

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center

H.B. 2951
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Veteran Affairs
5/12/2023
Engrossed

AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

According to the United States Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), an average of 16.8 veterans take their lives a day. The VA also reports that in 2020, the unadjusted suicide rate among U.S. veterans was 31.7 per 100,000, and 526 Texas veterans committed suicide. Despite these statistics, a study conducted by the RAND Center for Military Health Policy Research found that less than 50 percent of veterans with mental health needs receive treatment. However, tremendous success in mitigating the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, military sexual assault, and related drug use has been documented by veterans who use service dogs. H.B. 2951 creates a pilot program to pair veterans with highly-trained service dogs to help mitigate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and related mental health conditions.

H.B. 2951 amends current law relating to the establishment of a service dog pilot program for certain veterans.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

Rulemaking authority is expressly granted to the Texas Veterans Commission in SECTION 1 (Section 434.029, Government Code) of this bill.

SECTION BY SECTION ANALYSIS

SECTION 1. Amends Subchapter A, Chapter 434, Government Code, by adding Section 434.029, as follows:

Sec. 434.029. SERVICE DOG PILOT PROGRAM FOR CERTAIN VETERANS. (a) Defines "commission," "pilot program," and "veteran."

(b) Authorizes the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) by rule to establish a pilot program for veterans to assist in mitigating the symptoms of military service-related post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, or military sexual trauma through the provision of a service dog.

(c) Requires TVC to issue a request for proposals from nonprofit corporations to provide trained service dogs and training and services to veterans who participate in the pilot program.

(d) Requires TVC to approve one or more nonprofit corporations to provide services through the pilot program. Prohibits TVC from approving a nonprofit corporation unless the corporation:

(1) has demonstrated experience working with veterans who have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, or military sexual trauma;

(2) is authorized to conduct business in this state;

(3) is able to provide follow-up services to a veteran who participates in the pilot program and the veteran's service dog; and

(4) adheres to the standards of Assistance Dogs International.

(e) Requires a nonprofit corporation that is approved to provide services under the pilot program to:

(1) employ professional staff to train dogs to become service dogs for veterans participating in the pilot program;

(2) provide each veteran participating in the pilot program a fully trained service dog;

(3) instruct each veteran participating in the pilot program on maintaining the service dog's health and training;

(4) while a veteran is participating in the pilot program, ensure that regular mental health and depression assessments are conducted on the veteran; and

(5) be able to provide a veteran participating in the pilot program a new service dog if the veteran's service dog:

(A) is incompatible with the veteran; or

(B) dies or is otherwise unable to fulfill the dog's duty as a service dog before the fourth anniversary of the date the veteran received the service dog under the pilot program.

(f) Requires that all goods and services provided to a veteran as part of the pilot program, including a veteran's service dog, be provided at no cost to the veteran.

(g) Requires a service dog provided by a nonprofit corporation as part of the pilot program to:

(1) complete a training program accredited by Assistance Dogs International;

(2) comply with any requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. Section 12101 et seq.); and

(3) be evaluated by a veterinarian to ensure the dog is medically fit to serve as a service dog.

(h) Authorizes TVC to accept gifts, grants, and donations to fund the pilot program.

(i) Requires TVC to prepare and submit a report evaluating the pilot program to the governor, lieutenant governor, speaker of the house of representatives, and appropriate standing committees of the legislature not later than October 1, 2026. Requires that the report include:

(1) recommendations for legislative or other action; and

(2) an evaluation of the pilot program's effectiveness, including a recommendation on whether the pilot program should be continued, expanded, or terminated.

(j) Provides that the pilot program concludes and this section expires September 1, 2027.

SECTION 2. Requires TVC to adopt rules to administer the pilot program established under Section 434.029, Government Code, as added by this Act, as soon as practicable after the effective date of this Act.

SECTION 3. Effective date: September 1, 2023.