

SUBJECT: Providing electric bill payment assistance for veterans burned in combat

COMMITTEE: State Affairs — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 11 ayes — Cook, Giddings, Craddick, Farrar, Frullo, Geren, Harless, Hilderbran, Huberty, Smithee, Sylvester Turner

0 nays

2 absent — Menéndez, Oliveira

SENATE VOTE: On final passage, April 4 — 30-0

WITNESSES: *(On House companion bill, HB 2391)*

For — *(Registered, but did not testify:* Wendell Bell, Texas Public Power Association; Eric Craven, Texas Electric Cooperatives; John W Fainter, Jr.; The Association of Electric Companies of Texas, Inc.; Robert Flores, American G.I. Forum of Texas; Patrick Reinhart, El Paso Electric Co.; Ned Ross, Direct Energy)

Against — None

On — *(Registered, but did not testify:* Bryan Kelly, Public Utility Commission of Texas; Kyle Mitchell, Texas Veterans Commission)

DIGEST: SB 981 would allow all Texas electric utilities, including municipally owned utilities and electric cooperatives, to establish a bill payment assistance program for military veterans who had a significantly decreased ability to regulate body temperature as a result of severe burns received in combat.

All electric providers could recover costs associated with the program.

The bill also would require the Public Utility Commission (PUC) to compile a list of bill payment assistance programs for burned veterans and publish the list on the PUC's website.

This 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, 2013.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

Military veterans who have returned from combat with severe burns have trouble regulating their internal temperature, putting them at greater risk than most people of overheating — a threat with potentially deadly consequences. Because their bodies easily overheat and take long to cool, burned vets often stay inside, with the thermostat set at no more than 70 degrees, resulting in electricity bills much larger than a typical household.

A similar bill payment assistance program was created last session that only applied to CPS Energy, a municipally owned utility serving San Antonio and the surrounding areas. This bill would be permissive, giving other municipally owned utilities, electric cooperatives, and electric utilities across the state the authority to develop a bill payment assistance program for veterans severely burned in combat.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

While the bill would be permissive, it would promote the creation of an entitlement program with no guidance on income eligibility. It is unnecessary to establish a separate program for veterans burned in combat when utility discount programs are already available to those in need. Most municipally owned utilities or electric cooperatives already offer bill payment assistance, and the low-income discount program funded by the System Benefit Fund is available to those in areas of competition. An electric provider that chose to establish a program would incur costs that would likely be passed on to other ratepayers.