

**Texas Board of Criminal Justice
239th Meeting**



Minutes

**February 21, 2025
Austin, Texas**

TEXAS BOARD OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE

**Cambria Hotel Austin Uptown
13205 Burnet Road
Austin, Texas 78727**

**Friday, February 21, 2025
10:20 AM – 4:00 PM**

ORDER OF BUSINESS

Call to Order

Convene Texas Board of Criminal Justice (TBCJ) Meeting

I. Regular Session – Uptown Ballroom

A. Recognitions

B. Consideration of Approval of Consent Items

1. Hazardous Duty Pay Authorization Requests
2. Personal Property Donations
3. 238th TBCJ Meeting Minutes

C. Report from the Presiding Officer, Judicial Advisory Council

D. Discussion, Consideration, and Possible Action Regarding Proposed Amendments to Board Rules Title 37 Texas Administrative Code Sections

1. 152.71, “Acceptance of Gifts Related to Buildings for Religious and Secular Programs”
2. 163.42, “Substantial Noncompliance”

E. Discussion, Consideration, and Possible Action Regarding Proposed Adoption of Amendments to Board Rules Title 37 Texas Administrative Code Sections

1. 159.1, “Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facilities Eligibility Criteria”
2. 163.21, “Administration”
3. 163.33, “Community Supervision Staff”
4. 163.35, “Supervision”
5. 163.41, “Medical and Psychological Information”

F. Report from the Chairman, TBCJ

G. Report from the Executive Director, Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ)

H. Virtual Court Update

I. TDCJ Parole Division Spotlight

- J. Discussion, Consideration, and Possible Action Regarding Purchases and Contracts Over \$1 Million
- K. Discussion, Consideration, and Possible Action Regarding Proposed Land Transactions – Request for a Wastewater Easement, Travis County State Jail, Travis County, Austin, Texas
- L. Report from the Office of the Inspector General
- M. Report from the Office of the Independent Ombudsman
- N. Report from the State Counsel for Offenders
- O. Report from the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) Ombudsman
- P. Internal Audit Status Report

Recess Texas Board of Criminal Justice Meeting

The TBCJ may discuss and/or take action on any of the items posted on this meeting agenda.

II. Executive Session – ATX Board Room

- A. The TBCJ may convene into Executive Session.
- B. Discussion of personnel matters relating to the Board of Criminal Justice, the Executive Director, the Inspector General, the Director of the Office of the Independent Auditor, the Director of the State Counsel for Offenders, the Director of the Office of the Independent Ombudsman, and the Prison Rape Elimination Act Ombudsman or to hear a complaint or charge against an employee (closed in accordance with Section 551.074, Government Code).
- C. Discussion regarding deployment of security personnel, devices, or security audits (closed in accordance with Section 551.076, Government Code).
- D. Discussion regarding security assessments or deployments relating to information resources technology, confidential network security information, or the deployment, or specific occasions for implementation, of security personnel, critical infrastructure, or security devices (closed in accordance with Section 551.089, Government Code).
- E. Consultation with legal counsel regarding pending or contemplated litigation or settlement offers; to receive legal advice on items posted on this agenda; or consultation on a matter where the TBCJ seeks the advice of its attorney as privileged communications under the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct of the State Bar of Texas (closed in accordance with Section 551.071, Government Code).

Adjourn Texas Board of Criminal Justice Meeting

The TBCJ may discuss and/or take action on any of the items posted on this meeting agenda.

**MINUTES OF THE
TEXAS BOARD OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE
Meeting No. 239**

The Texas Board of Criminal Justice convened on Friday, February 21, 2025, in regular session at 10:21 a.m. at the Cambria Hotel in Austin, Texas, recessed in executive session at 1:02 p.m., and adjourned at 3:06 p.m.

**TEXAS BOARD OF CRIMINAL
JUSTICE MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Eric J.R. Nichols, Chairman
Hon. Faith Johnson, Vice Chairman
Rodney Burrow, M.D., Secretary
Thomas Fordyce
Hon. Molly Francis
Ambassador Sichan Siv
Pastor Nate Sprinkle
General Bill Welch
Sydney Zuiker

**TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF
CRIMINAL JUSTICE STAFF
PRESENT:**

Bryan Collier, Executive Director
Jason Clark, Chief Programs Officer
Bobby Lumpkin, Chief Operations Officer
Mary Babcock Eric Guerrero
Richard Babcock Rene Hinojosa
Andrew Barbee Ron Hudson
Kate Blifford Bill Lewis
Chris Carter Rebecca Waltz
Marvin Dunbar Rachelle White
Jennifer Gonzales David Yebra
Carey Green April Zamora
Stephanie Greger

**TEXAS BOARD OF CRIMINAL
JUSTICE STAFF PRESENT:**

Chris Cirrito Wyvonne Long
Lance Coleman Cassandra McGilbra
Jill Durst Brian Patrick

Convene the Texas Board of Criminal Justice

Chairman Eric J.R. Nichols convened the 239th meeting of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice (TBCJ or board) on Friday, February 21, 2025, at 10:21 a.m., noted that a quorum was present, and declared the meeting open in accordance with Texas Government Code Chapter 551, the *Open Meetings Act*. He stated the TBCJ would be conducting business from the agenda posted in the *Texas Register*.

Chairman Nichols stated that the TBCJ is committed to providing the opportunity for public presentations on posted agenda topics and public comments on issues within its jurisdiction in accordance with Board Rule 151.4, "Public Presentations and Comments to the Texas Board of Criminal Justice." No registration cards were received for public comment prior to the deadline, so the board will not hear public presentations on posted agenda topics.

Recognitions

Chairman Nichols recognized the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) employees who have dedicated 25, 30, 35, 40, and 45 years of service to the state of Texas. He stated these individuals represent the strong commitment of this agency's staff systemwide. On behalf of the TBCJ and Executive Director Bryan Collier, he expressed deepest gratitude for the continued service of these employees. During the months of January and February 2025, 58 employees attained 25 years of service, 47 employees attained 30 years of service, 11 employees attained 35 years of service, ten employees attained 40 years of service, and one employee attained 45 years of service. Chairman Nichols stated that the names of these individuals would be submitted as an attachment to the official board meeting minutes. He thanked them for their unwavering loyalty and dedication to the citizens of Texas. As a symbol of appreciation, these employees will receive a board certificate along with a personal letter of gratitude.

(Attachment A – Employee Names)

Mr. Collier recognized Correctional Institutions Division (CID) Director Eric Guerrero for his recent promotion. He highlighted Mr. Guerrero's career which began in 1994 as a correctional officer at the McConnell Unit. He described Mr. Guerrero as a strong leader with a solid track record for working well with others. Those attributes along with his significant operational experience will serve the agency well. Mr. Guerrero expressed his honor at being chosen to serve in his new position. He stated his team will focus on the security and safety of the agency's institutions and the culture within.

