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**Innovation, Community & Economic  
Development, & Veterans Committee**

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**HB 2203**

**Brief Description:** Creating a pilot project to assist incarcerated veterans.

**Sponsors:** Representatives Ryu, Walen, Paul, Reeves, Ormsby, Hackney, Fey, Reed, Taylor, Doglio, Donaghy, Goodman, Leavitt and Davis.

**Brief Summary of Bill**

- Creates a pilot project to assist incarcerated veterans with reentry to civilian life.
- Appoints a reentry navigator to assist incarcerated veterans with a reentry plan that will address housing, employment, education, and access to services.
- Provides a housing and reentry subsidy to assist veterans during the first year of civilian life.

**Hearing Date:** 1/17/24

**Staff:** Martha Wehling (786-7067).

**Background:**

Benefits and Services Available to Veterans.

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) provides a variety of services and benefits to veterans in Washington including counseling, claims assistance, employment, education, training, burial, housing, medical care, business certification, and relief programs. Certain veterans are eligible to receive additional benefits, such as scoring preferences on civil

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service exams, special license plates, homeownership down payment assistance programs, property tax relief, and tuition waivers, reductions, and other education benefits. The WDVA offers long-term care in four state veterans homes for certain veterans and family members. The Transitioning Warrior Program assists veterans based on Joint Base Lewis McChord with claims assistance, benefits, outreach to the communities, and referral services for transitioning veterans and families. Through the Department of Commerce, the WDVA provided digital equipment and literacy instruction, focused on underserved low-income and rural veterans.

#### Edmonds College Programs.

Edmonds College has programs that provide formerly incarcerated individuals with academic and mental health counseling, financial assistance, and computers to help those individuals reintegrate into society. Edmonds College partners with Monroe Correctional Complex to assist incarcerated individuals with earning a GED, high school diploma, professional certification, or associate degree. Edmonds College's veteran's outreach specialist and federal Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program navigator works with incarcerated veterans. Benefits provided to veteran students include reduced tuition, tuition waivers for family members, counseling, employment services, priority class registration, delayed tuition, gap funding, and emergency funds.

#### Department of Corrections Employment, Education, and Reentry Programs.

The Department of Corrections (Corrections) manages all state-operated adult prisons and supervises individuals who live in the community and are under supervision. As part of its operations, Corrections is required to offer certain education and work force programs to incarcerated individuals, prioritizing basic skills and a high school diploma or equivalent. The associate workforce degree program was created in 2017 and allows accredited community or technical colleges, colleges, or universities to prepare incarcerated individuals to enter the work force. Corrections may select an individual to participate in a state-funded associate degree program based on priority criteria.

Corrections operates a comprehensive work program for incarcerated individuals through the Correction Industries program. Some of the industries within the program provide basic work training and experience to incarcerated individuals.

Corrections is required to develop individual reentry plans for each incarcerated individual under its jurisdiction, with limited exceptions. The reentry plans include: plans to maintain contact with family; a portfolio of the individual's educational achievements, previous employment and work experience, and any training received; and a plan to facilitate reentry into the community that addresses education, employment, substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, family reunification, and other needs.

Corrections has additional policies that address veterans, including: establishment of a veterans unit providing veteran housing; designation of a facility employee as a point of contact to assist

veterans with resources, reentry, and benefits; and participation in raising and lowering of colors, a structured fitness program, holiday celebrations, fund raisers, and displaying the military seal from a veteran's service branch on his or her cell door and identification card.

### **Summary of Bill:**

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) is required to administer a six-year pilot project to assist incarcerated veterans reintegrate to civilian life by providing information on available services, a housing subsidy, and a reentry subsidy. "Veteran" means every person, regardless of discharge status, with certain specified service terms.

#### Coordination to Avoid Benefit Overpayment.

The WDVA will coordinate with the Department of Corrections (Corrections) annually to identify all veterans incarcerated within the preceding year. Corrections will assist those veterans receiving federal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability compensation or pension benefits with notifying the VA if the veteran will be incarcerated for more than 60 days. The purpose of the notification is to avoid overpayment of federal benefits.

#### Pilot Project Site.

The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges will select up to two pilot project sites and will give consideration to Edmonds College. The first site must be west, and the second site east, of the Cascades.

#### Pilot Project.

##### *Reentry Navigator.*

The WDVA will appoint a reentry navigator, who will:

- identify all incarcerated veterans with release dates within two years by coordinating with Corrections at least annually;
- contact each incarcerated veteran within one year of the veteran's release date and provide information on educational opportunities, services, and resources available after release;
- develop a reentry plan within three months of a participating veteran's release date. The reentry plan must include:
  - an assessment of anticipated living expenses;
  - educational opportunities to train for employment;
  - eligibility for assistance programs, such as educational benefits and the Department of Social and Health Services' Basic Food Employment and Training program; and
  - contact information for services in the county the veteran plans to reside in after release.

##### *Housing Subsidy.*

The WDVA will provide a housing subsidy up to \$200 per month to veterans participating in the pilot project for up to one year after release. The WDVA and reentry navigator will develop criteria to determine eligibility for housing assistance; priority must be given to veterans who apply or enroll in an educational institution within three months of release.

*Reentry Subsidy.*

The WDVA will provide a reentry subsidy up to \$2,000 during the first year after release. The WDVA and reentry navigator will identify appropriate expenses for reimbursement including clothing, car insurance, cellular phone, home furnishings, or food. The WDVA is required to timely pay eligible expenses.

*Additional Support.*

The WDVA and reentry navigator may provide additional support through the pilot project, such as:

- identification of housing opportunities;
- identification of training to assist veterans in the transition from incarceration to community; or
- support, mentoring, life skills training, and assistance with access to services and benefits for veterans.

The pilot project must be coordinated with existing programs to minimize duplication and to identify and assist those veterans most in need.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Requested on January 9, 2024.

**Effective Date:** The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.