

By: Shapleigh

S.B. No. 655

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED

AN ACT

relating to members and veterans of the armed forces.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF TEXAS:

SECTION 1. Subchapter A, Chapter 434, Government Code, is amended by adding Sections 434.0072, 434.0073, 434.0074, and 434.0075 to read as follows:

Sec. 434.0072. WEBSITE. (a) The Department of Information Resources shall establish an Internet site using "TexasOnline" to allow veterans to access information on state and federal veterans benefits programs.

(b) The website must allow a veteran to electronically file for state veterans benefits, including the electronic signing of the filing by the veteran and an electronic acknowledgment of the filing by the Texas Veterans Commission.

(c) The website may allow a veteran to electronically file for selected federal veterans benefits as specified by the Texas Veterans Commission upon reprints.

Sec. 434.0073. COMMISSION FORMS. Commission forms shall contain the Internet website address of TexasOnline benefits information and toll-free telephone number.

Sec. 434.0074. BENEFITS BOOKLETS. (a) Not later than February 1 of each even-numbered year, the commission shall create an electronic version of a state veterans benefits booklet and provide a hard copy and electronic version of the booklet to:

- 1 (1) each veterans county service officer; and
2 (2) the personnel office of each state or federal
3 military installation in this state.

4 The commission shall place an electronic version of the
5 booklet on its website.

6 (b) A veterans county service officer is encouraged to
7 distribute a copy of the booklet to any person who claims or will
8 claim Texas as a residence after discharge from the United States
9 armed forces. The veterans county service officer shall make a copy
10 of the booklet available at the county veterans' service office.

11 (c) The commission may update the booklet as necessary.

12 Sec. 434.0075. ELECTRONIC ACCESS TO NEWSLETTER OR SERVICES.
13 The commission, within available resources and with the assistance
14 of the executive director of the Department of Information
15 Resources, shall develop and implement a program that uses
16 appropriate computer hardware and software and required training
17 programs to facilitate electronic:

- 18 (1) delivery of a veterans newsletter; and
19 (2) initiation of veterans benefits claims by veterans
20 county service officers.

21 The Commission, within available resources, shall work with
22 the Windham Intermediate School District to establish a process
23 whereby refurbished computers in a quantity jointly determined by
24 the Commission and District shall be provided at no cost to
25 interested county service officers. County service officers that
26 obtain computers through this process shall make computers
27 available to veterans served by their respective counties either on

1 site or through a lending process in a manner determined by the
2 county service officers and approved by the county commissioners
3 court.

4 SECTION 2. Subchapter B, Chapter 434, Government Code, is
5 amended by adding Section 434.039 to read as follows:

6 Sec. 434.039. OFFICER PERFORMANCE. The commission shall
7 provide on their website information that may be voluntarily used
8 by counties to link evaluations of officer performance with the
9 percentage of veterans benefits claims successfully filed by an
10 officer.

11 SECTION 3. Subchapter B, Chapter 656, Government Code, is
12 amended by adding Section 656.027 to read as follows:

13 Sec. 656.027. PREFERENCE FOR VETERANS ON STATE EMPLOYMENT
14 FORMS. As new forms are published, and within available resources,
15 the commission shall include on all forms relating to state agency
16 employment that are prescribed by the commission under this
17 subchapter or other law a statement regarding the requirement
18 prescribed by Chapter 657 that each state agency have as its goal an
19 agency workforce composed of at least 40 percent veterans.

20 SECTION 4. Subchapter C, Chapter 161, Natural Resources
21 Code, is amended by adding Section 161.075 to read as follows:

22 Sec. 161.075. INFORMATION FOR LENDING INSTITUTIONS.
23 (a) In this section, "lending institution" has the meaning
24 assigned by Section 161.502.

25 (b) On request, the board shall provide to a lending
26 institution information regarding state land and housing benefits
27 programs for veterans in this state.

1 SECTION 5. Chapter 105, Election Code, is amended by adding
2 Section 105.003 to read as follows:

3 Sec. 105.003. ELECTRONIC VOTING. (a) Within existing
4 appropriations, the secretary of state shall explore the
5 feasibility of establishing a process whereby a person may cast an
6 electronic ballot if the person is:

7 (1) a member of the armed forces of the United States
8 who is on active duty overseas; or

9 (2) a spouse or dependent of a person described by
10 Subdivision (1) who will be outside the United States on election
11 day and during the early voting period for the election.

12 (b) The secretary of state shall recommend possible means by
13 which:

14 (1) upon the request of a person described in (1) and
15 (2) of Sec. 105.003, an electronic ballot may be sent to and
16 received from the voter;

17 (2) the identity of the voter may be verified;

18 (3) the security of the electronic transmission may be
19 ensured; and

20 (4) any other requirements the secretary of state
21 determines are necessary may be met.

22 SECTION 6. Not later than September 1, 2004, the Texas
23 Veterans Commission and the executive director of the Department of
24 Information Resources shall develop and implement the initial
25 program required by Section 434.0075, Government Code, as added by
26 this Act.

27 SECTION 7. Not later than December 1, 2005, the secretary of

1 state shall submit recommendations to the Legislature regarding an
2 electronic system as required by Section 105.003, Election Code, as
3 added by this Act.

4 SECTION 8. This Act takes effect immediately if it receives
5 a vote of two-thirds of all the members elected to each house, as
6 provided by Section 39, Article III, Texas Constitution. If this
7 Act does not receive the vote necessary for immediate effect, this
8 Act takes effect September 1, 2003.