State budget panel OKs federal AIDS program funds

Capitol news bureau

A state budget panel gave the go-ahead Wednesday to state acceptance of $927,941 in federal funds to set up an AIDS monitoring program.

The Joint Legislative Committee on the Budget endorsed the program after receiving additional information from state health officials. The panel deferred action on the request on Tuesday pending receipt of the data.

The Department of Health and Hospitals budget already includes $2 million in federal funds for AIDS prevention activities, and the state is in line for another federal grant that would provide an additional $927,941 this year, according to information given the joint committee.

The new grant would be used for monitoring the spread of acquired immune deficiency syndrome and AIDS education program among minorities and drug users.

A DHH official told the committee that none of the money can be used to purchase AZT — the drug being used to treat patients with AIDS, a deadly virus that attacks the body's immune system.

However, Dr. Louise McFarland said funds are being identified within the charity hospital system to keep the AZT supply going for a while.

Five new employees will be hired to help with the new AIDS monitoring program, said acting budget director Steve Winham. He said the employees are necessary because the public health agency already has been cut by some 250 positions.

"We actually feel they need the additional five," he said.

Rep. Raymond Laborde, D-Marksville, suggested that some of the laid-off workers be offered the new grant-related jobs first.

McFarland said some of the laid-off workers may have the qualifications to handle the work.