

Connections

September 2018

Executive director's update: TDCJ Legislative Appropriations Request for FY 2020-21

By Brian Collier



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Months before the Texas Legislature convenes, the state's budgeting process begins when the Legislative Budget Board and the Governor's Office of Budget and Policy direct the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and other state agencies to prepare and submit a Legislative Appropriations Request (LAR). LARs outline the funding requirements associated with each agency's strategic plan and serve as a fiscal expression of the agency's operational priorities and cost projections.

For the 2020-21 biennium, state leadership instructed agencies to limit budget requests so they would either match or be less than the 2018-19 funding levels. TDCJ's FY 2020-21 LAR and its associated operating budget exemplify responsible fiscal stewardship with a continued emphasis on spending restraint and include only items of critical importance. Agency employees should also remember that the LAR is only the first step in a lengthy appropriations process, and any decisions impacting agency appropriations and operations will be carefully considered by both the governor and legislature before such measures are adopted.

TDCJ's base budget provides funding to maintain current parole and probation caseload ratios, to continue current treatment and diversion initiatives, and reflects the transfer of community supervision and corrections department (CSCD) staff health insurance from TDCJ to the Employees Retirement System of Texas.

Requests for amounts in excess of the budgeted funds may be submitted as "exceptional items," and TDCJ's LAR includes funding requests for exceptional items related to critical issues affecting essential operations such as security staffing and related overtime costs, offender health care, and infrastructure.

Because diversion and treatment initiatives help us maintain a stable and successful criminal justice system, increased funding has been requested for local CSCDs, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and offender reintegration.

Exceptional items listed in TDCJ's 2020-21 LAR include:

- Funding to maintain more than 100 facilities across the state, many of which are 75 years old or older. TDCJ's LAR covers only part of the needed infrastructure repair and renovation, so projects like roof repairs, security fencing and lighting, electrical renovation, and water and wastewater system improvements are prioritized based on security and safety needs.
- Salary increases for parole and correctional officers, along with a career ladder restructuring to address correctional officer recruitment and retention issues. The maximum correctional officers' salary would rise from \$43,049 to \$47,041. Starting pay for new parole officers would go up to \$43,690, and the maximum salary for a PO would increase from \$44,661 to \$49,127. Ranking correctional and parole officers and correctional laundry and food service managers would receive similar pay increases.
- Funding to expand mental health services and medical beds in specialized correctional housing for mentally ill offenders, who would otherwise be placed in restrictive housing. Funding would also provide a supportive, sheltered environment for offenders who do not require infirmary care but have medical needs that cannot be met in a general population environment.
- Additional CSCD funding to improve and expand cognitive behavioral programs and mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence treatment in areas with the greatest need, and to increase mental health residential services in rural areas. The requested funding increase would serve approximately 20,000 additional offenders annually.
- The agency's offender healthcare providers, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC) and the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB), have indicated that supplemental funding is needed to provide the quality of care and services required to meet minimum standards. Less funding could lead to the elimination of some services, data system failures and lapses in information security. The university providers find it

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difficult to recruit and retain staff at TDCJ correctional facilities, and funds have been requested to provide targeted salary adjustments for these positions. The system also has a critical need for X-ray systems, dental chairs and other capital equipment.

- The legislature has previously appropriated funds for comprehensive security surveillance systems to monitor offender activities and movement on 14 maximum-security TDCJ facilities. These systems, which have up to 900 cameras and record retention capabilities of up to three weeks, have significantly improved safety and security by deterring assaults and escape attempts and preventing contraband smuggling and other serious violations. Continuation of this funding would allow for the installation of comprehensive video surveillance systems on four additional maximum-security facilities.
- Funding for the Texas Correctional Office on Offenders with Medical or Mental Impairments (TCOOMMI) to expand jail diversion services for special-needs offenders in rural areas, and to help offenders with high criminogenic risk and clinical care needs. These services will improve TCOOMMI's ability to provide intensive mental health case management, psychiatric assessments and diagnostics, and psychosocial rehabilitation.
- Funding for the Corrections Information Technology System Project to modernize the current legacy computer systems used to manage offender information. The current systems are 40 years old, comprise more than 12 million lines of COBOL programming code and require maintenance for nearly 70 different systems. These aging systems pose a security risk, are incompatible with current software and are difficult to maintain as the number of technicians with COBOL experience continues to decline. Funding for this project would allow the agency to provide a sustainable and secure information system, which could be expanded when necessary.

- Funding for post-secondary programs to help offenders develop marketable job skills in such career areas as welding, auto technology, HVAC, truck driving, construction carpentry and culinary arts, so they can find work when they re-enter society. This additional funding will allow for more post-secondary programs and to find additional colleges and universities to provide these services in areas where they are not currently available.
- HB 3130 of the 85th Legislature allows offenders convicted of a state felony to serve a sentence of confinement, under community supervision, for a total of 270 days with the condition the offender spends 90 days of confinement within a state jail facility and participates in a 180-day educational and vocational training program. This bill requires the agency to establish the non-residential, education/vocational training pilot program in four regional locations throughout the state. While the program may help reduce recidivism, there will be no immediate cost savings for incarceration, and the agency will need additional funding to implement this program.

In addition to our request for targeted salary increases for parole and correctional officers, we are encouraging state leadership to consider pay raises for all state employees, including probation officers at our local CSCDs, in recognition of their hard work and dedication. We understand that the state's leadership will have to make many difficult funding decisions during the upcoming legislative session, and we are confident that the criminal justice system's critical funding requirements will be met. We also appreciate both the governor's and the legislature's long record of strong support for TDCJ's frontline employees.

The 86th regular session of the Texas Legislature convenes on January 8, 2019, and is scheduled to end on May 27. The agency will continue using the TDCJ website and Connections newsletter to keep employees informed of fiscal and policy developments. ♦

Important dates for the TDCJ budget process:

August 24: TBCJ considers and votes on TDCJ LAR

August/September: submission of the TDCJ LAR, LBB and GOBP hold joint budget hearings

October through December: LBB and GOBP develop budget recommendations

January: LBB recommendations and governor's proposals are delivered to the legislature. The House of Representatives and Senate file their versions of the General Appropriations Bill

January through May: Legislature considers and adopts the General Appropriations Bill

May 27: scheduled close of regular legislative session

June: Comptroller certifies the General Appropriations Bill; governor approves or disapproves of the entire bill or sections of