

SUBJECT: Requiring TDCJ policy to encourage volunteer, faith-based organizations

COMMITTEE: Corrections — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 7 ayes — Parker, White, Allen, Riddle, Rose, J.D. Sheffield, Toth  
0 nays

WITNESSES: For — Doots. B Dufour, Diocese of Austin; Vikrant Reddy, Texas Public Policy Foundation; Ana Yanez Correa, Texas Criminal Justice Coalition; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Yannis Banks, Texas NAACP; Rebecca Bernhardt, Texas Defender Service; Cathy Dewitt, Texas Association of Business; Cindy Eigler, Texas Interfaith Center for Public Policy)

Against — None

On — (*Registered, but did not testify*: Rick Thaler, Texas Department of Criminal Justice)

BACKGROUND: Government Code sec. 501.009 requires the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to actively encourage volunteer organizations to provide certain types of education, treatment, and rehabilitation programs for incarcerated offenders. Sec. 501.009 lists types of programs that include literacy and education, life skills, job skills, parent-training, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, support programs, arts and crafts, and other programs determined to reduce recidivism and to help inmates transition to society.

DIGEST: HB 2811 would require TDCJ to adopt a policy requiring each warden to identify volunteer organizations that provide programs to incarcerated offenders. The policy would require each warden to actively encourage volunteer and faith-based organizations to provide the programs currently listed in Government Code sec. 501.009.

The policy would require each warden to submit a report on these efforts to the Texas Board of Criminal Justice each year by December 31. The report would include a summary of the programs provided to inmates and the warden's actions to identify volunteer and faith-based organizations willing to provide programs and actions taken to encourage organizations

to provide them.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2013, and TDCJ would have to adopt the policy required by the bill by December 1, 2013.

**SUPPORTERS  
SAY:**

HB 2811 would formalize and help expand TDCJ's current work with volunteer organizations, which could cost-effectively reduce offender recidivism and enhance public safety.

Currently, TDCJ allows many volunteer and faith-based organizations to offer programs in correctional facilities. The programs include literacy, job skills, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, arts and crafts, and more. The programs can have a significant, positive impact on offender rehabilitation, education, and skill acquisition.

HB 2811 would recognize the importance of these efforts by formalizing them through an agency policy. Such a policy would ensure wardens made conscious efforts in this area and were held to the same expectations concerning their efforts to involve volunteer and faith-based organizations within their facilities.

The annual report required by the bill would detail the efforts at each unit and would facilitate the sharing of strategies, ideas, and information, which could lead to increased volunteer involvement. A report also would give policy makers and the public information about community involvement at each unit.

With the efforts made under HB 2811, the number and scope of these programs could increase. More offenders could gain the necessary skills to keep from reoffending and to successfully reintegrate into society, making the public safer.

Using these cost-free programs leverages private resources to help the state. When offender recidivism is reduced, the state saves the money it would have spent to handle an offender who committed another crime. Increased volunteer involvement in prisons could translate into additional resources for offenders during their reentry into society.

HB 2811 would not burden TDCJ, and the bill's requirements could be met with existing resources. TDCJ already posts on its website information by unit about volunteer initiatives, and HB 2811 would fit

easily into those efforts. TDCJ staff always are working to process volunteer applications efficiently and in a timely manner and would continue to do so if HB 2811 led to an increase in applications.

**OPPONENTS  
SAY:**

It might be difficult for TDCJ to implement HB 2811 without additional resources. The bill could lead to an increase in the number of volunteer applications, and TDCJ could struggle to process them in a timely manner. Volunteers could become discouraged and move on to other opportunities.