

- SUBJECT:** Verifying an inmate's veteran status
- COMMITTEE:** Corrections —favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 7 ayes — Parker, White, Allen, Riddle, Rose, J.D. Sheffield, Toth
0 nays
- WITNESSES:** For — Brian McGiverin, Texas Civil Rights Project; Jorge Renaud, Texas Criminal Justice Coalition; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Erica Gammill, League of Women Voters of Texas; Joe Lovelace, Texas Council of Community Centers; Gyl Switzer, Mental Health America of Texas)

Against — None

On — Kyle Mitchell, Texas Veterans Commission; Rissie Owens, Board of Pardons and Paroles; Jack Stick, Texas Health and Human Services Commission Office of the Inspector General; April Zamora, Texas Department of Criminal Justice
- BACKGROUND:** The Public Assistance Reporting Information System (PARIS) is a federal-state database that contains information about recipients and potential recipients of public assistance, including military veterans who are eligible for certain benefits via the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). PARIS is operated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It was created to keep information about public assistance recipients in order to validate the eligibility of those who apply for benefits and prevent erroneous or duplicate payments. The Texas Health and Human Services Commission has participated in PARIS since 2009.

PARIS contains information on those with veteran status and their eligibility for veterans' benefits, including health care and income benefits. It may be used to identify both veterans and surviving spouses of veterans who may be entitled to receive benefits from the VA.
- DIGEST:** HB 634 would require the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) to use the PARIS to investigate and verify the military veteran status of every inmate. TDCJ also would be required to assist inmates who were veterans in applying for federal benefits or compensation for which they

could be eligible via the VA.

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, 2013.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

HB 634 would save the state money by helping inmates receive VA benefits for which they qualified. Allowing TDCJ to identify veterans and steer them toward available federal benefits would reduce enrollment in state-funded benefit programs. In 2011, Washington state saved \$5.7 million by using PARIS to identify and help low-income veterans enroll for VA benefits and reduce state Medicaid expenses.

HB 634 would help prepare inmate veterans for successful reintegration into society. Veterans, especially those finishing their time in a TDCJ facility, would have a better chance of a successful reentry if they took full advantage of federal benefits for which they were eligible. Many veterans are unaware of the full range of federal benefits available to them, and this bill would help ensure they were notified and had help enrolling in them. The bill also would enhance continuity of care for those veterans who had mental and medical health needs by ensuring they were properly referred to the appropriate VA services.

HB 634 would not infringe on the privacy of veterans who preferred not to report their military service. The information about an inmate's veteran status would be used by a reentry coordinator only if a veteran chose to apply for available VA benefits. It is more likely that the program would benefit veterans who otherwise might slip through the system than that it would negatively affect veterans who wanted to keep their veteran status private.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

HB 634 would institute a system that eliminated the choice veterans currently have of whether or not to report their veteran status to TDCJ. The current system for determining whether an inmate is a veteran requires veterans to volunteer the information. Historically, some veterans have been prone to disavow or hide their service. Some simply consider it a private matter. HB 634 would take away this option from inmates who might prefer not to be identified as veterans.