



April 17, 2023

To: House Corrections Committee

Re: Written Testimony Submitted FOR HB 4251

Honorable Chairman Herrero and Members of the House Corrections Committee,

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 obtained my Bachelor's degree while serving 19 years flat in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today in support of HB 4251.

The intent of this bill – to establish a coordinated system of postsecondary education programs to serve more than 120,000 people in Texas prisons – has never been more important with the restoration of federal Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals beginning July of this year. The stakes are especially high for women: while Texas has led the way under the federal Second Chance Pell pilot with more enrolled students than any other state since 2015, not a single female student has benefited yet.

I can assure you this is due to access and program barriers, not lack of interest among the more than 9,000 females currently incarcerated. I still communicate with several ladies inside who express the same concerns and experiences I had while taking college classes.

Incarcerated at the age of 19, 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 vocational programs that existed because of my sentence length. I only became aware of the college classes being offered on my unit because my family inquired. Without my family's support, I had no way of knowing.

Once enrolled, my course schedule was just once a week and attending a 3-hour class became a 7-hour ordeal where I was stripped naked 4 times, handcuffed and transported to another unit. I knew better than to drink anything before class because access to the bathroom was always an issue. There was no onsite college counselor and all questions to instructors had to be submitted via an in-house form that usually took three weeks or longer to receive a response in writing.

It took me nearly 15 years to complete my Bachelor's degree, but I was determined because I knew the odds would be against me as a convicted felon and that I needed to equip myself with a college education to have any chance of succeeding once released. I am now a graduate student at Texas Women's University and hope to continue effecting policy change for other system-impacted individuals pursuing higher education.

I know that many others who are currently incarcerated possess the very same resolve and tenacity to better themselves and their futures in spite of their pasts – but they need the opportunity. I urge you to please support HB 4251 to help ensure all Texans – inmates and their families, prison staff, local communities and employers – can benefit from the impact of high-quality, accessible educational and workforce training programs.

Thank you for your time, to TDCJ for their cooperation, and to Representative Cook for this bill.

Sincerely,

Alexa Garza

Texas Policy Associate, The Education Trust