

CLC: Denial of benefits hampers ex-offenders' re-entry into society

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AUSTIN—Texas needs to remove barriers that make it difficult for ex-offenders to re-enter the “free world” and become productive members of society, a public policy expert with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission insists.



Kathryn Freeman, CLC public policy director, testified before the House Committee on Human Services in support of HB 1267, introduced by Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston. The bill would modify the law to make some felony drug offenders eligible for federal food assistance funds two years after release from prison if they meet certain requirements, and it would enable broader participation of ex-offenders in work programs.

SNAP—the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps—enables qualified recipients to buy food while they participate in job-search and training programs. The federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 made people convicted of felony drug offenses ineligible for SNAP benefits unless the state passes legislation

extending benefits to them. Forty-one states developed policies to allow ex-offenders to regain SNAP eligibility, but Texas remains among the nine states that have retained the ban.

“We believe denying SNAP benefits to these individuals makes it very hard for them to transition back into society as they attempt to reintegrate into their communities,” Freeman said.

Contradicts Christian understanding of redemption

A lifetime ban on benefits contradicts Christians’ understanding of redemption, forgiveness and transformed lives, she continued.

“We believe that people who have served their time should—in some way, shape or form—earn back the privilege of receiving SNAP,” she said.

Access to resources that help ex-offenders re-enter society reduces recidivism—repeat offenses after release, according to the CLC. The Bureau of Justice Statistics’ [recidivism study](#) of 30 states revealed that from 2005 to 2010, about two-thirds of released prisoners were arrested for a new crime within three years, and three-quarters were arrested within five years.

Texas Baptists support multiple restorative justice ministries to help strengthen inmates’ relationships to their families and God, ease their re-entry into society and reduce recidivism, Freeman noted.

Two ministries honored

The Governor’s Criminal Justice Volunteer Service Award program recently honored two ministries launched by Texas Baptists—the Huntsville Hospitality House and the [Restorative Justice Ministry Network Network](#). The Huntsville [Hospitality House](#) received the community service award, and Bill Kleiber accepted the restorative justice award on behalf of the

network founded by longtime Texas Baptist prison chaplain Emmett Solomon and the Welcome Back/First Contact Family Ministry.

Of the 70,000 people released from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice in 2014, about 29,000 did not qualify for TDCJ Re-entry and Integration Division programs.

“Many of these individuals are in desperate need of housing assistance, employment opportunities and contact information for organizations that will provide medical and mental health care,” a CLC-produced document on prisoner re-entry states. “Research suggests that the most critical period for someone leaving prison is the period immediately following release.”

Many Texas organizations have compiled resource lists specific to particular areas that could be made available to prisoners awaiting release.

“Access to these resources would greatly help incarcerated individuals formulate re-entry plans based on available community providers, and it would increase the chances that these individuals will successfully re-integrate into their community and become productive, law-abiding citizens,” the CLC document states. “However, many prisoners do not know about these resources.”

Three bills introduced

Three bills related to resources for ex-offender re-entry have been introduced during the current legislative session:

- [SB 578](#), introduced by Sen. Chuy Hinojosa, D-McAllen, and Sen. Jose Rodriguez, D-El Paso, requires TDCJ to identify organizations that provide re-entry and re-integration resource guides and to collaborate with those organizations to make the resource guides available to all inmates. The bill passed the Senate April 9.

- Rep. Alma Allen, D-Houston, introduced the House version of the Hinojosa/Rodriguez bill, [HB 569](#), April 7, and it was sent to the Local and Consent Calendars Committee.

- [SB 99](#), introduced by Hinojosa, requires the TDCJ to make arrangements for an inmate's supervised re-entry into free society one year before release or when the inmate has served 90 percent of his or her sentence.

The re-entry program must provide the inmate with skills necessary to ensure successful re-entry into the community, including providing appropriate substance-abuse treatment, counseling and social service programs. The supervised re-entry program must be coordinated with any re-entry or re-integration services the inmate will receive. SB 99 was referred to the Senate Criminal Justice Committee.

One bill related to nondisclosure orders for ex-offenders already has passed the Senate. [SB 130](#), introduced by Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, creates eligibility for the records of an offense and conviction that have been set aside by a judge to be sealed through a nondisclosure order. It prohibits eligibility for certain alcohol-related offenses and sexual assault-related offenses, kidnapping and murder, as well as crimes of family violence or injury to a child, the elderly or disabled.

“Nondisclosure orders are important, because they can help released prisoners’ effort to gain employment,” the CLC document states. “Employment is a key factor for released prisoners’ successful re-entry into the community. Even so, more serious offenses are not eligible for nondisclosure orders.”

Two additional bills submitted

Lawmakers are considering two additional bills related to nondisclosure:

- [SB 1902](#), introduced by Sen. Charles Perry, R-Lubbock, creates eligibility

for the records of certain deferred adjudication community supervision offenses and certain nonviolent misdemeanors that have been discharged and dismissed by a judge to be sealed through a nondisclosure order. If the records were sealed, the person would not be required to acknowledge the crime on any job or licensing application. The Senate Criminal Justice Committee held a public hearing on April 21 and voted the bill out of committee favorably.

- [HB 3936](#), introduced by Rep. Abel Herrero, D-Corpus Christi, joined by Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, Rep. Jim Murphy, R-Houston, and Rep. Jason Villalba, R-Dallas, mirrors SB 1902. The bill is pending in the House Criminal Jurisprudence Committee.

“It is incredibly hard for ex-offenders to be re-integrated into society,” Freeman said. “They face difficulty in finding jobs and housing, and they and their families are often outcasts in their communities. They are treated as society outcasts without the benefits of full citizenship.

“People with nonviolent criminal backgrounds, even after completing their sentences, have limited opportunities post-release. Individuals should have the opportunity to redeem themselves through meaningful opportunities to contribute spiritually, economically and civically in community life.

“We, as believers in Christ, know what it means to be forgiven and redeemed. Therefore, we should extend that same forgiveness and redemption to ex-offenders who have served their time and are looking for a second chance to get it right.”

This article is based in part on research by Leah Holder, a public policy research intern with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and the Baptist Standard, made possible by a grant from the Christ is Our Salvation Foundation of Waco. She is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Texas at Austin and is a student in the University of Texas School of Law.