

TIFA CONTACT

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF TEXAS INMATE FAMILIES ASSOCIATION Vol.18 No.1



Independent Oversight of TDCJ – HB 877

On Wednesday, March 13, 2013 there was a hearing before the House Corrections Committee on House Bill 877. This bill would create an independent body to oversee the TDCJ, creating a way to identify and address operations- and inmate-related issues before they result in expensive lawsuits and other human and fiscal costs.

This bill encourages independent, unannounced inspections of TDCJ units, and it provides a mechanism for immediate communication between offenders, correctional officers, families, advocates and the oversight body. “We owe it to ourselves ... to effectively, humanely and efficiently operate our prison system,” said state Rep. Alma Allen, D-Houston, author of HB 877.

TDCJ prison officials have insisted that they have a number of independent monitoring and investigating mechanisms in place — from an inspector general to auditors to an ombudsman to a health care oversight committee.

But Allen said the Texas Department of Criminal Justice cannot adequately police itself. She cited high numbers of homicides, suicides, health-related deaths, medical-care issues and other chronic complaints that linger as justification for an oversight body.

Jennifer Erschabek, TIFA Executive Director, testified that “without transparency and external investigations



into the physical and mental abuses, these circumstances and types of treatments will never be remedied. The standard answer that our prisons are safe and secure just isn't true. Families want offenders to live in a humane environment and have correctional officers that are trained, paid a good wage and work in a transparent, professional, positive environment that does not promote punitive, negative behavior. One way this can be rem-

edied is with external oversight that creates a fair, safe and equitable way to solve problems.”

TIFA was well represented at the hearing and numerous family members testified. There seems to be support in the House for the bill but the Senate may prove more of a hurdle. There is some resistance to creating another oversight body with Senator Whitmire saying “it would duplicate the supervision already conducted by the Texas Board of Criminal Justice”. ■

Conroe Parole Packet Workshop April 27, 2013

TIFA is pleased to announce the third Parole Packet Workshop on April 27 to be held at the Eagles Nest Ministries of Conroe, 1450 Blake Rd., Conroe, Texas.

This workshop is for family members and friends who have loved ones in a Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) unit and would like to learn more about the parole process and how to put together a parole packet. There will be speakers from the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles including a member of the parole board, an institutional parole officer, a parole officer, and an ex-offender. This line up of speakers can provide information and answer questions about the entire parole process.

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TIFA Contact

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TIFA is a non-profit 501 (c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code. Membership in TIFA is open to anyone. A Basic membership is \$25 per year and includes one newsletter subscription to the member address. A Basic Plus membership of \$35 per year includes all family members residing in one household and the inmate newsletter.

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The past two workshops have been a wonderful success for everyone attending. A mother stated, "I benefited much from the panel. This was such an awesome workshop as well as experience. Their willingness to be available to answer questions after the workshop was so appreciated. The care and concern of the San Antonio board was amazing. They were awesome! Thank you so very much". And from a Parole Board commissioner, "It is organizations like yours that assists all of us in reaching our goal of assisting individuals in coming home and achieving success".

Be sure and tell your family and friends to visit the TIFA web site at www.TIFA.org for more information and a registration form. You can call the Conroe TIFA Chapter at 281-541-7192 or the TIFA phone line at 512-371-0900 and leave a message. You do not need to be a TIFA member to attend. The workshop will be limited to the first 50 registrations. Look for the next Parole Packet Workshop to be held in Ft Worth in June. In May TIFA will be holding a planning meeting and we will be announcing our parole workshops for the rest of the year in our next Contact newsletter.

Message from the Executive Director, Jennifer Erschabek

So far 2013 has been an amazing year for TIFA. Our membership is growing, we are adding new chapters and we are busy with the legislative process. There is so much news that I could not even get it all into this newsletter. And let us not forget about the parole workshops. The phones are ringing off the wall with people wanting to know if there is still room in the workshop. There are so many good things happening, it takes my breath away to just think about it. So I will try to focus on one thing at a time. Right now, I just want to say thank you to all our wonderful volunteers who work so hard to make all this happen and also send out an appeal for anyone else who would be interested in helping grow an organization that is so important to so many families. Thank you for your work and thank you for being a member. Without your support we could not be doing all this great work.



New TIFA Chapters

TIFA is proud to announce our newest chapter in Amarillo.

See the back page for time, date and contact information. We are also looking forward to new chapters in Tyler and one in north Austin. Check our web site for a chapter near you. If you are interested in starting a TIFA chapter in your area, please contact the TIFA office. For more information give us a call at (512) 371-0900.

