
Postsecondary Education & Workforce Committee

HB 1161

Brief Description: Establishing the veteran employability training and career advancement for reentry program.

Sponsors: Representatives Ryu, Obras, Paul, Davis, Ormsby and Hill.

<p>Brief Summary of Bill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creates the Veteran Employability Training and Career Advancement for Reentry Program to assist justice-involved veterans with civilian life.

Hearing Date: 1/14/25

Staff: Saranda Ross (786-7068).

Background:

Benefits and Services Available to Veterans.

The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) provides a variety of services and benefits to veterans in Washington including: counseling, claims assistance, employment, education, training, burial, housing, medical care, business certification, and relief programs. Certain veterans are eligible to receive additional benefits, such as scoring preferences on civil service exams, special license plates, homeownership down payment assistance programs, property tax relief, and tuition waivers, reductions, and other education benefits. The WDVA offers long-term care in four state veterans homes for certain veterans and family members. The Transitioning Warrior Program assists veterans based on Joint Base Lewis-McChord with claims assistance, benefits, outreach to the communities, and referral services for transitioning veterans and families. Through the Department of Commerce, the WDVA provided digital equipment and literacy instruction, focused on underserved low-income and rural veterans.

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.

Department of Corrections Employment, Education, and Reentry Programs.

The Department of Corrections (Department) manages all state-operated adult prisons and supervises individuals who live in the community and are under supervision. As part of its operations, the Department is required to offer certain education and work force programs to incarcerated individuals, prioritizing basic skills and a high school diploma or equivalent. The associate workforce degree program was created in 2017 and allows accredited community or technical colleges, colleges, or universities to prepare incarcerated individuals to enter the work force. The Department may select an individual to participate in a state-funded associate degree program based on priority criteria.

The Department operates a comprehensive work program for incarcerated individuals through the Correction Industries program. Some of the industries within the program provide basic work training and experience to incarcerated individuals.

The Department is required to develop individual reentry plans for each incarcerated individual under its jurisdiction, with limited exceptions. The reentry plans include: plans to maintain contact with family; a portfolio of the individual's educational achievements, previous employment and work experience, and any training received; and a plan to facilitate reentry into the community that addresses education, employment, substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, family reunification, and other needs.

The Department has additional policies that address veterans, including: establishment of a veterans unit providing veteran housing; designation of a facility employee as a point of contact to assist veterans with resources, reentry, and benefits; and participation in raising and lowering of colors, a structured fitness program, holiday celebrations, fundraisers, and displaying the military seal from a veteran's service branch on his or her cell door and identification card.

Diversion Opportunities.

Under certain circumstances, the prosecuting authority reviewing a case for possible criminal charges against a person may use its discretion to offer a diversion opportunity to the person before filing charges. Generally, pre-filing diversions involve an agreement by the prosecuting authority to decline to file the pending charges if the person complies with certain conditions, such as completing a treatment program or remaining crime-free for an agreed period of time. These types of pre-filing diversions are typically operated by the prosecuting authority.

If charges have been filed in a case, the defendant may seek other opportunities to resolve the case prior to trial depending on the nature of the charges. For example, a defendant charged with a misdemeanor or gross misdemeanor in district or municipal court may petition the court for a deferred prosecution, subject to meeting eligibility criteria, making certain stipulations and waivers, and complying with a specific treatment plan and other conditions. If the defendant completes the treatment plan and all other statutory requirements, the court must dismiss the defendant's charges.

State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (College Board) is a nine-member, Governor-appointed board that has general supervision and control over Washington's system of 34 public community and technical colleges. Among other duties, the College Board is charged with:

- preparing a budget for the system of community and technical colleges;
- ensuring that each of the state's 30 college districts offers comprehensive educational, training, and service programs to meet the needs of communities and students; and
- preparing a comprehensive master plan for the development of community and technical college education and training.

Summary of Bill:

Subject to appropriations, the Veteran Employability Training and Career Advancement for Reentry Program (Program) is created within the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (College Board) to provide individualized transitional and soft skills to justice-involved veterans and their families to improve economic well-being, reduce recidivism, prevent homelessness, improve reintegration, and provide a workforce that is educated and trained for living-wage careers of the twenty-first century.

