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TESTIMONY 2013

H.B. 799

Dear Members of the Committee,

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to present testimony in favor of H.B. 799, an effective policy that will increase public safety and strengthen communities by providing individuals incarcerated in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) with realistic vocational choices so they can train to become law-abiding, contributing members of their communities after they are released.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN TDCJ SHOULD REFLECT THE TEXAS JOB MARKET

The Windham School District (WSD), which is the entity that provides vocational training for individuals incarcerated in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), offered 30 vocational trades for individuals during fiscal year 2011.¹ But Texas licensing agencies demand that individuals receive a license in only three of those trades to be eligible to practice: electrical; piping/plumbing; and heating, ventilation, air conditioning, and refrigeration. In other words, inmates are being trained – and certified – in trades that will not require licensure upon release.

However, the Texas Education Code mandates that WSD “prioritize the programs that result in certification or licensure, considering the impact that a previous felony conviction has on the ability to secure certification, licensure, and employment.”² While certification is surely a positive outcome for incarcerated individuals, the individuals who prefer to pursue an occupation that demands licensing – with its greater prestige, occupational security, and increased income – are limited by the selection currently offered by WSD.

WSD should assess Texas job markets in order to update, augment, and expand the vocational training programs offered to incarcerated individuals, and, by doing so, ensure that those individuals are released with the skills to compete in occupations that will allow them to provide for their families and be contributing members of their communities.

KEY FINDINGS

- Efforts to increase public safety have made employment and/or licensure in certain occupations more difficult for incarcerated or previously incarcerated individuals to obtain. A broader range of educational opportunities will increase the chances that individuals leaving prison will be able to find employment.
- Research has shown that “one of the most important conditions that leads to less offending is a strong tie to meaningful employment.”³

COST-SAVING AND PUBLIC SAFETY-DRIVEN SOLUTION: SUPPORT H.B. 799 BY REPRESENTATIVE THOMPSON

- **By requiring WSD to continually assess the Texas job market and provide vocational programs that will build relevant skill sets, H.B. 799 will ensure that more returning individuals are matched with available trades in Texas communities.** This bill will reduce the likelihood that such individuals will become unemployed and return to crime, and, in doing so, it will create safer communities.

Continued on reverse.

- **H.B. 799 will provide incarcerated individuals with a greater range of educational opportunities, resulting in a larger qualified workforce.** This will allow Texas employers a much broader set of options, ensuring that they have the most skilled, qualified employees possible, thus leading to a more vibrant and healthy Texas economy.

CONCLUSION

Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to testify in favor of this bill. Incarcerated individuals who have the best chance for success after release are those who have been offered meaningful, relevant educational and vocational programs. This means that in-prison educational entities must continually seek ways to keep their vocational programs up-to-date. H.B. 799 ensures they do that, and the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition strongly urges you to support it.

Citations

¹ Legislative Budget Board, *Windham School District Evaluation*, January 2012, 30.

² Tex. Ed. Code, Section 19.004(c)

³ Roger Przyblski, *What Works: Effective Recidivism Reduction and Risk Focused Prevention programs*, RKC Group, February 2008, 38.