

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 2203

As Reported by House Committee On:

Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans

Title: An act relating to creating a pilot project to assist incarcerated veterans.

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 History:

Committee Activity:

Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans: 1/17/24, 1/23/24 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Creates a pilot project to assist incarcerated veterans with reentry into 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.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON INNOVATION, COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, & VETERANS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 8 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Donaghy, Vice Chair; Rule, Vice Chair; Cortes, Paul, Senn, Shavers and Street.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 6 members: Representatives Volz, Ranking

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Minority Member; Caldier, Chambers, Christian, Waters and Wilcox.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 1 member: Representative Barnard, Assistant Ranking Minority Member.

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 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 Substitute 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 (federal VA) disability compensation or pension benefits with notifying the federal 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 Cascade Mountains.

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 including state registered apprenticeship programs, 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, including state registered apprenticeship programs;
 - 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.

The reentry navigator is also required to monitor the status of participating veterans. If a veteran is incarcerated while participating in the pilot project, the reentry navigator will promptly notify the WDVA and immediately terminate the housing subsidy and reentry subsidy, effective on the date of incarceration.

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 or state registered apprenticeship program 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.

Reporting.

The WDVA is required to report to the Legislature annually beginning on November 1, 2025, until the pilot project expires on June 30, 2030. The report must identify:

- the number of veterans assisted by the project;
- the number of veterans eligible for the project, but unable to participate;
- the number of housing and reentry subsidies provided;
- the employment status of each participating veteran at the conclusion of participation, including part-time, full-time, temporary, or unemployed;
- the housing status of each participating veteran at the conclusion of participation, including temporary or permanent housing; and
- a comparative analysis of the housing and employment status between participating veterans and veterans released from incarceration who did not participate in the pilot project.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill adds state registered apprenticeship programs to the educational information provided to veterans during incarceration and as priority criteria for the housing subsidy. The substitute bill requires the reentry navigator to monitor participating veterans and notify the WDVA if a participant is incarcerated; incarcerated participants' housing and reentry subsidies must be terminated immediately upon the date of incarceration. The substitute bill requires the annual report on the pilot project to address each participating veteran's employment and housing status at the conclusion of the one-year participation in the project and compare the participating veterans' employment and housing status with veterans released from incarceration who did not participate in the pilot project.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) The reentry experience from incarceration is complex, and the complexity acts as a deterrent to success. However, successful reentry and a fulfilling future can happen, which will help veterans and the state. The pilot program will create a statewide seamless pathway from incarceration through education to employment, blending new initiatives with work already in place to assist veterans.

The justice system can be particularly cruel, and veterans have their own court, unique language, and bond. A program at Thurston County showed that when veterans are

connected and issues are identified they can go from very serious issues to success. It would be helpful to assist veterans even more than two years prior to release. Many incarcerated individuals do not have the tools to transition back to civilian life, making the likelihood of success low. It is very costly for the state when veterans who have served and paid for their crimes do not succeed in the transition. It costs about \$35,000 per year for each homeless person and can cost up to \$200,000 per year for higher need individuals. Helping formerly incarcerated veterans transition well, get the education needed, find a job, and become contributing members of society helps avoid additional expenses and tremendously improves the quality of life for the veterans and their families.

Many incarcerated veterans have a hard time finding housing when they are released. Existing subsidies are inadequate; even with Section 8 vouchers the cost of housing is not covered. The \$200 housing allowance is included for that difference.

To fill the jobs of the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries, the state needs an educated workforce. The Department of Corrections is changing the arc of incarceration. The captive workforce of incarcerated veterans is ready to be trained to do the future jobs that require increasing levels of education. Prisoners who engage in post-secondary education while in prison have a 48 percent lower recidivism rate. Colleges also need increased enrollment, and no group of students brings more money to campuses than veterans. During the 2020-21 academic year, nationwide, veterans brought \$8.4 billion in funding. The fully developed community college system is eager to develop pathways to the future. Education navigators are in the college facilities; what is missing is the outreach, support, and navigation to justice-impacted veterans. This pilot project is additive to the existing programs.

Edmonds College received a two-year grant for a veteran reentry program then funded it for a third year. The program gives veterans an opportunity to return to society. Even in complex cases that showed all indications for reoffense, under the program, the veterans succeed. It has had such good results that it should continue, and it is working so well that another location east of the mountains should replicate the program. The world is confusing enough without the effects of long-term incarceration. Using the program, we can better prepare veterans to enter society, reduce recidivism, save the state money, create workers needed for the future, and help those who were willing to sacrifice all for their nation.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) The intent to support veterans as they exit a correctional facility is appreciated. Turning off veterans benefits when a veteran is incarcerated more than 60 days in a Department of Corrections facility is the most important thing the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) can do for veterans because federal law requires each incarcerated veteran to stop payment within 60 days of confinement. If the veteran does not stop payment, upon release the veteran will have to pay back the benefits instead of receiving important dollars to support themselves, their families, and their communities.

There are opportunities for families to get a portion of a veteran's benefits during incarceration, and the WDVA can assist veterans with that application and process. The WDVA can also assist veterans who end up with an overpayment in the application for a waiver or a repayment plan. The WDVA can connect veterans to benefits such as health care, mental health care, education, vocational rehabilitation, and disability or pension benefits. This reduces the reliance on other state benefits and provides ongoing financial support which is critical upon release.

The WDVA can assist veterans with making connections with the local veterans service officer or a county veterans service officer who can assist the veteran with applying for benefits, as well as opportunities for housing, including transitional or permanent, connection to other state or federal providers, and with peer programs to connect with local communities and build resiliency. The WDVA is ready to assist with eastern and western colleges and the Department of Corrections, and is hopeful that additional colleges will be added in the future. The WDVA is also glad to add additional information to the reporting, such as employment, housing, or the apprenticeship options, and can develop policies or rules to address reoffending.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Cindy Ryu, prime sponsor; Dennis Gibb, Edmonds College; and Larry Jefferson, Washington State Office of Public Defense and Washington State Reentry Council.

(Other) David Puente, Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.