

SUBJECT: Requiring Texas Veterans Commission to track, report veteran suicides

COMMITTEE: Defense and Veterans' Affairs — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 6 ayes — Flynn, Tinderholt, Ashby, Hinojosa, Ramos, Romero

0 nays

3 absent — Lopez, Lozano, Reynolds

WITNESSES: For — LaShondra Jones; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Lee Johnson, Texas Council of Community Centers; and six individuals)

Against — None

On — (*Registered, but did not testify*: Tim Keesling, Health and Human Services Commission)

BACKGROUND: Some have suggested that veterans are not adequately considered in state suicide data and that more needs to be done to improve policymakers' understanding of the incidence of veteran suicides.

DIGEST: CSHB 1045 would require the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC), in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), to develop and maintain a system for tracking the number of veteran suicides in Texas and determining the number of those veterans who received services from the VA.

The tracking system would have to be developed by December 31, 2019, and include available data from the VA that was reported to TVC.

A person who knew that the cause of death for a veteran was suicide, including a medical examiner or justice of the peace acting as a coroner or certain health care or mental health facilities, would have to report the suicide to TVC and provide any information that could assist the commission in determining whether the veteran received services from the

VA. A person would not have to comply with this reporting requirement until January 1, 2020.

Information about the suicide of a veteran obtained under the bill would be confidential and not subject to disclosure under public information laws or to subpoena and could not be released or otherwise made public.

TVC would report to the Legislature by December 31 of each year:

- the number of veteran suicides that were reported during the preceding year and the number of those who received services from the VA;
- information on whether the rate of veteran suicides in Texas was decreasing or increasing; and
- an evaluation of and recommendations for improving the effectiveness of statewide prevention and awareness campaigns in decreasing the number of veteran suicides.

The first report would be due December 31, 2020.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2019.