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TESTIMONY 2015

HB 569

Dear Members of the Committee,

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to present testimony in favor of HB 569, which will ensure that incarcerated individuals are provided with accurate reentry resource information prior to release. This will connect individuals with employment, housing, health, education, and mental health services that will help them to successfully reintegrate back into the community.

INFORMATION ABOUT COUNTY-SPECIFIC SERVICES WILL PROVIDE EXITING INDIVIDUALS WITH TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

The transition from prison back to the community is unexpectedly difficult for most people leaving prison. They leave with \$100, the clothes on their back, a 10-day supply of medication, and a bus ticket home.¹ Oftentimes, they leave on cold winter days without a coat to wear. Even when basic needs are met, however, there remains the extraordinary challenge of finding a job and housing when most of those doors are closed to them.

Ideally, reentry planning begins upon initial intake into a corrections facility, where practitioners identify factors that have led to a person's incarceration and, based on those factors, develop an individualized treatment plan – always with a vision of post-release outcomes in mind.² For instance, incarcerated individuals whose route to prison included substance abuse problems are less likely to recidivate when provided treatment in prison and aftercare following release. Ultimately, planning for a successful reentry entails a “hand off” between the prison system and community supports based on individual need.

Texas has Gaps in its Reentry System

The reentry system in Texas falls significantly short of this ideal. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) is appropriated only enough funds to employ 139 Reentry Case Managers to help more than 75,000 incarcerated individuals who leave prison each year.³ These Case Managers seldom have enough time to do more than order social security cards and birth certificates for exiting individuals, focusing most of their efforts on the most at-risk people leaving prison.⁴

As such, incarcerated individuals must do their own planning. They must locate and apply for continuing education in the community. Veterans who received supports prior to incarceration must contact providers to restore services post release. Some individuals are being released to overcrowded state-run halfway houses, and they must get on the waiting list for safer, more stable housing as soon as possible. Improved access to this information before one is released increases the likelihood of success post-release.

Inaccessible Reentry Resource Information Comes at a High Cost to the State

Inaccurate, outdated, or inaccessible resource information carries additional costs to the state. When individuals do not have family members willing to take them in upon release, they must quickly locate private halfway house options or risk waiting in custody for additional months beyond their projected release dates for one of only 1,880 state-run halfway house beds available to the nearly 75,000 people released each year.⁵ **Outdated halfway house information slows the process and costs the state additional funds, keeping people in custody long past projected release dates.**

Continued on reverse.

Local Reentry Resource Information is Already Available

Many private, non-profit, and faith-based organizations have already compiled locale-specific resource lists that could be made available to incarcerated individuals preparing for their return to society. For instance, a team of community leaders in Travis County compiled a resource guide for those returning to the Austin area that contains nearly 50 pages of resources, including 27 housing resources available to recently released individuals.⁶ Moreover, Reentry Case Managers have their own database of resources that they utilize for the limited number of people they are able to help. Expanding incarcerated individuals' access to this information would greatly help them formulate successful reentry plans.

KEY FINDINGS

- Texas statute mandates that TDCJ develop a comprehensive reentry plan that includes “programs that address the assessed needs of offenders; a comprehensive network of transition programs; the identification of...existing local programs and transitional services; and other providers of services as necessary to adequately assess and address the needs of each offender.”⁷ **Providing exiting inmates with already-compiled information about available community-based service providers and other relevant organizations will assist TDCJ in this effort at very low or no cost.**
- Recently released individuals who experience difficulty accessing clothing, food, shelter, medical care, or transportation are at **exceptionally high risk of returning to crime** as a means to provide for basic needs.⁸

COST-SAVING AND PUBLIC SAFETY-DRIVEN SOLUTION: SUPPORT HB 569 BY REPRESENTATIVE ALLEN

- **HB 569 will provide critical information to incarcerated individuals, preparing them for a successful return to their communities.** This bill stipulates that TDCJ contact organizations that have compiled comprehensive, locale-specific resource lists containing basic, easily accessible, and accurate contact information, and make that information available to all incarcerated individuals prior to release.
- **HB 569 will provide incarcerated individuals who are within six months of release with their own community-specific resource list,** enabling them to readily access information in the event they must change their plans.

Citations

¹ Texas Department of Criminal Justice Parole Division, *Policy and Operating Procedure #PD/POP-3.1.2: Release Payment* (“Gate Money”), December 6, 2012, https://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/documents/parole/03.01.02_parole_policy.pdf.

² Urban Institute Justice Policy Center, *Release Planning for Successful Reentry: A Guide for Corrections, Service Providers, and Community Groups*, Research Report, September, 2008, 6-23, http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411767_successful_reentry.pdf.

³ Texas Department of Criminal Justice, *Biennial Report of the Reentry and Integration Division*, September 1, 2014, 11, http://tdcj.state.tx.us/documents/rid/RID_Reentry_Biennial_Report_8_28_14.pdf.

⁴ Ibid, 11.

⁵ Texas Department of Criminal Justice, *Legislative Appropriations Request for Fiscal Years 2016 and 2017*, August 25, 2014, 175, <http://docs.lbb.state.tx.us/display.aspx?DocType=LAR&Year=201>.

⁶ Travis County Justice and Public Safety Division, *Travis County Reentry Success Guide: A Guide to Travis County Area Resources for People Leaving Jail or Prison*, Revised May 2012, <http://www.reentryroundtable.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Resource-Guide-May-2012.pdf>.

⁷ TEX. GOV. CODE § 501.092(b)(2)-(5)

⁸ Urban Institute, *Release Planning*, 2.