

BILL ANALYSIS

H.B. 232
By: Rodriguez
State Affairs
Committee Report (Unamended)

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The lack of phone service, and the isolation and barriers to services that may occur as a result, can strike many populations: families or individuals who are homeless, survivors of family violence, transitioning foster youth, the elderly or disabled, or those whose incomes are so low that they are unable to afford reliable phone service. Several nonprofit entities in Texas offer free or low-cost personalized voice-mail-box access to their clients. In most cases, the programs require outcome measures, which have consistently shown that these boxes are quite useful in directly linking individuals to jobs, housing, and services that lead to a greater level of stability. The boxes are low-cost, as is the administration of the programs.

Currently, most of the community-based voice mail programs in Texas have no ongoing source of funding for their administrative functions, and are continually seeking patchwork funding solutions. These programs are eligible for funding from the universal service fund under the Utilities Code.

H.B. 232 helps community-based voice mail programs achieve sustainability by establishing a grant program through the Public Utility Commission of Texas. The grant program would use universal service fund dollars to partially fund existing voice-mail-box programs to assist with the enrollment and oversight functions.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

It is the committee's opinion that rulemaking authority is expressly granted to the Public Utility Commission of Texas in SECTIONS 1 and 2 of this bill.

ANALYSIS

H.B. 232 amends the Utilities Code to require the Public Utility Commission of Texas (PUC) by rule to establish and implement a program to provide funding for a grant program to assist the service administrators of telephone voice-mail-box services for individuals who are homeless, are in transition, or cannot afford telephone services. The bill amends provisions requiring the PUC to adopt and enforce rules requiring local exchange companies to establish a universal service fund to include, as a use of that fund, the funding of the telephone voice-mail grant program, and to include that program and its funding within the rules adoption and rules enforcement requirement. The bill requires that funding for the grant program be from the universal service fund, but prohibits the grant program from fully funding a voice-mail-box service program.

H.B. 232 requires that, to be eligible for a grant under the program, a service administrator be a publicly funded nonprofit organization or a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The bill requires that rules adopted for the grant program include accountability measures and provisions for loss of eligibility for failure to comply with the measures. The bill requires that rules adopted for the grant program require grant recipients to provide the PUC with information on program outcomes.

EFFECTIVE DATE

September 1, 2009.