

- SUBJECT:** Waiving certain fees and licensing requirements for first responders
- COMMITTEE:** Culture, Recreation and Tourism — favorable, without amendment
- VOTE:** 8 ayes — K. King, Gervin-Hawkins, Burns, Clardy, Frullo, Krause, Martinez, C. Morales
- 0 nays
- 1 absent — Israel
- WITNESSES:** For — Rene Ochoa, Bexar County Sheriffs Office; Kathryn Brown, Bexar County Constables; Jeremy Payne, Deputy Sheriffs' Association of Bexar County; (*Registered, but did not testify*: Selena Xie, Austin EMS Association; Philip Barquer and Craig Smith, Austin Travis County EMS; Chris Jones, Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas (CLEAT); Carlos Lopez and Jama Pantel, Justices of the Peace and Constables Association of Texas; Jimmy Rodriguez, San Antonio Police Officers Association; Tom Maddox, Sheriffs' Association of Texas; Monty Wynn, Texas Municipal League; Dallas Reed, Texas Municipal Police Association (TMPA); Timothy Fuentes)
- Against — (*Registered, but did not testify*: John Shepperd, Texas Foundation for Conservation)
- On — Justin Halverson, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
- BACKGROUND:** Parks and Wildlife Code secs. 13.015, 42.012, 46.004, and 50.002 establish the authority of the Parks and Wildlife Commission (TPWC) to charge and collect park user fees for park services and resident license fees for hunting, fishing, and combination licenses.
- DIGEST:** HB 409 would require the Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) and TPWC to waive the state park entrance fees and the fees or license requirements for hunting, fishing, and combination licenses for certain first responders.

The bill would waive the state park entrance fee for all qualifying first responders and the license fees for qualifying residents who were first responders.

The first responder would qualify for the waiver if the first responder:

- had completed at least 20 years of continuous service as a first responder; or
- had a disability connected to service as a first responder that consisted of the loss of the use of a lower extremity or a disability rating of 50 percent or more.

For the purposes of the bill, a first responder would include:

- a firefighter certified by the Texas Commission on Fire Protection or by the State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association of Texas;
- an individual certified as emergency medical services personnel by the Department of State and Health Services;
- a municipal police officer;
- a sheriff, deputy sheriff, or reserve deputy sheriff; or
- a constable, deputy constable, or reserve deputy constable.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2021.

SUPPORTERS
SAY:

HB 409 would honor and give back to first responders by waiving state park entrance fees and the fees or requirements for obtaining hunting and fishing licenses for certain first responders who had completed 20 years of service or were disabled. Texas first responders work tirelessly, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and should be recognized for their service to the state with an opportunity to enjoy Texas' beautiful natural environment after they become eligible for the waiver through years of service to the state or due to a disability sustained in the line of duty.

The bill could provide an added incentive in recruitment efforts for law

enforcement agencies by providing a benefit comparable to what the Texas State Guard currently offers to active duty guardsmen. The waiver would reward veteran officers and encourage junior officers to commit until the retirement level, increasing retention rates in departments that may be facing staffing vacancies.

**CRITICS
SAY:**

HB 409 could result in substantial revenue loss for the State Park and Game, Fish and Water Safety accounts. Although the spirit of the bill is commendable, the costs of the bill should be paid with general revenue funds.

NOTES:

According to the Legislative Budget Board, the bill would have a negative impact of about \$1.2 million to the Game, Fish, and Water Safety Account and about \$109,000 to the State Parks Account through fiscal 2023.