

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center

S.B. 655
By: Shapleigh
Veteran Affairs & Military Installations
8/12/2003
Enrolled

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. S.B. 655 requires the Department of Information Resources to create and maintain a TexasOnline veterans 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 printed copy versions of a state veterans benefits booklet and facilitate the electronic initiation of veterans benefits by county veterans services county officers. 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 434, Government Code, by adding Subchapter C, as follows:

SUBCHAPTER C. TECHNOLOGY SERVICES AND REQUIREMENTS

Sec. 434.101. DEFINITIONS. Defines "commission" and "TexasOnline."

Sec. 434.102. VETERANS WEBSITE. (a) Requires the Department of Information Resources (DIR) to establish and maintain on TexasOnline a veterans website to allow veterans to access information on state and federal veterans benefits programs.

(b) Provides that a state agency that participates in the veterans website is encouraged to allow a veteran to electronically file for state veterans benefits, including an electronic signature function and an electronic acknowledgment of the filing.

(c) Authorizes the veterans website to allow a veteran to file for selected federal veterans benefits, as specified by the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC), to be included on the website.

Sec. 434.103. COMMISSION FORMS. Requires TVC forms to include the veterans website address maintained under Section 434.102 and TVC's toll-free telephone number.

Sec. 434.104. 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 and provide a printed copy and electronic version booklet to certain offices and officers.

(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.

(c) Requires each veterans county service officer to make a copy of the booklet available at the veterans county service office.

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

(e) Requires TVC to provide an electronic version of the booklet on its website.

Sec. 434.105. ELECTRONIC ACCESS TO NEWSLETTER OR SERVICES. Authorizes TVC, with the assistance of DIR's executive director, to develop and implement a program using appropriate hardware, software, and required training programs to facilitate the electronic delivery of a veterans newsletter and the electronic initiation of veterans benefits claims by county service officers.

Sec. 434.106. DONATIONS; COMPUTERS FOR VETERANS COUNTY SERVICE OFFICERS. (a) Authorizes TVC to accept donated computers from any person, including a governmental entity, and to cooperate with that person to establish a program to provide computers at no cost to interested veterans county service officers.

(b) Requires a veterans county service officer who obtains a computer under this program to make the computer available to veterans at the veterans county service office or to lend the computer to veterans in a manner determined by the officer and approved by the county commissioners court.

SECTION 2. Amends Subchapter B, Chapter 656, Government Code, by adding Section 656.027, as follows:

Sec. 656.027. PREFERENCE FOR VETERANS ON STATE EMPLOYMENT FORMS. Requires TVC 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 give a veterans employment preference until the agency workforce is composed of at least 40 percent veterans.

SECTION 3. Amends Subchapter C, Chapter 161, 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 4. Makes application of Sections 434.103 (Commission Forms) and 656.027 (Preference for Veterans on State Employment Forms), Government Code, as added by this Act, prospective.

SECTION 5. Requires TVC and the executive director of DIR to develop and implement the initial program required by Section 434.105 (Electronic Access to Newsletter or Services), as added by this Act, not later than September 1, 2004.

SECTION 6. (a) Requires TVC, under the authority granted by Section 434.106, Government Code (Donations; Computers for Veterans County Service Officers), to work with the Windham School District to establish a program providing refurbished computers to interested county service officers at

no cost.

(b) Requires TVC and the Windham School District to jointly determine the quantity of refurbished computers for the program.

SECTION 7. (a) Requires the secretary of state to study the feasibility and cost of establishing procedures to allow certain persons to cast an electronic ballot.

(b) Requires the secretary of state, as part of the study, to recommend certain options.

(c) Requires the secretary of state to submit the study, including the recommendations, to the legislature not later than December 1, 2005.

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