

SUBJECT: Higher education tuition and lab fee exemptions for certain peace officers

COMMITTEE: Public Safety — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 6 ayes — Merritt, Frost, Driver, P. King, Rodriguez, Vo

0 nays

3 absent — Burnam, Lewis, Mallory Caraway

WITNESSES: For — Chris Jones, Combined Law Enforcement Association of Texas (CLEAT); Sean Mannix, Austin Police Department; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Jeff Adickes, Austin Police Department; Laura Andersen, San Antonio Police Department; John Chancellor, Texas Police Chiefs Association; James Jones, Houston Police Department; Randal Kuykendall, Texas Municipal Police Association; Joe Saldana, San Antonio Police Officers Association; Gary Tittle, Dallas Police Department)

Against — None

On — Timothy Braaten, Texas Commission of Law Enforcement Officers Standards and Education

BACKGROUND: Education Code, sec. 54.208 exempts firefighters from paying tuition and laboratory fees at public junior colleges and four-year colleges and universities.

DIGEST: HB 2347 would extend the tuition and lab fee exemption currently in place for firefighters enrolled in fire science courses to peace officers employed by political subdivisions of the state who enrolled in courses offered as part of a criminal justice or law enforcement management-related curriculum designed for peace officers. The exemption would not apply to security deposits that may be required for property loaned to the student.

The exemption would begin with the 2009 fall semester.

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.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

HB 2347 would correct an inequity by authorizing a higher education benefit to peace officers that firefighters currently enjoy. Peace officers are important public servants, and it is in the state's interest to ensure we have the best prepared peace officers possible.

Officers are encouraged to pursue higher education as a way to help improve the law enforcement profession. By some indications, the more college education a police officer has, the fewer the number of misconduct complaints against the officer. Many large cities, such as Houston, offer education incentive programs by reimbursing the cost of tuition for these officers, an indication of the value they place on higher education, but smaller cities simply do not have the budget for this.

While there would be a cost for providing these exemptions for peace officers, it would be justifiable for public servants who put their lives on the line every day for the communities they serve. It would be a small price for the benefit residents in Texas communities would receive when the police officers they hired were educated, well-trained, and prepared.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

While no one would dispute the worthiness of this bill's intentions or of its beneficiaries, adding new tuition exemptions could create a financial strain on the affected institutions, especially community colleges. Although HB 2347 would have no fiscal impact on the state, it would continue a trend that is eroding the base of the state's higher education funding. At some point, policy makers should consider creating uniformity for exemptions and establishing benchmarks and standards for recipients to continue receiving aid.

NOTES:

According to the LBB, there would be no significant fiscal impact to the state. However, according to the THECB, the total tuition exemption for all students in all sectors of higher education would be \$1.6 million for fiscal 2010, and would increase in future years as the number of peace officers claiming the exemption increased.

During floor consideration of HB 2347 on April 27, the House adopted amendments to add peace officers employed by the state to the tuition and lab fee exemption, to require the THECB to adopt rules governing the

grant or denial of an exemption and a uniform listing of the degree programs covered by the exemption, and to delete the requirement that curriculum subject to the exemption be designed for peace officers. Further consideration of the bill was postponed until today.