Eligibility.

Justice-involved means a currently or formerly incarcerated individual and includes defendants participating in pre-trial diversion programs 18 to 24 months in length in Pierce, King, or Snohomish county. Veteran means any person who, regardless of discharge, has served in any branch of the armed forces of the United States.

To be eligible for the Program, a justice-involved veteran must:

- be within 24 months of release from incarceration or within 24 months post-incarceration, or be participating in a pre-trial diversion program 18 to 24 months in length in Pierce, King, or Snohomish county;
- complete the Employment Readiness Scale biannually to measure self-efficacy and outcome expectancy; and
- complete a Career Research Project.

In administering the Program, the College Board must select a community college West of the Crest of the Cascade Mountain range to participate in the Program. The College Board must prioritize community colleges with demonstrated records of providing similar services. Subject to appropriations, the Department of Corrections (Department) must identify and approve participation in the Program for qualifying justice-involved veterans incarcerated or under Department supervision.

Veteran Support.

In serving participants in the Program, the selected community college must make use of available programs, courses, and methods to deliver transitional employment and reentry

readiness materials. The Department must assist incarcerated participants with receiving correspondence, textbooks, and other curriculum for the Program, and document participation in the Program to ensure sufficient recordkeeping and facilitate uninterrupted participation in the event a participant is transferred to another correctional facility.

Reentry and Educational Navigator.

Subject to appropriations, the selected community college must employ a full-time equivalent Reentry and Educational Navigator (Navigator) to determine eligibility, collaborate with the Department to make contact with eligible justice-involved veterans, and provide individualized transitional reentry and employment readiness services. The Navigator must also, where applicable:

- conduct intensive intake interviews with participants and approved immediate family;
- verify eligibility by obtaining proof of military service in any branch of the armed forces of the United States;
- collaborate with the Department and other relevant agencies to deliver individualized prerelease programs through correspondence, approved textbooks, or core curriculum objectives;
- assist participants in preparing and updating program-specific individualized transitional reentry and employment readiness plans based on assessment scores of the Employment Readiness Scale;
- in collaboration with the Department, assist participants in developing a post-release transitional support system with timely and measurable steps that supports a participant's Transitional Reentry and Employment Readiness Plan;
- conduct regular virtual or in-person check-ins with participants to measure progress of soft skills development;
- assist participants with career development skills; and
- utilize funding from federal, state, and local agencies to support participants or their immediate family.

Family Support.

If a participant provides written permission to offer their immediate family services and the family meets eligibility criteria developed by the College Board, the selected community college, and the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), then, subject to appropriations, the Navigator must offer funds to support the participant's immediate family with:

- rental support not to exceed \$1,000 per month up to 12 months paid directly to the landlord, housing provider, or mortgage holder;
- food assistance not to exceed \$500 per month up to six months;
- driver's license fees including unpaid fines, auto insurance premiums, auto registration fees, public transportation, and auto repair expenses not to exceed \$1,000 within 24 months; and
- purchasing work-appropriate clothing and training certificates not to exceed \$1,500 within 24 months.

No funds allocated for immediate family may be used for unpaid child support or legal financial

obligation fines.

Work Group, Data Collection, and Reports to the Legislature.

A work group consisting of the College Board, the WDVA, and the selected community college is created to analyze the feasibility of expanding the Program statewide and report its findings and recommendations to the Legislature by December 1, 2024. The College Board, the WDVA, and the selected community college must also report to the Legislature by November 1, 2025, and by July first annually thereafter until the Program expires on August 1, 2031:

- the number of participants and immediate family participating in the Program;
- the level of educational attainment of participants;
- employment statistics of participants;
- recidivism rates of participants; and
- the nature and extent of assistance participants received under the Program.

Subject to appropriations, the WDVA must assign two full-time equivalent veteran service officers or staff members trained in the benefits available to veterans to collect data on veterans entering a correctional facility and veterans under department supervision, and share this data with the College Board and the selected community college. A national veterans organization may provide the veteran service officers or staff members.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 8, 2025.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.