Mr. Guerrero recognized newly promoted CID Deputy Division Director Daniel Dickerson. He highlighted Mr. Dickerson's career which began in 1997 as a correctional officer at the Terrell Unit, now known as the Polunsky Unit. Mr. Dickerson holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Administration of Criminal Justice from Mountain State University and a Master of Science degree in Criminal Justice and Leadership Management from Sam Houston State University. Mr. Dickerson thanked his family for their support and the men and women of the TDCJ.

Mr. Guerrero recognized newly promoted CID Deputy Division Director L.E. Townsend. He highlighted Mr. Townsend's career which began in 2004 as a correctional officer at the Pack Unit. Mr. Townsend holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Waylon Baptist University. Mr. Guerrero described him as a great leader and thanked him for accepting the challenge. Mr. Townsend thanked the board and Mr. Collier for the opportunity and stated he would stand behind the people in the agency.

Inspector General Lance Coleman recognized newly promoted Special Operations Commander Dustin Shrell. He highlighted Mr. Shrell's career which began in 2010 as an investigator with the TDCJ. Mr. Shrell holds a Bachelor of Arts and Science in Law Enforcement and Sociology from Stephen F. Austin University. Mr. Shrell thanked Mr. Coleman for trusting him to lead the Special Operations team and stated the most rewarding part of his career has been with the TDCJ.

Independent Ombudsman Brian Patrick recognized newly promoted Quality Control Coordinator Suezjon Harrison for her professionalism and dedication. He highlighted her career which began as a clerk in the Central Grievance Office. She holds a bachelor's degree in business administration from Sam Houston State University. He stated her organizational skills and focus on procedures will serve the agency well. Ms. Harrison thanked the board for the opportunity to serve in her new role.

Rehabilitation and Reentry Division (RRD) Director April Zamora recognized newly promoted RRD Deputy Division Director Michael Bates. She highlighted his career which began in 2008 at the Ellis Unit.

He holds a Master of Science in Criminal Justice specializing in leadership and management. She stated he has great operational experience and understands the corrections industry. Mr. Bates expressed his honor at being selected and stated the RRD is comprised of amazing individuals who are dedicated to achieving the mission of the agency.

Chief of Staff Rachelle White recognized new Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Rutledge. She highlighted his career which began in 2008 as a parole chaplain. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in History, a Master of Arts in Theology, and a Doctorate degree in Ministry. Mr. Rutledge thanked the board and Mr. Collier for this opportunity and stated he welcomes the chance to be a servant leader for the agency.

Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics (MAL) Division Director Bill Lewis recognized recently promoted MAL Deputy Division Director Tanya Hudnall. He highlighted her career which began in the Business and Finance Division. He stated she has a vast array of knowledge and experience and described her as a valuable leader. Ms. Hudnall expressed her appreciation for her time in the Business and Finance Division and thanked Mr. Lewis for the opportunity.

Training and Leader Development Division (TLDD) Director David Yebra recognized newly promoted TLDD Deputy Division Director Cody Ginsel. He highlighted his career which began thirty years ago as a correctional officer. Mr. Yebra commended his work ethic, integrity, insight and knowledge. Mr. Ginsel thanked the board for the opportunity and expressed his excitement at working with the men and women in the field. He commended the training instructors of the agency.

Human Resources (HR) Division Director Mary Babcock recognized newly promoted HR Deputy Division Director Quintana Carroll. She highlighted Ms. Carroll's career which began in 2009 as a correctional officer at the Hightower Unit. She holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas in San Antonio. Ms. Babcock commended her for having a people-first mindset and building strong relationships. Ms. Carroll thanked the board for recognition and stated the people she works for and with deserve recognition as well.

Consideration of Approval of Consent Items

- 1. Hazardous Duty Pay Authorization Requests**
- 2. Personal Property Donations**
- 3. 238th TBCJ Meeting Minutes**

Chairman Nichols asked if there were any amendments, abstentions, or objections to the proposed consent items. Hearing none, the consent items were approved.

Report from the Presiding Officer, Judicial Advisory Council

Judge Rebecca Palomo presented an update on behalf of the Judicial Advisory Council (JAC). In November 2024, the Community Supervision and Corrections Department (CSCD) Summit Planning Committee collaborated with the Community Justice Assistance Division (CJAD) of TDCJ to host the annual Probation Chief Summit in Round Rock. Chiefs used the summit as an opportunity to share operational strategies and insights across jurisdictions statewide. Since summit attendance is limited to probation directors, it was a unique opportunity for probation leadership to openly discuss any issues or

challenges facing the departments. Additionally, she expressed the JAC's appreciation to CJAD for active engagement and participation in those discussions. In January 2025, the Correctional Management Institute of Texas hosted the new chief's development program, which provides training and coaching to newly appointed CSCD directors. CJAD also participated in this program and provided an overview of each section, providing dedicated time to review and discuss budgets and financial operations of CSCDs.

Judge Palomo expressed the JAC's gratitude to the board and Executive Director Bryan Collier for supporting and approving the exceptional item request outlined in the fiscal year 2026-2027 Legislative Appropriations Request submitted to the legislature. She stated the JAC is pleased with the initial budget proposals for the state's General Appropriations Act in the form of HB 1 and SB 1 as both bills include an additional \$25 million for pretrial diversion programs and an increase of \$32.8 million to fund basic supervision at population levels projected by the Legislative Budget Board in July 2024. Although probation still has approximately \$114.6 million in remaining exceptional item requests, the JAC has full confidence those items are at the top of the agency's priority list as the agency works through the legislative process. The \$114.6 million includes salary increases for probation officers and residential officers, misdemeanor funding, and residential and non-residential grant funding. She stated the JAC is available to assist the board and Mr. Collier in any way necessary to obtain this funding.

Chairman Nichols expressed support for the JAC and stated the funding requested is essential to support the corrections programs that benefit all. Mr. Collier stated the JAC's funding requests are a top priority for the agency and thanked the JAC for their support. Mr. Nichols stated both the House and the Senate recognize the significance of the funding requests and the importance of the programs being provided.

Discussion, Consideration, and Possible Action Regarding
Proposed Amendments to Board Rules
Title 37 Texas Administrative Code Sections

152.71, "Acceptance of Gifts Related to Buildings for Religious and Secular Programs"

General Counsel Stephanie Greger presented Board Rule 152.71, "Acceptance of Gifts Related to Buildings for Religious and Secular Programs," with proposed amendments that revise "offender" to "inmate" and "rule" to "section" throughout; revise the policy statement for clarity; remove language specifying a building related to the provision of religious and secular programs; add language to state the TDCJ shall meet with donor groups to evaluate a prospective donated building or enhancement; revise language to state a donor or designee will be qualified; and add language to specify building enhancements. The rule will be posted in the *Texas Register* and available for public comment.

Chairman Nichols commented on the importance of this rule, as it relates to those donor groups who dedicate time and raise money to build chapels and religious facilities for the units. He stated the Jacobs Hammer Group will soon be dedicating a chapel at the Halbert Unit. He asked if there were any questions or comments. Hearing none, he called for a motion and a second.