2013 National Prisoner's Family Conference

An enlightening and inspiring 5th annual National Prisoner's Family Conference was held in Houston in February 2013. The NPF Conference was initiated in 2009 as a project of Community Solutions of El Paso and is held for 3 days the last week in February each year. The conference provides presentations and workshops on topics relevant to the prison family and all who serve them. There is ample time for networking; considering issues for advocacy and for building friendships with others across the country that care deeply about the prison family.

On the first day, Ray Hill, from the Prison Show started the day with information about advocacy, followed by Oscar Mendoza, Deputy Director of ARRM at TDCJ with encouraging news for prison families about how things are starting to slowly change in TDCJ. Day two started with an



extraordinary talk by Grace Bauer that provided a boldly honest look at juvenile justice in this country, and inspired many to "DO SOMETHING!" Day three included an encouraging presentation by Donna Doolin Larsen's about her 18 year battle to save her innocent son from the California death penalty and that they may now be seeing light at the end of the tunnel. The conference speakers were followed by workshops on a host of different topics, all interesting and informative.

TIFA was well represented by Jennifer Erschabek, Raylene Truxton and Susan Fenner. Jennifer and Raylene gave workshop attendees a very polished and professional presentation on TIFA's mission to support, educate and advocate for families of inmates. We made many new contacts and look forward to working with our new friends to grow and strengthen TIFA.



2013 Vision Summit in Austin, Texas

Save the dates of September 10-13, 2013 for this national reentry meeting to be held in Austin. More details to follow. This is a free conference.

TDCJ Quarterly Meeting

The Administrative Review and Risk Management (ARRM) Division, which includes the Ombudsman's Office, Director Jackie Edwards has retired after 28 years of service. The newly appointed director is Mr. Oscar Mendoza who previously served as Deputy Director of Management Operations, Correctional Institutions Division. The spring TDCJ quarterly meeting has been postponed due to an intensive departmental review and a reassessment of processes and programs within the ARRM Division.

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Vending Machine Issues

If you have vending machine issues during visitation please contact Robert Elzner by sending an email to tifa@tifa.org. He will need the name of the unit, date of visit, type of machine and problem. Please remember the vending machines are not under the control of TDCJ. They are under the control of the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (Formerly TX Commission for The Blind).

Membership

When an offender changes units or is released, please send us an email at tifa@tifa.org so that if they are receiving a newsletter we can update that information. Also, if you are not getting TIFA emails, we may not have your email address on file or have it incorrectly entered. Please let us know and we will correct it.

Donations

TIFA is a 501(c)3 organization and any donations that you care to make to help us help families and their loved ones are always appreciated. Please send your tax deductible donations to TIFA, PO Box 300220, Austin, TX 78703. Thank you. ■

Are Tablets the Way of the Future in Prisons?

Tablets are the way of the future and will one day provide inmates with access to digital books, digital legal resources, private and secure electronic communications with their attorneys, digital modes of communication with friends and family members, and

effective distance-learning resources. Prison facilities generally forbid devices that can be turned into weapons, be used to communicate freely with the outside world, or conceal contraband. But today there are MP3 players and tablets being designed and built for the correctional environment that may be a better alternative to the system currently in place. A St. Louis-based supplier of food and personal-care products to prison commissaries, started providing MP3 players and a music download service for prisoners in 2009. Now JPay and other companies are offering mini-tablets and tablets designed and built exclusively for use in the prison system. They vary in prices from \$50 to several hundred dollars depending on the system. A media tablet today can cost as little as \$200, has a screen, has some form of connectivity, can store thousands of books (depending on the format of the book and whether it has images) and can operate for hours on a single battery charge. The prices of memory and screens are falling rapidly, so a reasonable guess is that a media tablet with 16GB of memory will cost around \$100 by 2015.

There are many major advantages of having tablets in the prison system. The first advantage would be improved safety. Tablets would replace physical goods such as books, magazines and newspapers providing fewer opportunities to hide contraband and make searches easier and quicker. Second, because the tablet could replace physical mail and lessen the need for the libraries there would be a cost savings because of a need for fewer personnel to staff those facilities. Third, a prison facility could go to a paperless system for submissions of



I-60s, medical requests, grievances, commissary request forms, and other paper submissions. Even the Echo could be distributed through a paperless tablet system. Fourth, a wireless tablet system would create better inmate outcomes through education. Distance-learning solutions could deliver a wide range of education, rehabilitation and job training programs that are now out of reach for most inmates because of the current economy and because most programs are now paperless.

