



**August 10, 2022**

To: Texas House Corrections Committee

Re: Monitoring HB 3227 (86R), relating to the availability of and access to services of persons in the custody of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice

Chairman Murr and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Alexa Garza. I am a Texas Policy Associate for the Education Trust in Texas. I am also a system impacted woman who struggled to access programming while serving 19 years flat in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

The intent of HB 3227 – to increase and promote female access to programs – has never been more important. Women are the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population, increasing by more than 800% over the past 40 years. In 2021, there were 9,946 incarcerated women in Texas prisons.<sup>1</sup>

I recently heard Bryan Collier, Executive Director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, say that “public safety means successful reentry for incarcerated individuals.” Statistics show that 95% of all incarcerated individuals will one day be released, be it in 2, 5 or 20 years. In 2020, 56,669 Texans were released from prison, and 9,625 were women.<sup>2</sup>

No one ever discussed reentry with me until 6 months prior to my release. **If public safety depends upon successful reentry, Texas must invest more deeply and from the moment an individual enters the criminal justice system.**

Education is the key to this transition. Returning citizens must be prepared for the challenges of the 21st-century workforce. By 2030, 62% of all jobs in the state will require a postsecondary credential. Texans will need to earn a credential beyond a high school diploma to meaningfully participate in our state’s economy, and the stakes are even higher for returning citizens. Being able to find self-sustaining employment can mean the difference between successfully transitioning back into a community or returning to prison.

Since the U.S. Department of Education launched The Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative in 2015, Texas has led the way with more enrolled students than any other state.<sup>3</sup> However, it was not until this April that a women’s program was added. Woman can no longer be a correctional afterthought, especially when the federal government fully reinstates Pell eligibility for incarcerated students in July 2023.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/women\\_overtime.html](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/women_overtime.html)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/documents/Statistical\\_Report\\_FY2020.pdf](https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/documents/Statistical_Report_FY2020.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/second-chance-pell-four-years-of-expanding-access-to-education-in-prison.pdf>

In accordance with HB 3227, the Female Programming Report provided by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is exactly what the legislature requested: a list of educational programs available to females.

Please note the few places that indicate “new programming.” There is progress and potential for a sustainable framework to increase the quantity and quality of women’s programming, but from my two decades there, we often saw superficial changes without real substance to meet our specific needs as women. I share my lived experiences to help inform “policies that increase and promote a female inmate’s access to programs.”

I was incarcerated at the age of 19 with a 20-year sentence. I found myself surrounded by walls, entombed; I thought my life was over. I was desperate to create meaning and make the best use of my time but wasn't eligible for the few programs that existed because of my sentence.

I was only aware of the opportunity of college because my family inquired about educational programming. Without my family’s support I had no way of knowing.

I took a class every night. The landscape for college then was very different. There was an onsite college counselor who assisted students and a variety of classes offered.

As the years went on, the onsite college counselor disappeared. All questions had to be submitted via an I-60 form, an in-house form where you wrote your questions and waited for a response in writing. The process usually took three weeks or longer.

The class schedule dwindled from three times a week down to one. Out of the 644 ladies assigned to the Mountain View Unit, only about 10 of us were actively enrolled in higher education.

1. **Cost is a huge barrier.** The class prices increased so much that when pursuing my BA, my family was paying about \$650 a class. The majority of incarcerated women do not have that support. College reimbursement was offered for one class a semester if you met certain criteria. If you were “fortunate” enough to qualify, the cost of class attendance would accumulate, and you were obligated to pay this debt upon release. Failure to pay the fee on time would result in a parole violation and you would be sent back to prison. The thought of going back to prison for educational late fees, in addition to paying required parole fees, while searching for work upon release made the reimbursement structure a cruel joke – especially with no plan or support for reentry.



2. **Time is a valuable and necessary resource.** Two-thirds of women who enter Texas prisons lack a high school diploma, and 11% have not completed more than the 8th grade.<sup>4</sup> Allowing access to educational programs sooner would provide much-needed time to acquire the knowledge, skills, and credentials needed to compete in the modern workforce. And what no data can truly capture is the power of correctional education to empower people and provide them with a newfound sense of hope and confidence, which can positively affect the families and communities to which they belong, within prison and outside of prison.
3. **Quality matters.** Whether they lead to academic degrees or industry-recognized credentials, postsecondary programs in prison should ensure that coursework can contribute to individuals' post-release efforts, furthering their education and advancing their careers. That might be a 6-month vocational certification or a 2-year associate degree. No matter what educational path offered, we need to ensure that the programs are of quality and track data to inform choices related to subject matter and curriculum.
4. **Placement can dictate access.** The majority of programs are only accessible in state jails, where only those individuals with less than 24 months left on their sentence can enroll. Even the physical placement of programs on specific units can play a critical factor in interest, eligibility and willingness to participate.
5. **Access requires effective outreach and promotion.** In 19 years, I never once saw or heard a GED graduate actively encouraged to continue into higher education. I often hear that woman "lack interest." It is not lack of interest but rather lack of information. In fact, data suggests that there are many more incarcerated people who would like to enroll in these programs than do so. In 2014, 70 percent of people in prison expressed a desire to enroll in an academic program. Twenty-nine percent of this group wanted to enroll in a certificate-granting program, and about 18 percent wanted to study for an associate degree.<sup>5</sup>

Developing and promoting a clear continuum of educational programming for those who receive their GED to enroll in higher education is a great opportunity to follow the intent of HB 3227 and "increase access to women's educational programming." More creative ways of disseminating program information are needed. The normal procedure of posting a flyer in the bulletin board of the living area is not sufficient.

6. **Better data is needed to drive improvement.** To improve access and quality, we need better measures on programs, participants and outcomes that go beyond the list of programs required under HB 3227. Which inmate populations are eligible to access which programs? Which programs are accredited and aligned to state licensure eligibility or to a credential that leads to

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/tcjc/Womens\\_Report\\_Part\\_2.pdf](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/tcjc/Womens_Report_Part_2.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/investing-in-futures.pdf>



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a self-sustaining wage upon release? Is the program supported by evidence to support successful reentry and reduce recidivism? How many inmates enroll and earn a credential? What program outreach strategies work best for what populations?

Far too often those of us with lived experience are equipped with solutions but not the opportunities to lead efforts of change. Forming a cross-agency advisory committee that includes those with lived experience to inform policy-makers would improve the outcomes and impacts of correctional educational programs, focus on reentry and achieving public safety.

Gratefully,  
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