Judge Faith Johnson moved that the Texas Board of Criminal Justice approve for publication in the Texas Register the proposed amendments to Board Rule Title 37 Texas Administrative Code Section 152.71, "Acceptance of Gifts Related to Buildings for Religious and Secular Programs," to receive public comment as presented.

Judge Molly Francis seconded the motion, which unanimously passed when called to a vote.

163.42, “Substantial Noncompliance”

Ms. Greger presented Board Rule 163.42, “Substantial Noncompliance,” with proposed amendments to reflect the Office of the Independent Auditor as independent of the TDCJ. The rule will be posted in the *Texas Register* and available for public comment.

Chairman Nichols asked if there are any other rules that may need to be revised for this reason. Ms. Greger confirmed and stated one has already been revised. He asked if there were any questions or comments. Hearing none, he called for a motion and a second.

Dr. Rodney Burrow moved that the Texas Board of Criminal Justice approve for publication in the Texas Register the proposed amendments to Board Rule Title 37 Texas Administrative Code Sections 163.42, “Substantial Noncompliance,” to receive public comment as presented.

Sydney Zuiker seconded the motion, which unanimously passed when called to a vote.

Discussion, Consideration, and Possible Action Regarding **Proposed Adoption of Amendments to Board Rules** **Title 37 Texas Administrative Code Sections**

159.1, “Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facilities Eligibility Criteria”

General Counsel Stephanie Greger presented Board Rule 159.1, “Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facilities Eligibility Criteria,” for the adoption of amendments that revise the title of a referenced document to reflect current terminology, remove the reference to an outdated document, revise language to align with current verbiage, and clarify eligibility requirements. Grammatical and formatting updates were also made. These amendments were posted in the *Texas Register* for public comment. No public comments were received.

Chairman Nichols asked if there were any questions or comments. Hearing none, he called for a motion and a second.

Judge Molly Francis moved that the Texas Board of Criminal Justice adopt amendments to Board Rule Title 37 Texas Administrative Code Section 159.1, “Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facilities Eligibility Criteria,” as published in the Texas Register, and that the Chairman sign the order to this effect.

Judge Faith Johnson seconded the motion, which unanimously passed when called to a vote.

163.21, “Administration”

Ms. Greger presented Board Rule 163.21, “Administration,” for the adoption of amendments that revise “continuum of sanctions” to “progressive sanctions” throughout; remove the *Human Resources* category

from the policies and procedures that shall be included in the administrative manual maintained by the Community Supervision and Corrections Department (CSCD); revise the *Standards* category of the administrative manual; revise language referencing an application process to specify a proposal; add language to state documentation of training hours shall be maintained at the CSCD and available on request; and make grammatical and formatting updates. These amendments were posted in the *Texas Register* for public comment. No public comments were received.

Chairman Nichols asked if there were any questions or comments. Hearing none, he called for a motion and a second.

Ambassador Sichan Siv moved that the Texas Board of Criminal Justice adopt amendments to Board Rule Title 37 Texas Administrative Code Section 163.21, "Administration," as published in the Texas Register, and that the Chairman sign the order to this effect.

Dr. Rodney Burrow seconded the motion, which unanimously passed when called to a vote.

163.33, "Community Supervision Staff"

Ms. Greger presented Board Rule 163.33, "Community Supervision Staff," for the adoption of amendments that revise "rule" to "section" throughout; remove the definition of "direct supervision" and replace it with a reference to Board Rule 163.35, "Supervision"; and make grammatical and formatting updates. These amendments were posted in the *Texas Register* for public comment. No public comments were received. The rule will be republished due to a minor grammatical revision concerning comma placement.

Chairman Nichols asked if there were any questions or comments. Hearing none, he called for a motion and a second.

Sydney Zuiker moved that the Texas Board of Criminal Justice adopt amendments to Board Rule Title 37 Texas Administrative Code Section 163.33, "Community Supervision Staff," as published in the Texas Register, and that the Chairman sign the order to this effect.

Pastor Nate Sprinkle seconded the motion, which unanimously passed when called to a vote.

Ms. Zuiker asked for clarification on the adoption process due to the rule being republished with changes. Chairman Nichols recommended reposting the rule in the *Texas Register* for public comment and adopting the changes at the next board meeting in April. Ms. Greger agreed and stated the rule would be presented at the April board meeting for adoption with the additional changes after a 30-day public comment period.

163.35, "Supervision"

Ms. Greger presented Board Rule 163.35, "Supervision," for the adoption of amendments that revise "rule" to "section" throughout; revise the definition of "direct supervision"; and make grammatical and formatting updates. These amendments were posted in the *Texas Register* for public comment. No public comments were received.

Chairman Nichols asked if there were any questions or comments. Hearing none, he called for a motion and a second.

Thomas Fordyce moved that the Texas Board of Criminal Justice adopt amendments to Board Rule Title 37 Texas Administrative Code Section 163.35, "Supervision," as published in the Texas Register, and that the Chairman sign the order to this effect.

Judge Faith Johnson seconded the motion, which unanimously passed when called to a vote.

163.41, "Medical and Psychological Information"

Ms. Greger presented Board Rule 163.41, "Medical and Psychological Information," for the adoption of amendments that update the reference to model policy guidelines with the corresponding Texas Health and Safety Code and remove the website address. These amendments were posted in the *Texas Register* for public comment. No public comments were received.

Chairman Nichols asked if there were any questions or comments. Hearing none, he called for a motion and a second.

Pastor Nate Sprinkle moved that the Texas Board of Criminal Justice adopt amendments to Board Rule Title 37 Texas Administrative Code Section 163.41, "Medical and Psychological Information," as published in the Texas Register, and that the Chairman sign the order to this effect.

General Bill Welch seconded the motion, which unanimously passed when called to a vote.

Report from the Chairman, TBCJ

Chairman Nichols recognized the Bartlett Innovation Unit in Williamson County. The Bartlett Innovation Unit was an idle facility until recently reopened as a pilot innovation unit that emphasizes positive change and successful reintegration through some older and proven, and some new programming. The Bartlett Innovation Unit is in the process of being fully opened within the premises of the former Bartlett State Jail, which was originally operated as a private facility but closed in 2017 due to the declining state jail inmate population. As the agency's population began to increase post-COVID, TDCJ leadership, including Executive Director Bryan Collier, conceived the idea of opening Bartlett as a facility with a population drawn from inmates who are on the path to successful reentry into the free world. This concept included fostering within the Bartlett Unit an environment that was structured to this particular segment of the population by putting increased focus on rehabilitation and personal growth. Through comprehensive academic, career and technical education, and life skills programs, the Bartlett Unit empowers inmates who have chosen to step forward in their rehabilitative journeys to give them a platform to transform their lives even further, including by providing training and support towards meaningful employment and a positive return to communities. In October 2024, the unit began the process of reopening, and that process has come to the point where the rededication of the unit will soon be celebrated. Mr. Nichols stated this has taken and is taking a great team at the unit level, under the leadership of Warden Lorie Larson, to get the Bartlett Unit out of mothballs and ready for the mission of being an innovation unit. He introduced two of those outstanding team members who are working to lead the charge at the unit.

