

- SUBJECT:** Vouchers and debit cards for temporary housing for parolees
- COMMITTEE:** Corrections — committee substitute recommended
- VOTE:** 8 ayes — McReynolds, Madden, England, Marquez, Martinez, S. Miller, Ortiz, Sheffield
- 0 nays
- 2 present not voting — Dutton, Hodge
- 1 absent — Kolkhorst
- WITNESSES:** For — Erica Surprenant, Texas Criminal Justice Coalition; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Tommy Adkisson, Commissioners Court; Jacqueline Conn, Travis County Re-entry Roundtable; Ed Davis, Restorative Justice Ministries Network of Texas; Donald Lee, Texas Conference of Urban Counties; Mark Mendez, Tarrant County; Matthew Simpson, The ACLU of Texas; Antonio Renaud; Karen Smith.
- Against — None
- On — Bryan Collier, Texas Department of Criminal Justice; (*Registered, but did not testify*: John Cruzot; Robert Francis)
- BACKGROUND:** Under Government Code, sec. 508.141(e), a parole panel may release an inmate from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) on parole only when arrangements have been made for the inmate's employment or for the inmate's maintenance and care.
- DIGEST:** CSHB 3226 would authorize TDCJ to issue a voucher or debit card to inmates who were eligible for release on parole but who had not been released from TDCJ, including from its halfway houses, solely because they did not have a permanent residence. The voucher or debit card would be to pay for temporary housing that met the inmate's parole conditions.
- The amount of the voucher or debit card could not exceed the cost to TDCJ to incarcerate an inmate for 90 days. TDCJ would have to pay the

costs of the voucher or debit card from its funds appropriated for the housing of inmates in the parole system.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2009. The bill would apply only to inmates released on parole after January 1, 2010, and TDCJ's executive director would be required to adopt rules to implement CSHB 3226 by that date.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

CSHB 3226 would help move more offenders who had been approved for parole out of Texas correctional facilities so they could begin their re-entry into the community, and it would help TDCJ place more parolees closer to their counties of residence. Having a place to live is critical for inmates to work on other reentry issues, and CSHB 3226 would help inmates meet this crucial first step.

Currently, about 250 to 300 inmates at any time have been approved for release on parole but cannot leave prison because they do not have housing arranged and the state's 1,500 halfway house beds are filled. These inmates wait in prisons until a halfway house bed opens up or they are able to make other housing arrangements. Another problem is that the state's halfway house beds are in only six of the state's 254 counties, which results in some inmates going to halfway houses that are not near their home counties. This is unfair to the inmate who has been approved for release, delays offenders' reintegration into the community, and keeps prison beds filled that may be needed for other offenders.

CSHB 3226 would solve these problems by creating a voucher or debit card system that would be used to pay for temporary housing in a motel or other place for these inmates. Instead of having to wait for a halfway house bed to open up, these inmates could be released sooner and closer to their homes.

CSHB 3226 would limit the vouchers or debit cards to the cost of 90 days of incarceration, which would total about \$4,275 when calculated at the LBB estimate of \$47.50 per day. This amount of money should pay for enough days in temporary housing for the offender to arrange other housing. On average, halfway house residents stay about 90 days before moving into their own housing. Inmates using the voucher program who reached the voucher or debit card limit without a housing plan would not

be turned out to the street but would go back into the TDCJ halfway house program.

CSHB 3226 would be a cost-effective way to help inmates transition to society without increasing costs to the state. TDCJ would use funds from its halfway house programs to pay for the vouchers or debit cards. If those programs ran short of funds, the agency has some authority to shift money from other programs. The fiscal note on the bill estimates no significant implication to the state.

The approach in CSHB 3226 would be a reasonable way to address the state's problem with re-entry housing because it could be implemented quickly, as opposed to building new halfway house beds, and it would not commit the state to operating new halfway houses long term. CSHB 3226, along with the 300 additional halfway house beds approved by the 80th Legislature, 200 of which are already operating, would move the state significantly forward on the issue of reentry housing for offenders.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

It might be better to focus CSHB 3226 on building the state's halfway house program. Using vouchers and debit cards would raise many issues, including whether some private landlords would refuse to take the vouchers and what would happen to offenders whose voucher or debit card ran out before they had other housing arranged. Offender housing needs to be examined in conjunction with all the other things needed for successful reentry.

NOTES:

The committee substitute increased the maximum cost of the vouchers from the cost to incarcerate an offender for 30 days to the cost for 90 days of incarceration.