

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center

S.B. 655
By: Shapleigh
Veteran Affairs & Military Installations
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DIGEST AND PURPOSE

Currently, many Texas veterans are not aware of the programs and benefits to which they are entitled. The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) is aware of this problem, but does not have the resources to survey target populations. Additionally, needs change as the population ages. TVC files increasing numbers of claims each year, indicating a growing financial need among Texas veterans and a growing need to more effectively disseminate information on programs and benefits to eligible veterans. As proposed, S.B. 655 requires TVC to create a website containing information on state and federal veterans benefits programs and the ability to file for selected benefits. S.B. 655 also directs TVC to create and distribute electronic and hard copy versions of a state veterans benefits booklet and facilitate the electronic initiation of veterans benefits by county veterans services county officers no later than September 1, 2004. Also included is the requirement that all state agency employment-related forms include a statement regarding the required goal of an agency workforce composed of at least 40 percent veterans.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

This bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, institution, or agency.

SECTION BY SECTION ANALYSIS

SECTION 1. Amends Chapter 434A, Government Code, by adding Sections 434.0072, 434.0073, 434.0074, and 434.0075, as follows:

Sec. 434.0072. WEBSITE. (a) Requires the Department of Information Resources (DIR) to establish an Internet site using TexasOnline to allow veterans to access information on state and federal veterans benefits programs.

(b) Requires the website to allow a veteran to electronically file for state veterans benefits, including electronic signature functionality and acknowledgment from the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC).

(c) Authorizes the functionality to file for selected federal veterans benefits, as specified by the TVC, to be included on the website.

Sec. 434.0073. COMMISSION FORMS. Requires TVC forms to include the Internet website address of TexasOnline benefits information and toll-free telephone number.

Sec. 434.0074. BENEFITS BOOKLETS. (a) Requires TVC to create, not later than February 1 of each even-numbered year, an electronic version of a state veterans benefits booklet, provide a hard copy and electronic version booklet to certain offices and officers, and place the electronic version on its website. [Not indicated as proposed text in bill as drafted].

(b) Provides that a veterans county service officer is encouraged to distribute the

booklet to anyone who claims or will claim Texas residency after discharge from the armed forces. Requires the veterans county service officer to make a copy of the booklet available at the county veterans' service office. [Not indicated as proposed text in bill as drafted].

(c) Authorizes TVC to update the booklet as necessary.

Sec. 434.0075. ELECTRONIC ACCESS TO NEWSLETTER OR SERVICES. Requires TVC, within available resources and with DIR's executive director's assistance, to develop and implement a program using appropriate hardware, software, and required training programs to facilitate the delivery of a veterans newsletter and the initiation of veterans benefits claims by county service officers.

[Subsection/division - not indicated as proposed text in bill as drafted] Requires TVC, within available resources, to work with the Windham Intermediate School District to establish a program providing refurbished computers to interested county service officers at no cost. Requires that these computers be available to veterans either on site of through a lending program to be established by the county service officers and approved by the county commissioners court.

SECTION 2. Amends Chapter 434B, Government Code, by adding Section 434.039, as follows:

Sec. 434.039. OFFICER PERFORMANCE. Requires TVC to provide on its website information that may be voluntarily used by counties to link officer performance evaluations with the percentage of veterans benefits claims successfully filed by an officer.

SECTION 3. Amends Chapter 656B, Government Code, by adding Section 656.027, as follows:

Sec. 656.027. PREFERENCE FOR VETERANS ON STATE EMPLOYMENT FORMS. Requires TVC, within available resources and as new forms are published, to include on all state agency employment-related forms, a statement regarding the requirement prescribed by Chapter 657 (Veteran's Employment Preferences) that each state agency have as its goal an agency workforce composed of at least 40 percent veterans.

SECTION 4. Amends Chapter 161C, Natural Resources Code, by adding Section 161.075, as follows:

Sec. 161.075. INFORMATION FOR LENDING INSTITUTIONS. (a) Defines "lending institution."

(b) Requires the Veterans' Land Board (VLB), on request, to provide information on state land and housing programs for veterans in this state to lending institutions.

SECTION 5. Amends Chapter 105, Election Code, by adding Section 105.003, as follows:

Sec. 105.003. ELECTRONIC VOTING (a) Requires the secretary of state, within existing appropriations, to explore the feasibility of establishing electronic voting under certain circumstances.

(b) Requires the secretary of state to recommend certain implementation processes.

SECTION 6. Requires TVC and the executive director of DIR to develop and implement the initial program required by Section 434.0075 (Electronic Access to Newsletter or Services) as added by this Act.

SECTION 7. Requires the secretary of state to submit recommendations to the legislature regarding an electronic system meeting the requirements of Section 105.003 (Electronic Voting), Election Code, not later than December 1, 2005.

SECTION 8. Effective date: upon passage or September 1, 2003.