Chairman Nichols stated Major Lashaunda Stafford is a native of Jacksonville, Florida, who began her career with the TDCJ in 2006 and has served in various capacities, including in security leadership. He described her leadership style as empowering to those around her and collaborative, focusing on fostering teamwork, encouraging individual ideas, and guiding staff to reach their full potential. In keeping with the principles of servant leadership, Chairman Nichols stated Major Stafford is passionate about mentorship both for staff and inmates and finds joy in helping to shape this new aspect of agency's future. At the Bartlett Unit, she emphasizes celebrating successes together and creating an environment where, even in a prison environment, people can feel a sense of normalcy and belonging. The unit prioritizes rehabilitation and holding its population accountable while encouraging genuine recognition of past actions and changed behavior. Respect is a core value for Major Stafford, and she has high expectations for good conduct. Chairman Nichols stated the board shares her aspirations that the Bartlett Unit will serve as a model for other TDCJ facilities. He stated Major Stafford envisions it flourishing and producing "whole" individuals prepared to make positive contributions to society and hopes the rewarding experience found at the Bartlett Unit will be replicated throughout the system.

Chairman Nichols stated Jameeka White is a correctional officer dedicated to positive change within the TDCJ. Originally from Sacramento, California, she has called Killeen home since 1996. Since March 2009, she has been making a difference in the lives of both her colleagues and the inmate population. She currently serves as a Field Training Officer (FTO) at the Bartlett Innovation Unit and brings a wealth of experience to her role within the TDCJ. In addition to being a correctional officer and professional, she goes above and beyond to contribute in other ways, such as being a Fallen Officer Week organizer, a member of the CRISP peer support program to help support colleagues who have experienced difficulties and trauma, an Education Officer, and a Recreation and Wellness Officer. She stepped up in admirable ways and champions teamwork, open communication, and strong organizational skills, believing those are crucial for fostering innovation and creativity. She sets clear expectations, provides necessary resources and support, and holds both herself and her peers accountable. Leading with integrity and ethical decision-making is paramount to Officer White, as is the ability to adapt and problem-solve in challenging situations. Her hope for the Bartlett Innovation Unit is that it becomes a model for successful rehabilitation and reintegration, inspiring the TDCJ to open other such units, or to convert other units into innovation units. She believes true public safety is achieved through rehabilitation of those who have fallen into criminal behavior, and the programs and services offered by TDCJ facilities play a crucial role in reducing crime rates. Chairman Nichols thanked Major Stafford and Officer White for their work.

Major Stafford stated the Bartlett Unit is the state's first full innovation unit and is part of the TDCJ's Reentry pillar of the 2030 plan. The Bartlett Innovation Unit is a new approach to incarceration with ground-breaking programs and initiatives designed to stop the cycle of recidivism. The facility can house 1,049 male inmates. The inmates who are assigned to the unit must meet a set of criteria, as every inmate must be G1 or G2, not have a sentence over 50 years, have no major disciplinary cases within 24 months, and have no history of security precaution designators. The Bartlett Unit is an all-program unit, meaning each person is there for a purpose and actively participates in the opportunities offered. The staff at Bartlett are the key to innovation, and the team are referred to as innovators. Bartlett staff are hand-selected and undergo a thorough review process before starting at the unit with the same goal of changing lives. Staff work hard to cultivate a positive and impactful environment, for both the population served and staff. Staff address those incarcerated by name, not number; extend a hand for a handshake; and support the population on their rehabilitation journey. The team is unique, and it is evident in the gold uniform instead of the normal gray.

Officer White stated the best part of her role at the Bartlett Innovation Unit is the opportunity to positively impact the lives of inmates, supporting their rehabilitation, and preparing them for reentry into society.

She stated it is rewarding to witness individuals making positive changes when given the right tools and encouragement, while maintaining a safe and secure environment. One major population that the Bartlett Innovation Unit serves is the veteran population. Recognizing the unique challenges faced by veterans returning to civilian life, the Bartlett Unit offers them specific veteran-based programming and support. Officer White discussed the Veteran X program, which is a peer-led recovery initiative. Participants work together as a recovery team for a fictional character, "Veteran X," who faces challenges similar to their own. Through this process, social barriers and challenges related to social support, housing, substance use, and problem-solving skills are addressed. Select veterans are also trained to become facilitators for the Veteran X program, enabling them to bring this valuable program to other veterans' dorms across the agency. The agency also partnered with the Military Veteran Peer Network to create a specialized program within the Veterans Dorm. This program provides a structured environment, including daily flag ceremonies, and fosters camaraderie and peer support among the veterans.

Officer White stated the Bartlett Unit also has a unique partnership with the Williamson County Animal Shelter. The dog handler program offers a second chance to rescue dogs while providing companionship and purpose for the veteran population. Twenty selected veterans serve as dog handlers, providing 24-hour care for those animals. After completing training, the dogs are available for adoption in the community. As an added benefit, families who adopt a program dog receive free boarding if needed.

Major Stafford stated the newest initiative focuses on the power of peer support. The agency trained select individuals from the population to become certified Reentry Peer Support Specialists. Those individuals, having a similar lived experience to peers, can offer unique and holistic support to participants in reentry dorms. The agency partnered with Via Hope to provide the necessary training, and upon completion, those specialists will earn 250 credit hours toward certification. This provides them with valuable, employable job skills for post release. There is even an established, dedicated dorm at the Bartlett Unit as a training hub for those future specialists to prepare and deploy across the state.

Officer White described the THRIVE Reentry Center, which embodies a collaborative approach to reentry. This 16-week program is a joint effort between the Correctional Institutions Division; Rehabilitation and Reentry Division; Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics Division; and Windham School District. THRIVE is designed to prepare male individuals with specific votes and discharges for a successful return to their communities. The trauma-informed curriculum is led by four dedicated Reentry Peer Support Specialists and focuses on key areas, such as career readiness, financial literacy, basic computer skills, interview preparation, and résumé writing. Participants also receive support in securing job opportunities, safe housing, and pursuing higher education. Importantly, the agency provides interview-ready clothing upon release.

Major Stafford stated the Forge program takes a more personalized approach, providing enhanced reentry services to individuals within 180 days of release. This program allows for a fluid participant base as individuals become eligible or as their release date approaches. Forge residents receive tailored support from four dedicated Reentry Peer Support Specialists who facilitate a curriculum covering essential topics, such as life skills, mental health, financial literacy, and the development of sustainable release plans. A key benefit of Forge is that residents are typically released into communities near the facility, which strengthens connections with employers and local resources.

