed from 1983 through 1986, according to a 1991 report by LSU and the Department of Health and Hospitals.

Pap smears are used to detect cervical cancer, which is curable. As with breast cancer, early detection of cervical cancer can make a great difference in the effectiveness of treatment.

The grant would have provided services to about 10,000 women per year, she said. “It would be incredibly important to provide the care,” she said.

Roughly 1 million Louisianians — male and female of all ages — are believed to have no health insurance, according to a study of performed by a congressional agency in 1991.

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Public Health official
Dr. Laura Cassidy, a Baton Rouge surgeon who specializes in breast diseases, said the denial of the grant is "terrible for the state because obviously we have a lot of poor women who could benefit from the project."

Cassidy said the CDC apparently rejected Louisiana's grant application because it considered the state's need for the grant to be too small, or the state's organizational framework for the grant to be undeveloped.

Kirkconnell said the CDC judged grants in part according to a state's ability to carry out the educational and medical services, and Louisiana may have fallen short in that area.

New York and Pennsylvania, two of the six states awarded grants by the CDC, have won related grants in the past and have developed community coalitions to improve diagnosis of breast and cervical cancer, she said.

OPH will now seek to develop community coalitions that seek to educate women of different backgrounds, Kirkconnell said.

The CDC awarded the state a grant of $150,000 annually for two years to develop those local coalitions and to carry out public education.

Cassidy said a Baton Rouge foundation, Women in Need Gain Support, will help provide women with education and services related to breast cancer.