

SUBJECT: Voice-mail services for individuals in crisis or in transition

COMMITTEE: State Affairs — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 13 ayes — Solomons, Menendez, B. Cook, Craddick, Farabee, Gallego, Geren, Harless, Jones, Maldonado, Oliveira, Swinford, S. Turner

0 nays

2 absent — Hilderbran, Lucio

WITNESSES: For — Jennifer Brandon, Community Voice Mail; Andrew Bucknall, Austin Travis County MHMR; Sandra Castillo and Polly Levers, Goodwill Industries of Central Texas; Ester Geffre, Catholic Charities, San Antonio; Sandra Harrison; Mickie Powers, IE, Inc.; Larry Sykes; Linda Terrill, Alpha Home, Inc.; Eva Thibaudeau, Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County; Stephanie Whitney, The Stewpot; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Karen Hadden, SEED Coalition; Sandra Haverlah, Texas Consumer Association)

Against — None

On — Casey Haney, Public Utility Commission; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Eva Munoz, AT&T)

BACKGROUND: Utilities Code, sec. 56.021 established the universal service fund (USF) which requires telecommunications companies to charge a universal service fee to help finance or reimburse providers for programs such as:

- providing telephone service at reasonable rates to high-cost rural areas across the state;
- reducing the cost of specialized telephone equipment and services for deaf, blind, or speech-impaired individuals; and
- providing “lifeline” services or discounts on telephone installation and monthly service for eligible low-income customers.

DIGEST: HB 232 would amend the Utilities Code to add a telephone voice-mail-box assistance program to the list of services eligible for funding from the

universal service fund. The Public Utilities Commission would have to establish a grant program to financially assist the service administrators of telephone voice-mail-box services for individuals who were homeless, in transition, or could not afford telephone services. The service administrator would have to be a publicly funded nonprofit or other tax exempt charitable organization.

Grant recipients would have to provide information on program outcomes based on accountability measures established by the commission. Failure to comply with the measures would result in loss of eligibility for the grant program.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2009.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

Hundreds of non-profit organizations across the state offer free or low-cost voice mail access to families or individuals who are in transition or crisis, including domestic violence survivors, transitioning foster youth, elderly or disabled individuals, very low-income individuals, or the homeless. These voice-mail-box programs currently have no stable source of funding, so the struggling non-profits providing the service are continually seeking funding options for providing consistent, uninterrupted service to those in need.

HB 232 would provide a measure of stability to these programs, which meet USF funding requirements as set out in the Utilities Code, by allocating grant money to partially fund administration costs, thus easing the burden for providers serving those in crisis or transition.

Individuals in these situations often do not have reliable phone service. Lacking this means of communication can be a major barrier to accessing services needed to achieve stability, such as jobs, housing, and medical services.

In 2008, more than 8,000 Texans in crisis or transition received voice-mail-box services. These services are vital as a means of receiving voice-mail messages in response to job applications and for maintaining contact with family members, but they also are valuable for disseminating information. Non-profit service providers have sent out mass messages on job fairs and provided warnings on health issues, such as salmonella outbreaks. They also have provided information on approaching hurricanes, the dangers they pose to homeless individuals in specific areas,

and where to go to remain safe. As a result, voice-mail-box programs address communications issues, as well as humanitarian, economic, and safety issues.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

No apparent opposition.