Officer White discussed one of the most impactful initiatives at the Bartlett Innovation Unit when an inmate is released from custody. On the day of release, inmates will put on a suit to mark the beginning of a new chapter and will ring a freedom bell in front of peers before stepping out into the free world. Officer White expressed excitement at celebrating the release of 43 men since October. She stated Bartlett

staff love and believe in the work conducted each day and thanked the board for their support. Chairman Nichols commented on the trust that Warden Larson has to send her staff to present before the board. A special video was shared showcasing the Bartlett Unit's unique atmosphere.

Ms. Zuiker expressed appreciation for the positive media exposure surrounding the Bartlett Unit and stated the unit has an important role in creating a positive impact. Mr. Collier thanked the staff and stated Warden Larson has done a phenomenal job with the initial idea. He recognized Office of Strategic Initiatives and Modernization Division Director Andrew Barbee for initiating the idea of an innovation unit.

Report from the Executive Director, Texas Department of Criminal Justice

Executive Director Bryan Collier provided an update on the agency's activities related to the 89th legislative session and the implementation of the body-worn camera program.

89th Legislative Session

Mr. Collier stated the legislative session began on January 14th and is in full swing. The agency received base funding in January, and Mr. Collier expressed his approval with the funding received in both the House and Senate, as several of the requested exceptional items were funded in the base. The items funded in the base bills included the requested pay increases for parole and correctional officers, major repair funding which included a request for \$118 million for additional air conditioning, vehicle replacement funding, and funding to construct 5,600 expansion dorm beds. Following review of the bills as introduced, the agency modified requested exceptional items to reflect the remaining items based on the Senate and House base budgets. As committees have been named, the agency has been meeting with individual senators and house committee members to discuss the agency's exceptional item requests. The agency presented its budget to the Senate Finance Committee on January 28th and will present to the House Appropriations sub-committee on Wednesday of next week. Mr. Collier thanked Chairman Nichols and Pastor Nate Sprinkle for attending the Senate Finance Committee meeting and welcomed the other board members to join next week for the House Appropriations presentation. He stated the agency has also been meeting with members of the committees interacting with the TDCJ most frequently, such as the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, chaired by Senator Pete Flores, and the House Corrections Committee, chaired by Representative Sam Harless. Those committees will begin holding weekly hearings soon. Governmental Affairs Director Kate Blifford will continue to send out weekly updates of session activities, and Mr. Collier stated he would provide updates as the agency continues to make progress. Overall, the session has started very well for the agency, but Mr. Collier stated there is still a lot of time between now and the end of session on June 2nd.

Implementation of the Body-Worn Camera Program

Mr. Collier provided an update on the agency's progress implementing the body-worn camera program on maximum-security units. During the 88th legislative session, the agency requested and received funding to equip officers at the 23 maximum security facilities with body-worn cameras to enhance officer safety. Following the bid process, the contract was awarded to Axon Enterprises in April of last year. Axon identified an 18-month implementation schedule to allow for infrastructure wiring to be done at the units, as well as the training and rollout to staff. The first unit online was the Polunsky Unit last June, and the agency currently has 14 units that are fully operational. The remaining nine units will be completed by July of this year. Staff from the Information Technology Division, Facilities Division, Correctional

Institutions Division, and the Training and Leader Development Division have been working with Axon on the implementation, which entailed equipping the unit infrastructure to operate the body-worn camera system, as well as the training and distribution of the actual cameras. This new tool has already proven to be a great asset for staff and wardens and has been used countless times to aid investigations, verify compliance, and de-escalate situations. The agency is also piloting the use of the body-worn camera system as a method to report use of force incidents by interviewing those involved on camera instead of completing written statements. This concept came from a Lieutenant Retention Workgroup in 2023 and is being tested at the Ferguson and Wainwright units. Early response from supervisors is very promising. Mr. Collier presented a video to show how the system records daily events as an officer conducts security checks. Mr. Collier thanked agency staff for their hard work to implement this new tool for security staff and expressed his anticipation for expanding the program to additional units as funding becomes available.

Chairman Nichols thanked the members of the Legislature and leadership on the appropriations side for the careful consideration given to the budget requests of the agency.

Virtual Court Update

Judge Molly Francis introduced Virtual Court Administrator Lynnette Barnes to provide an update on the Virtual Court Program. Ms. Barnes stated anyone with a cellphone or a television has seen the headlines depicting criminal activity within a courthouse. The unfortunate reality is that security and inmate escapes are a challenge during transports. Public safety is the agency's mission, and TDCJ wants to leverage technology and cultivate relationships with the courts to ensure a positive outcome. The Virtual Court Program is a significant step toward public safety. When COVID necessitated hearings be conducted virtually, the agency learned it was possible to reduce transportation risks and costs by conducting virtual hearings in a timely manner. The Virtual Court Program offers impartial access to the court and the county. The agency utilizes secure platforms like Zoom provided by the courts, which is reliable technology controlled by the court staff. Virtual court appearances have evolved with programs like Operation Lonestar. The Briscoe, Segovia, and Lopez units have held over 8,500 virtual court hearings since inception in July 2021, which does not include virtual attorney/client visits.

Ms. Barnes presented statistical data demonstrating that the virtual court program reduces the need for a physical bench warrant and extradition and reduces transportation costs and housing on the county side. Additionally, the inmate remains in custody and continues to receive personal services, such as medical appointments, educational programs, and religious services. The agency has developed policies and procedures to promote an efficient and secure virtual court appearance while maintaining security. Access to Courts piloted the program to meet the needs of the 254 counties. Each law library has been equipped with virtual capabilities to include laptops, scanners, printers, and expanded broadband. This will enable each unit to meet the demands of case management. This program does not change or replace current bench warrant processes. It is both for civil and criminal matters and benefits any case that needs a prompt resolution. It is ideal for plea agreements, uncontested civil matters, and preliminary hearings.

The agency has a dedicated support staff with the Virtual Court Administrator and a great management team in Administrative Review and Risk Management (ARRM) Deputy Division Director Leonard Echessa and ARRM Division Director Marvin Dunbar who offer consistent monitoring. ARRM staff have standardized the experience to ensure a consistent and centralized process. The courts receive uniform guidance when needed. The virtual court scheduler is a public-facing, web-based tool that enables the court to coordinate a virtual appearance up to five weeks in advance. Advanced coordination is required

and Board Policy BP-03.81, “Rules Governing Inmate Access to the Courts, Counsel, and Public Officials,” discusses a 14-business-day notification. With efficiency and security in mind, each hearing is prepared for in advance. The required link is tested, the location is designated, and staff availability is ensured. The agency works with the court staff directly to ensure a plea agreement or a waiver is in front of the inmate prior to the hearing. The court's pivotal role in all this is to advocate for advanced notification and identify those cases that would benefit from a virtual court hearing and provide the documents needed. Ms. Barnes presented a screenshot of the portal login for the courts and described it as user-friendly.

