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TEA launches heart screening pilot program

AUSTIN – As a Valentine’s gift to Texas students, the Texas Education Agency announced today that Championship Hearts Foundation has been awarded a contract to begin screening sixth-graders for heart conditions that can cause sudden and unforeseen death.

The \$1 million Early Cardiovascular Detection Pilot Program, created in 2007 by Senate Bill 7, will target about 12,750 sixth-grade students in public schools across Texas. The Foundation will select schools that are geographically and ethnically diverse to participate in the pilot that will begin this month.

The free screening will be designed to detect signs of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM) and other cardiovascular conditions that can cause sudden death. HCM is the leading cause of sudden cardiac death in young people.

In Texas, on average 50 students die from sudden cardiac arrest each year, according to Parent Heart Watch, a national organization that collects heart-related medical data. Earlier this school year, undiagnosed heart conditions in two student athletes led to fatalities.

“Sudden death due to an undetected heart condition is rare among school children,” Commissioner of Education Robert Scott said. “Yet there have been cases – tragic cases in which students died after some kind of strenuous physical activity. We want to do everything possible to protect our young people, and this screening program is a part of that effort.”

The screenings will include a pre-screening questionnaire, an electrocardiogram (EKG), which tests the electrical activity of the heartbeat, and an echocardiogram, an ultrasound that shows the shape and size of the heart. Many heart conditions that can lead to heart failure among adolescents are undetectable without an electrocardiogram or an echocardiogram.

Licensed technicians will administer the tests and board-certified cardiologists will read and interpret the results. Test results will be provided to the parents of each screened student. Individual test results are confidential and not available to the public. Cumulative findings from the heart screenings will not identify individual students.

Results of the data collected will be reported to the Texas Education Agency by June 2009 to determine the feasibility of a large-scale, statewide screening program.

The contract awarded to Championship Hearts Foundation represents a collaboration between the Foundation, Children’s Medical Center of Dallas, Texas Children’s Hospital of Houston, Children’s Cardiology of Austin and other medical professionals. This partnership of medical entities brings a wealth of knowledge and experience that utilize cutting-edge personnel and cardiovascular screening practices.

Championship Hearts Foundation, led by Dr. George Rodgers, is a non-profit organization based in Austin that has conducted more than 6,000 heart screenings for student athletes over the past seven years.

The cardiovascular screening pilot program will provide TEA and the legislature with the opportunity to gain important information regarding the potential benefit of implementing a more comprehensive screening program for young people. A cardiovascular screening of adolescents could yield life-saving information that parents and teachers otherwise might not have available.

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