

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5117

As of January 21, 2021

Title: An act relating to rental vouchers to eligible offenders.

Brief Description: Concerning rental vouchers to eligible offenders.

Sponsors: Senators Nguyen, Saldaña, Billig, Darneille, Das, Dhingra, Hasegawa, Kuderer, Lovelett, Muzzall, Robinson and Wilson, C..

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Human Services, Reentry & Rehabilitation: 1/21/21.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Allows the Department of Corrections to extend the rental voucher period from three to six months if rental assistance will result in an approved release plan for the eligible incarcerated individual, subject to appropriations.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES, REENTRY & REHABILITATION

Staff: Kelsey-anne Fung (786-7479)

Background: Generally, individuals incarcerated at correctional facilities operated by the Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC) may earn early release time for good behavior and good performance, subject to certain exceptions. Certain individuals who are eligible for earned early release and who are required to serve a term of community custody under the supervision of DOC must be transferred to community custody in lieu of earned release time. These individuals must propose a release plan with an approved residence and living arrangement prior to release to the community. DOC may deny transfer if the release plan violates supervision or sentence conditions, presents a risk to victim or community safety, or places the incarcerated individual at risk to reoffend or violate sentence conditions.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

If DOC is unable to approve the incarcerated individual's release plan, DOC may:

- transfer the person to partial confinement for up to three months; and/or
- provide rental vouchers for up to three months if rental assistance will result in an approved release plan.

Rental vouchers must be provided in conjunction with additional transition support programming or services, including but not limited to, substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, sex offender treatment, educational programming, or employment programming.

Summary of Bill: Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, DOC may provide rental vouchers to an eligible incarcerated individual for up to six months in total if rental assistance will result in an approved release plan.

Appropriation: The bill contains a section or sections to limit implementation to the availability of amounts appropriated for that specific purpose.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Forty-eight percent of people who leave the justice system leave housing insecure. Housing affordability is already an issue in our communities, especially for those who are formerly incarcerated. The average time it takes to find housing has been under three months but in certain markets, it can take longer because of the dynamics of affordable housing that exist today. This bill will give flexibility for those who need it to find housing in an appropriate amount of time. Housing is a foundational support system that really lays the groundwork for successful reentry back into society.

OTHER: Expanding the housing voucher program benefits from three months to up to six months allows individuals to remain in stable, affordable housing for a longer period of time. Individuals also will have more time to program, attend training, or access educational opportunities without worrying about housing. Housing vendors would benefit too by having a more stable tenant population, increasing vendor interest and participation and creating more housing opportunities. We need more housing opportunities, especially for hard to place individuals. While the program has been successful for individuals transitioning back into the community, many are not able to maintain housing after the benefit period ends and unfortunately experience homelessness. This is why the six-month allowance will provide a longer period of time for individuals to get back on their feet.

If the rental voucher period is extended to six months without adding resources to the program, then the DOC housing voucher program would only be able to serve half of the people. The program is a direct investment in communities where individuals release, which may be minority or poverty stricken communities. This program presents a pathway for people leaving prisons or entering community supervision.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Joe Nguyen, Prime Sponsor; Karen Lee, Washington Statewide Reentry Council.

OTHER: Danielle Armbruster, Department of Corrections, Reentry Division; Melena Thompson, Department of Corrections, Office of the Secretary, Executive Policy Director.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.