Judge Francis asked what the capacity for virtual court hearings is currently and if that capacity could be increased. Mr. Dunbar stated the units could potentially handle another 20 in capacity. Judge Francis commented that the program’s publicity is important to inform the courts and attorneys on how to participate. She stated the program has reached a stable level of efficiency and benefits the inmate population who have pending cases. She mentioned Office of Strategic Initiatives and Modernization Division Director Andrew Barbee and proposed the agency uses the statistics available to identify inmates for virtual court instead of the courts identifying inmates.

Chairman Nichols asked if the program serves the purpose of reducing inmate transports for court proceedings. Mr. Dunbar confirmed. Mr. Nichols asked Mr. Collier for operational information on transporting inmates for court proceedings. Mr. Collier stated that counties often send their own staff for bench warrant inmates who return via agency intake procedures. If the agency transports the inmate, it will take three officers depending on the custody level of the inmate, and a surveillance vehicle may be necessary to follow the transport. Mr. Collier stated it is a high-risk issue, and Judge Francis has done a great job with this program to reduce transports. He stated the agency is advertising to the counties to increase participation, which benefits the counties as well since the county will cover the cost of housing an inmate until the court proceeding is concluded. Chairman Nichols clarified that not every court need will be served by this program, as an individual going through a criminal trial would not be using virtual court hearings to do so.

Chairman Nichols asked if there was a way to thank and acknowledge the participation of specific judges and jurisdictions. Judge Francis stated judges’ organizations and district attorney organizations are being contacted and agreed with Mr. Nichols’ suggestion. Chairman Nichols asked if the board rules are being evaluated for necessary revisions to improve operational efficiencies. Mr. Dunbar confirmed and stated there are no operational issues currently. Judge Francis stated the agency is complying with statute and is making an effort not to waive public hearings. Chairman Nichols asked if providing an informed waiver still adheres to the mission of the program. Judge Francis confirmed and stated the technology available allows an individual to be just as present as an in-person appearance. Chairman Nichols thanked everyone for their involvement in this program, as it helps reduce transports for the agency and alleviates issues due to resource shortages such as staffing. Judge Faith Johnson commended Judge Francis for her leadership on virtual court hearings and stated Texas will be a role model for other states thanks to her innovative thinking.

TDCJ Parole Division Spotlight

Parole Division Director Rene Hinojosa introduced Parole Officer Barbara Rodriguez who retired from the US Army and began her second career with the TDCJ in 2013 as a clerk at the Hughes Unit before becoming a correctional officer a few months later and earning her bachelor's degree and a master's degree in criminal justice. She left the agency for a few years then returned in 2023 to pursue her dream of

becoming a parole officer and started at the Waco District Parole Office before transferring to the Temple office where she currently works. Officer Rodriguez is currently assigned to supervise the administrative caseload at the Temple District Parole Office (DPO).

Barbara Rodriguez thanked the board and Mr. Hinojosa for the opportunity to highlight a client and the opportunity to begin her career as a parole officer. She stated her career in parole started late in life as she enlisted in the military and spent 32 years serving both active duty and reserve status. She worked at the Hughes Unit while completing her education and was eventually hired by the Parole Division. She helps and guides clients through the criminal justice system to encourage success in their personal and professional endeavors.

She introduced client Emory Hernandez who was released to parole supervision in July of 2021. She stated Ms. Hernandez's journey is a testament to resilience and determination. After four and a half years within the TDCJ, Ms. Hernandez emerged with a newfound commitment to professional growth. She was certified in specific industrial areas, such as OSHA compliance, ServSafe management, and relapse prevention with intense life skills. Her dedication to continuous learning and excellence is unwavering.

Upon release to supervision, Ms. Hernandez embarked on a job search and found employment with Arby's as a crew member. She went from shift work to general manager and eventually promoted to a district manager overseeing nine restaurants and 178 employees. Ms. Hernandez also committed to help with treatment initiatives in the community and assisted in job placement, found housing for residents, and taught classes three days a week for relapse prevention and anger management. Her commitment and high level of responsibility allowed her to take on the daily operations of a sober living house.

Ms. Hernandez finds fulfillment in her family life as a devoted mother and grandmother alongside her supportive husband. Ms. Hernandez's passion for reentry is profound, and she has served as a mentor in the Strength Through Restoration, Independence, Vision and Empowerment (STRIVE) program. She prioritizes giving back to the community and aims to dedicate herself fully to reentry with initiatives driven by the desire to make a lasting impact. She will forever give back to the agency that saved her life and is currently an employee at the TDCJ working as a reentry supervisor. This is a major accomplishment, as only a select few candidates are approved for this type of position within the agency.

She enjoys serving as a mentor with various programs helping former justice-involved individuals and facilitates opportunities for individuals within correctional facilities to embark on a path toward success. She demonstrates commitment and empowers others by driving positive change with her effective and profound dedication to making a meaningful difference in the lives of those she serves.

Ms. Hernandez thanked the board for the opportunity to speak and stated, when she first began her journey, she felt hopeless and unsure of where to start. She decided to take small steps and became involved in the education building for the many resources available. She took advantage of the massive plate of opportunity that reentry placed in front of her and began to see that being an adult and living an honest life was not the hardest part, it was about believing in herself and deciding that she could do it. She is an alumnus and mentor of the TDCJ STRIVE program. She stated the experience saved her life and allowed her access to opportunities, such as the internet in computer class, which surprised even her family. She stated she decided to face her obstacles and challenged her fears to complete her goals. She stated she would give back to as many people as she could for as long as she lives. From correctional officers to wardens to reentry, she met some of the biggest cheerleaders she ever had in her life. As she reentered her community and her family home, she feared that parole may not understand that she is a new person, and

she wondered what kind of parole officer she would have. She stated the results surprised her, as the Temple DPO has been great, understanding and supporting her journey time after time. She stated she is fortunate to work under the same umbrella with the Rehabilitation and Reentry Division (RRD). The constant support received from her parole officer has been incredible, and she has always been in her corner from day one. She stated many conversations have been shared, and her parole officer always expresses her pride toward Ms. Hernandez. The mistaken belief that parole is her enemy or that officers do not care is not true, and she is living proof that life after release is a dream.

Ms. Hernandez expressed how surreal it is to her that she has keys to her own office in a prison and that, when her shift is over, she can walk right out. She expressed her gratitude to be a part of some amazing people at the Bartlett Innovation Unit. She recognized RRD Director April Zamora, Deputy Division Director Sherri Cogbill, and other reentry staff for being amazing mentors. She thanked her parents who were in attendance for continuously believing in her. She thanked the Windham School District and the Parole Division for providing her with the resources and programs needed to be successful.

Chairman Nichols called Ms. Hernandez brave for sharing her story and asked for clarification that the TDCJ is a second chance employer. Upon confirmation by Mr. Collier, Mr. Nichols stated this is an important aspect of the system that needs to be publicized and thanked Ms. Hernandez for shedding light on this topic. Mr. Collier thanked Ms. Hernandez and Ms. Rodriguez for their contributions and expressed pride for their work. He thanked Ms. Zamora for having the courage to advocate for hiring Ms. Hernandez. Chairman Nichols stated the STRIVE program has many successful stories about changing lives in a positive manner. He thanked Ms. Rodriguez for her service to the agency and the country.

