



WRITTEN TESTIMONY

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REGARDING HOUSE BILL 3637

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON CORRECTIONS

APRIL 16, 2007

Dear Members of the Committee:

My name is Ana Yáñez-Correa. I am the Executive Director of the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony regarding House Bill 3637 by Representative Sylvester Turner, Speaker Pro Tempore.

Texas law designates 1,941 individual offenses as felonies, which has created a huge felon population in our state. In fact, approximately 1 in 11 Texas adults has a felony conviction on his or her record, and Texas has over 100 state laws that forbid felons from obtaining certain jobs. In 2005 alone, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) released 64,512 felons from incarceration. These are people who must find jobs and housing or else risk turning to illegal activity to survive.

In addition to employment-prohibitive state laws, many parolees are released to society with few job skills, a low educational level, drug and alcohol problems, and a host of psychosocial adjustment issues – all of which lead to greater job instability and, on average, low income levels. The State must reinvest in the provision of resources to former offenders so that they may successfully re-enter back into society. In doing so, Texas will prevent the high costs of re-incarceration while better protecting its communities.

WHAT IS PROJECT RIO?

Project RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders) is a state program that encourages inmates to take advantage of educational and vocational services while incarcerated, and then assists these individuals in obtaining documents necessary for employment. Project RIO has also created placement services to give offenders practical work experience in their areas of training. The program is currently administered by the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) in collaboration with local Workforce Development Boards, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), the Windham School District, and the Texas Youth Commission (TYC).

WHAT DOES H.B. 3637 DO?

House Bill 3637 would transfer the responsibility of administering Project RIO from TWC to TDCJ. As such, TDCJ would be charged with developing and maintaining a statewide network for finding positions of employment that require the skills possessed by project participants (both adult and juvenile offenders). In addition, TDCJ would be responsible for assisting these participants in securing employment while also drafting and enforcing the standards and guidelines for accomplishing this.

WHAT ELSE SHOULD H.B. 3637 DO?

Furthermore, to expand upon Project RIO's success, the state should make the program accessible to Community Supervision and Corrections Departments.

H.B. 3637 WILL ENSURE BETTER IMPLEMENTATION, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND SUCCESS FOR PROJECT RIO.

Giving responsibility of Project RIO to TDCJ – while maintaining coordination with TWC and TYC – would give TDCJ more control over and oversight of the program, as well as a more vested

interest in the project's success. TDCJ would also be able to designate certain personnel to certify prospective employees for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit program, which provides a tax incentive to employers for hiring economically disadvantaged ex-offenders. Finally, TDCJ would have the capacity to make free fidelity bonding services available to employers, which would make hiring ex-offenders and adjudicated youth more attractive.

In bestowing franchise tax credits to employers who hire formerly incarcerated individuals, the State will promote ex-offenders' re-integration into the economy. These tax credits should offset any diminished marketability of offenders in hiring due to liability or other issues which discourage them from being hired.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the committee and to provide information on this important issue. Texas has an opportunity with H.B. 3637 to refurbish and reinvigorate Project RIO. Successful implementation of this program will lead to reduced rates of recidivism, more responsible and self-reliant citizens, and a safer state.