

- SUBJECT:** Establishing a service dog pilot program for certain veterans
- COMMITTEE:** Defense & Veterans' Affairs — committee substitute recommended
- VOTE:** 8 ayes — Wilson, R. Lopez, Bumgarner, Dorazio, Frank, Garcia, Muñoz, Slaton
- 0 nays
- 1 absent — Morales Shaw
- WITNESSES:** For — Damian Cook, K9s For Warriors, Inc.; Mitch Fuller, Veterans of Foreign Wars Department of Texas; Kenneth Flippin; Robert Jones; Mark Parent; Jessica Ridenour (*Registered, but did not testify*: Denise Rose, Best Friends Animal Society; Leela Rice, Texas Council of Community Centers; Steven Price, The VOICES of Our Veterans; Bob Bagley; Kym Olson)
- Against — Lori Stevens, Patriot PAWS Service Dogs; Sheri Soltes, Service Dogs, Inc. and Assistance Dogs International; Jill Tate
- On — Cindy Smiley, Canine Companions; Col. Tom Palladino, Texas Veterans Commission
- BACKGROUND:** Some have suggested that extending service dog programs to more veterans could help mitigate symptoms of PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and military sexual trauma experienced by service members and veterans.
- DIGEST:** CSHB 2951 would require the Texas Veterans Commission to establish a pilot program for veterans to assist in mitigating the symptoms of military service-related PTSD, traumatic brain injury, or military sexual trauma through the provision of a service dog.
- The commission would be required to issue a request for proposals from and approve one or more nonprofit corporations to provide trained service dogs and training and services to veterans who participated in the pilot

program. The commission could only approve a nonprofit corporation that:

- had demonstrated experience working with veterans who have experienced PTSD, traumatic brain injury, or military sexual trauma;
- was authorized to conduct business in Texas;
- was able to provide follow-up service to a veteran who participated in the pilot program and the veteran's service dog;
- adhered to the standards of Assistance Dogs International or the Association of Service Dog Providers for Military Veterans.

A nonprofit corporation that was approved to provide services under the pilot program would be required to:

- employ professional staff to train dogs becoming service dogs for veterans participating in the program;
- provide each participating veteran a fully trained service dog;
- instruct each participating veteran on maintaining the service dog's health and training;
- ensure that regular mental health and depression assessments were conducted on the veteran while a veteran was participating in the program; and
- be able to provide a participating veteran a new service dog if the veteran's service dog was incompatible with the veteran, died, or was otherwise unable to fulfill the duties of a service dog before the fourth anniversary of the date the veteran received the service dog under the pilot program.

The bill would require that all goods and services provided to a veteran as part of the pilot program be provided at no cost to the veteran. A service dog provided by a nonprofit corporation as part of the pilot program would be required to complete certain training requirements and veterinarian evaluations and would need to comply with certain disability requirements.

The commission could accept gifts, grants and donations to fund the pilot program.

By October 1, 2026, the commission would be required to prepare and submit a report evaluating the pilot program to the governor, lieutenant governor, speaker of the House, and appropriate standing committees of the Legislature. The report would be required to include recommendations for legislative or other action and an evaluation of the pilot program's effectiveness, including a recommendation on whether the pilot program should be continued, expanded, or terminated.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2023. The commission would be required to adopt rules to administer the pilot program as soon as practicable after the bill's effective date. The pilot program would conclude September 1, 2027.

NOTES:

According to the Legislative Budget Board, HB 2951 would have a negative impact of \$4,180,926 on general revenue related funds through fiscal 2024-25. The estimate assumes \$2,000,000 per fiscal year for grants for the pilot program.