

SUBJECT: Establishing community-based navigator program for benefit applicants

COMMITTEE: Human Services — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 7 ayes — Raymond, Morrison, Gonzalez, Hopson, Hughes, Hunter, Naishtat

2 nays — Laubenberg, V. Taylor

WITNESSES: For — Bee Moorhead, Texas Impact; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Jennifer Banda, Texas Hospital Association; Chase Bearden, Coalition of Texans with Disabilities; Dolores Briones, Texas Health Institute; Miryam Bujanda, Methodist Healthcare Ministries; Jose E. Camacho, Texas Association of Community Health Centers, Inc; Celia Cole, Center for Public Policy Priorities; Jodyann Dawson, Texans Care for Children; Jean Thomas Dwyer, Insurance.A.Kid; Michelle Romero, Texas Medical Association)

Against — None

On — Liz Garbutt, Health and Human Services Commission; Lynn Blackmore, Health and Human Services Commission

DIGEST: HB 2610 would require the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) to establish a community-based navigator program by September 1, 2012, to assist individuals applying online for public assistance benefits through the Texas Integrated Eligibility Redesign System (TIERS) or another electronic eligibility system.

HHSC would have to recruit, train, and certify volunteers and other representatives of faith- and community-based organizations as navigators to assist individuals applying for public assistance benefits. The bill would require HHSC to publish a complete list of certified navigators online.

HHSC would have to develop a training program for navigators that included information on:

- how to complete an online application for public assistance benefits;

- the importance of maintaining confidential information;
- the importance of submitting complete and accurate information when applying online;
- certain public assistance benefit programs allowing online applications; and
- how an individual could apply for public assistance benefits that did not allow online applications.

HHSC also would have to adopt rules for the program, including on navigator certification qualifications, suspension, revocation, and renewal.

HB 2610 would require HHSC to establish an advisory committee by January 1, 2012, to assist with the navigator program. The committee would have to include representatives of faith- and community-based organizations and reflect the geographic, religious, and racial diversity of Texas.

HB 2610 would be effective September 1, 2011. If a state agency determined that a federal waiver or authorization was necessary to implement the program, then the agency would have to request the waiver and could delay implementation until it was granted.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

Individuals eligible for and needing financial or public assistance often cannot complete online applications through TIERS without outside help. HB 2610 would help facilitate this process by requiring HHSC to establish a community-based navigator program to guide benefit applicants through the system.

Some individuals lack computers, Internet access, or other technological equipment necessary to fill out TIERS applications. Even with access, some do not know how to properly scan documents, submit confidential information, or navigate the online application process.

Many faith- and community-based organizations have volunteers who are willing and able to help these individuals access the assistance they need. The navigator program simply would help train and certify volunteers to help people successfully complete their public assistance benefit applications. Individuals could then submit their applications at churches, libraries, food shelters, and other locations within the community.

Since navigators would be volunteers from faith- and community-based organizations, there would be no cost associated with their help. The costs for training and implementing the navigator program would be incorporated into HHSC's established training budget, according to the fiscal note.

By properly training volunteer navigators to help Texans successfully complete their online applications, HHSC would not be consumed by tracking down incomplete applications and could better focus on successfully implementing its mission.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

HB 2610 would create a new program that would require HHSC to establish new rules, train volunteers on a multifaceted application system, and monitor volunteers' ability to maintain confidential information. In the upcoming biennium, HHSC would bear the costs for developing and implementing the navigator program. This also could potentially require future appropriations to continue the program's implementation.

Additionally, allowing nonstate employees access to sensitive and confidential information could increase the potential for fraud and abuse that would siphon resources from needed public assistance benefit programs.