Discussion, Consideration, and Possible Action **Regarding Purchases and Contracts Over \$1 Million**

Chairman Nichols abstained from taking action on this agenda item due to his firm representing entities listed.

Jennifer Gonzales, Business and Finance Division Director, reviewed the purchases and contracts over \$1 million. Ms. Gonzales stated there will be five items brought for the board's consideration and approval. Item one is an increase to the FY 2025 contract from the amount previously approved at the April 2024 board meeting for the purchase of metal aluminum coils used in the manufacturing of license plates due to increased utilization and pricing. Item two is an increase to the FY 2025 contract from the amount previously approved at the April 2024 board meeting for the purchase of license plate materials due to increased utilization. Item three is an increase to the FY 2025 contract from the amount previously approved at the October 2024 board meeting for independent monitoring services for the Corrections Information Technology System project due to increased utilization of services in the fiscal year. Item four is a replacement contract for FY 2025 purchase of corn for feed mixture to feed agency livestock and poultry, used at the Wainwright and Coffield feed mills. Item five is a new contract for FY 2025 for the purchase of millimeter wave scanners.

Chairman Nichols asked if there were any questions or comments. Pastor Nate Sprinkle asked if the increase in the license plate materials contracts is being passed on since it is one of the agency's more beneficial efforts. Ms. Gonzales stated there was a price increase from 90 cents/pound to 95 cents/pound, and more license plates are being produced. Pastor Sprinkle asked if this impacted the agency's profit margin. Ms. Gonzales stated it does not negatively impact the profit margin, as the agency adjusts to price

increases. Chairman Nichols commented that this may be in response to the efforts to eliminate the paper tags, which would increase the utilization of license plates. Ms. Gonzales agreed. Mr. Collier asked if the increased price is offset by the increased production. Ms. Gonzales stated it balances out.

Chairman Nichols asked if there were any additional questions or comments. Hearing none, he called for a motion and a second.

Judge Molly Francis moved that the Texas Board of Criminal Justice approve the purchases and contracts over \$1 million as presented.

Dr. Rodney Burrow seconded the motion, which unanimously passed when called to a vote.

Discussion, Consideration, and Possible Action
Regarding Proposed Land Transactions – Request for a Wastewater
Easement, Travis County Jail, Travis County, Austin, Texas

Chairman Nichols abstained from taking action on this agenda item due to his firm representing entities listed.

Bill Lewis, Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics Division Director, presented the request of the City of Austin for a wastewater easement at the Travis County State Jail. The wastewater easement consists of 0.1167 acres or 5,084 square feet, and compensation is offered in the amount of \$13,218. In addition, the request includes 379 square feet for a temporary workspace and compensation is provided of \$788. The total compensation will be \$14,006. The new easement will benefit TDCJ land, and the term will be in perpetuity. Mr. Lewis presented a map of the area. The easement includes language requiring indemnification as the grantee's responsibility and the most-favored-nation clause. The easement has been negotiated at the current geographical appraisal value in Travis County.

Chairman Nichols asked if there were any questions or comments. Hearing none, he called for a motion and a second.

General Bill Welch moved that the Texas Board of Criminal Justice approve the request for a wastewater easement at the Travis County State Jail, Travis County, Austin, Texas, as presented.

Dr. Rodney Burrow seconded the motion, which unanimously passed when called to a vote.

Report from the Office of the Inspector General

Inspector General Lance Coleman presented a report on the Office of the Inspector General (OIG). He began by recognizing four fugitive analysts who maximize the ability of OIG investigators to spend more time on the street. He recognized Tina Darity who began her career with the Department of Public Safety as a crime analyst before transferring to the TDCJ in 2010. She is part of the OIG gang section and assists in providing information for gang investigations along with disseminating information to Texas anti-gang personnel and OIG staff to further ongoing gang initiatives. She works with the TDCJ Security Threat Group at the Fusion Center, ensuring situational awareness for the OIG and TDCJ by collecting criminal

information regarding the relationships between gangs operating inside and outside the prisons and threats to staff facility and public safety. Ms. Darity spent two and a half years training three criminal analysts at the Fusion Center and is back at the main office. She has 20 years of state service.

Mr. Coleman recognized Monica Lee who began her career in 1988 as a correctional officer at the Huntsville Unit before joining the OIG in 2001. Ms. Lee provides packets for warrants issued for OIG investigators, assists with Crime Stopper tips, and provides executive services to the U.S. Census Bureau clearances. She has thirty-five years of state service.

Mr. Coleman recognized Pam McMahon who came to TDCJ in 1995 as a file clerk. She was promoted to crime analyst in 2007 and is the coordinator for Behind the Walls, a Crime Stopper program. She is the OIG terminal agency coordinator for the Texas Law Enforcement Telecommunications System and other similar programs, ensuring privacy certification is completed. She is the agency administrator over several databases for the OIG crime analyst, as well as assisting OIG investigators with criminal and fugitive investigations. Ms. McMahon has 29 and a half years of state service.

Mr. Coleman recognized Brenda Schiro who began her career in September 1993 as a file clerk on administrative cases before promoting to fugitive analyst in 2007. Ms. Schiro processes parole warrant packets and inmate ineligible release packets for fugitive apprehension, as well as managing tips from parole concerning wanted parole violators. She has been the lead analyst for the ankle monitor program, and she assists other local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies to obtain information related to TDCJ inmates and parolees. Ms. Schiro has 32 years of state service. Mr. Coleman stated those four analysts collaboratively handled over 3,000 investigations in 2024. He reported that Crime Stoppers received 617 tips which resulted in 11 arrests.

Mr. Coleman discussed the Strike Force initiative, which has become a very successful group of eight OIG investigators and one captain that are making a vast difference. The OIG has added four investigators from existing positions that were repurposed and will be adding two additional positions from other vacancies. From the initiation of the Strike Force in June 2024 through January 2025, the OIG has completed 52 arrests with 190 charges, and there have been 36 resignations and terminations. Mr. Coleman stated this has been a collaborative effort between OIG and the agency, including the Fusion Center, which is an initiative that has been in existence for three years now, and the Special Prosecution Unit. Mr. Coleman emphasized how important former Fusion Center Director Michael Bates was in continuing the collaborative effort to make the prison community safer.

Mr. Coleman stated it is everyone's responsibility, including family members or neighbors, to report any tips concerning contraband. He emphasized the anonymity of the tipline, stating neither the OIG nor the TDCJ know who is calling. Receiving tips is crucial to making the prison community safer. Chairman Nichols commented that the contraband being introduced into the prisons is killing people. It contributes to self-harm, assaults between inmates, and inmates assaulting staff. He reiterated that reducing the introduction of contraband is one of the agency's highest priorities.

