

SUBJECT: Establishing a veterans services coordinator, reentry program for TDCJ

COMMITTEE: Defense and Veterans' Affairs — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 7 ayes — Gutierrez, Blanco, Arévalo, Cain, Flynn, Lambert, Wilson

0 nays

WITNESSES: For — Lashondra Jones, Catholic Charities; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Olivia Bush, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Galveston Houston; Gyl Switzer, Mental Health America of Texas; Deborah Rosales-Elkins, NAMI Texas; Ellen Arnold, Texas Association of Goodwills; Jim Brennan, Texas Coalition of Veterans Organizations; James Cunningham, Texas Coalition of Veterans Organizations, Texas Council of Chapters of the Military Officers Association of America; Joseph Green, Travis County Commissioners Court; James Thurston, United Ways of Texas; CJ Grisham; Sacha Jacobson)

Against — None

On — April Zamora, Texas Department of Criminal Justice

DIGEST: CSHB 865 would require the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) to establish a veterans service coordinator and a veterans reentry dorm program for certain state-jail defendants.

**Veterans services coordinator.** The coordinator would support all of the department's divisions and coordinate responses to the needs of veterans under TDCJ's supervision. In cooperation with the community justice division, the coordinator would have to provide information to community supervision and corrections departments to help veterans placed on community supervision.

The coordinator, in collaboration with the attorney general's office, would have to provide each incarcerated veteran with a child support modification application.

**Veterans reentry dorm program.** TDCJ would be required to coordinate with the Texas Veterans' Commission to establish and administer a voluntary rehabilitation and transition program for certain veterans confined in state jails. Participation would be open to veterans who suffered from a brain injury or mental illness or disorder or were victims of sexual trauma that was related to military service and could have contributed to the defendant's criminal activity.

The program would be required to:

- verify the veteran status of each defendant confined in a state jail;
- be available to male and, depending on resources, female defendants;
- include provisions for interviewing and selecting defendants for participation;
- allow a defendant to decline participation or withdraw at any time;
- design housing that mimicked a squadron structure; and
- coordinate and provide department-approved services, including individual and group support, access to military trauma-informed licensed mental health counseling, evidence-based rehabilitation programming, and reemployment services.

At least 60 days before a participant's release or discharge, the program, to the extent feasible, would have to:

- match the defendant with community-based veteran peer support services to assist with transitioning into the community; and
- transfer the defendant to a state jail located near the defendant's home or desired community.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2017.

SUPPORTERS  
SAY:

CSHB 865 would address concerns about the frequency of veterans entering the criminal justice system with untreated, military-related mental health issues. Many veterans face challenges when returning to civilian

life that often are exacerbated by a mental illness or disorder resulting from their military service. Without proper support and guidance, these conditions can lead to substance abuse issues and involvement in the criminal justice system. The bill would help facilitate reentry into society for certain veterans with mental health issues and connect them with much-needed services.

Establishing a veterans services coordinator would benefit veterans and service providers. The coordinator would advocate for incarcerated veterans and act as a liaison between them and service providers in the community. Many programs across the state are available to help veterans transition from service to civilian life, but many veterans are unaware of them. The coordinator could help service providers spread awareness to incarcerated veterans to assist their transition back into the community and reduce recidivism.

The dorm program would provide incarcerated veterans a chance to receive rehabilitative services in a familiar environment. By mimicking a squadron setting, the program would leverage what the veteran acquired while in the military — a structured lifestyle, habits and routines, and the value of peer support — by living with people who had been through similar experiences. This structure and social support would benefit a person in recovery and could encourage their transition back into society as law-abiding citizens.

CSHB 865 also would ensure that the reentry dorm program was available to both male and female incarcerated veterans, depending on resources. This is critical because female veterans currently do not have a dedicated reentry program. Mental health issues afflict both male and female veterans, so they experience similar challenges when transitioning into civilian life.

The Department of Criminal Justice, Veterans' Commission, and attorney general's office have indicated that any costs associated with implementing the bill could be absorbed within existing resources. The department already has a staff member dedicated to veterans services, and

the Travis County Jail already runs a veterans dorm reentry program. HB 865 would codify current practices and ensure that these services continued and were made available throughout the system.

OPPONENTS  
SAY:

No apparent opposition.

NOTES:

CSHB 865 differs from the filed bill in several ways, including that the committee substitute would:

- require TDCJ to work in coordination with the Veterans' Commission to establish the dorm program;
- require the veteran status of all state-jail defendants to be verified, as well as procedures to interview and select participants;
- add a victim of military sexual trauma to the criteria that could make a veteran eligible for the program;
- extend the program to female defendants, if resources allowed;
- expand the programming available to participants; and
- require defendants to be connected with transition resources 60 days, rather than 30 days, before their release.