Mr. Coleman discussed two cases concerning contraband and mentioned that while they are ongoing investigations, he cannot provide full details; however, he wants to ensure the board is aware of what OIG is intercepting on the units. The first case occurred at the McConnell Unit with a family member introducing 78 grams of methamphetamine during visitation, which was recovered thanks to tips received. The second case also occurred at the McConnell Unit. Information was received that a drone would be dropping contraband at the unit. A suspicious vehicle was later discovered, and the Department of Public Safety initiated a traffic stop. The individuals inside the vehicle fled, although they were found using the

agency's tracking canines. Contraband recovered included 278 grams of methamphetamine, 10 cellphones, 48 packs of Newport cigarettes, two vape pens, and 48 sheets of paper laced with K2. Mr. Coleman brought attention to the large quantity of contraband these investigations kept out of the unit. The OIG also recovered the drone and have downloaded the data from it for further investigation.

Chairman Nichols asked if fentanyl was still being introduced into the prison system. Mr. Coleman confirmed and discussed the technology used to test for that substance. Ms. Zuiker asked if the tips received are being tracked to see how lucrative the tips are for investigations. Mr. Coleman stated the OIG is working on tracking those. Judge Johnson asked what the value of the contraband collected is. Mr. Coleman stated he did not have the specific street value but noted it was substantial. He stated people who deliver the contraband are being paid up to \$4,000.

Chairman Nichols asked if the agency is evaluating ways to prevent the use of drones from conducting contraband drops. Mr. Collier stated the agency has piloted the technology that detects drones, and there is legislation at the federal level being considered to allow the agency to interrupt the drone over agency property, which is not currently legal. Ms. Zuiker further explained that the tipline does not gather any personal information and is completely anonymous. Mr. Collier thanked OIG staff and the Correctional Institutions Division for their work and described cellphones and narcotics as the root of all evil in the prison system.

Report from the Office of the Independent Ombudsman

Independent Ombudsman Brian Patrick presented a report on the Office of the Independent Ombudsman (OIO), encompassing November 16, 2024, through January 15, 2025. The OIO received 645 inquiries during this period that required substantive work.

The OIO responded to 628 inquiries from the public or an inmate and 17 elected official inquiries. The three most common inquiries received were related to life and safety, medical issues, and allegations against staff.

Chairman Nichols asked if the OIO is in the process of obtaining additional personnel to ensure programs are running appropriately. Mr. Patrick confirmed and stated more personnel would assist with diverting inquiries to the appropriate ombudsman based on specialty and assist with report writing.

Report from the State Counsel for Offenders

State Counsel for Offenders (SCFO) Director Wyvonne Long presented a report on the SCFO. She stated, in the past two months, the SCFO opened 143 cases, closed 191 cases, and had more than 1,400 cases actively open. The SCFO answered or handled more than 3,400 pieces of correspondence. She provided an update on Chairman Nichol's previous question from the last board meeting concerning amendments to statute regarding the name of the SCFO. She stated the request has been submitted for consideration by legislators to amend the relevant statute to reference the board instead of the state counsel, which would allow the SCFO to change the name.

Ms. Long reported the SCFO recently obtained a Not Guilty verdict, which is rare, on an Assault Public Servant case. She discussed the case of an individual who received a second conviction for a sexually

violent offense in 1995 and was incarcerated for 19 years then civilly committed. In 2022 and 2024, it was determined that the individual no longer met the legal standard of having a behavioral abnormality and was unlikely to engage in a predatory act of sexual violence. The SCFO filed a motion for release, which was eventually granted, and the individual was released.

Report from the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) Ombudsman

PREA Ombudsman Cassandra McGilbra presented a report from the PREA Ombudsman office. From December 2024 through January 2025, there were 333 PREA inquiries, with 152 from the general public and 181 from inmates. She stated the PREA Ombudsman Compliance Specialists have assisted with six PREA audits at TDCJ facilities, including three Correctional Institution Division facilities, one community supervision corrections department, and two transitional treatment centers. She stated 150 PREA investigations were reviewed.

Chairman Nichols asked if the workflow is operating as intended. Ms. McGilbra confirmed and stated the PREA Ombudsman office works specifically on PREA-related inquiries with the Correctional Institutions Division and others.

Internal Audit Status Report

Chris Cirrito, Chief Audit Executive, presented updates to the Office of the Independent Auditor (OIA) Status Report for Fiscal Year (FY) 2023:

- **2302 – Parole Division Culture:** Project is a final report.

Mr. Cirrito continued with updates to the Internal Audit Status Report for FY 2024:

- Three remaining full scope carry over projects:
 - Two have been issued as draft reports.
 - **2402 – *Mental Health Assessments*** is a final report.
 - **2404 – *Travel Services*** is a proposed final report.
 - One is ongoing.
 - **2409 – *Incident Reporting*** is in report writing.
- **2411 – Emerging Risks:**
 - *Classification and Records State Ready* is a revised draft report. Executive Director Bryan Collier requested this audit to ensure the agency is meeting the 45-day duty to accept from the counties.
 - *Time Scan Application* has moved from Office of the Inspector General (OIG) assistance to an audit. The project is in reporting.
 - The OIA is currently assisting the OIG on one project.
 - Proposed final report on internal control issues has been provided to management. Proposed final report means it has been sent to the Chief of Staff for review and discussion. Mr. Cirrito stated it is vital to receive the judgment of those involved while maintaining the independence and objectivity of the OIA.

Mr. Cirrito continued with updates to the Internal Audit Status Report for FY 2025:

- Two consultations are ongoing.
 - **2502** – *Inmate Custody*
 - **2508** – *Purchasing* was revised to be a consultation due to the implementation of the CAPPS initiative in the near future.
- Nine full scope projects:
 - Three are ongoing.
 - **2504** – *Inmate Communication Contracts* is in planning.
 - **2507** – *Career and Technical Education Tool Control* is in fieldwork.
 - **2509** – *Texas Correctional Industries* is in planning.
 - Six are not yet assigned.
- **2514** – **Walkthroughs:** *Digital Mail System* is in reporting.
- **2515** – **Follow-Up and Action Plan Tracking:** *Investigation of Allegations of Improper Vendor Payments* is in reporting and includes follow up on State Auditor’s Office Report 23-030. Some control issues were found but no improper payments. *Structural Integrity* is in fieldwork.

Mr. Cirrito stated the OIA is currently tracking 126 recommendations. Tracking recommendations creates a pool for possible follow-up projects:

- 92 are reported as implemented with confirmation by the respective division director.
- 4 are reported as implemented pending confirmation by the division director.
- 30 are ongoing.

Chairman Nichols asked if there were any questions or comments. Hearing none, he thanked Mr. Cirrito for the status report.

(Attachment B – Office of the Independent Auditor Status Report)

Adjournment

There being no further business, Chairman Nichols thanked everyone for attending the meeting and announced that the next meeting of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice will be Friday, April 24-25, 2025, in Austin, Texas, and adjourned the 239th meeting of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice at 3:06 p.m.

Chairman*

Secretary*

* Signature on File