With security being a major concern, a private, secure communications network can govern all functions of inmate tablets and ensure the safety of the prison and the public. The network system intermediates between the “outside” and the “inside” world could provide content filtering and provide around-the-clock monitoring to guard against misuse and maintain safety. Once inside the system with a primary role such as education clearly established, its other capabilities can gradually be integrated into the system, transforming it over the long term. And in the end, it would also encourage better inmate behavior while in prison and lower rates of recidivism after release. ■

Supporting TIFA Using Amazon.com

by Robert Elzner

Did you know that you can order books from Amazon.com through the TIFA website <http://www.tifa.org> and support TIFA? I'll bet you didn't, as many of us were not even aware of this. It doesn't cost you a penny

because Amazon is allowed to place their advertisement on the TIFA web site. Under this arrangement, anytime you order books and almost all other items available on Amazon through our website, TIFA gets a small rebate. Amazon prices are comparable to other book clubs with any order over \$25 usually eligible for free shipping.

Now, how do you order from Amazon.com using the TIFA website? Go to www.tifa.org, click on one of the tabs at the top of the page, any one it doesn't matter. After the next page opens, look on the left side under Navigation where there is a bullet labeled Store. Click on Store and another web page opens up (you may want to 'bookmark' this page for future use). Look for the small Amazon logo in the upper right corner of this page, click on the logo and you will be taken to the Amazon.com website. Order as normal and TIFA will receive a small credit.

If you have any questions, email us at tifa@tifa.org and we will assist you. And please tell your friends and family members about this easy way to support TIFA. ■

Inmate Transfers

Sometimes an inmate can be moved or transferred to a different facility because of certain needs or because of a request. These types of approved transfers include:

- hardships (family member has a medical condition/disability that does not allow long distance travel);
- treatment for an inmate medical condition;
- program or rehabilitative; and
- educational courses/college.

However, there are certain things you must keep in mind such as custody level and disciplinary problems. There are very specific guidelines that must be met in order to obtain these transfers. For more detailed information and guidelines, please contact TIFA by email (tifa@tifa.org), phone (512) 371-0900 or by regular mail — TIFA, PO Box 300220, Austin, TX 78703-0004. Or you can go to the TIFA website (www.tifa.org), click on Public Documents, and you will find the instructions for transfers there. ■

The Texas 83rd Legislative Session

TIFA is actively involved in the 83rd Legislative session this spring. We have joined a coalition to promote the closing of the mismanaged, privately run Dawson State jail and the Mineral Wells pre-release facility and have been talking to policy makers about our concerns on a variety of issues. Below are a few of the bills related to criminal justice that we are watching. Remember, only a small percentage of bills filed become law. TIFA plans to provide testimony for some of these bills when appropriate. For a complete list of the more than 170 bills filed this session relating to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department and the TDCJ visit the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) web site. You will find a list of bills, analysts, fact sheets, and TCJC testimonies <http://www.texascjc.org/2013-legislative-session-83rd-legislature> or visit the Texas Legislature Online at <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/>.

HB 512 – Medically recommended intensive supervision (MRIS) – The bill would amend the Government Code to eliminate offense restrictions for

inmates with 3(g) offenses and sex offenses for release on MRIS as long as the offender does not pose a public safety threat and has a physical disability, a condition requiring long-term care, terminal illness, mental illness, or an intellectual and developmental disability. The bill also eliminates eligibility on the basis of age.

HB 877 and HB 2650 – Independent oversight of TDCJ: establishing a committee to provide a continuing program of inspection and oversight for each correctional facility.

HB 968 – Inmate grievance system: creating zero-tolerance policy for failure to protect inmates from retaliation for filing a grievance and submitting an annual comprehensive report containing details about the grievances filed.

HB 1188 – Relating to limiting the liability of persons who employ persons with criminal convictions.

HB 2398 – A study of TDCJ visitation policies.

HB 2652 – Reentry and integration: TDCJ shall identify organizations that provide reentry and reintegration resource guides and shall collaborate with those organizations to make the resource guides available to all inmates.

HB 2811 – Relating to programs provided by volunteer organizations to inmates in the TDCJ. The policy requires each warden to actively encourage volunteer and faith-based organizations to provide programs for inmates in the warden's facility.

HB 3079 – Relating to limiting the liability of landlords who rent or lease dwellings to persons with criminal records.

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HB 3531 – Relating to establishing a peer education program for offenders in the TDCJ.

HB 3533 – Relating to notifying the next of kin of a person confined in the TDCJ of a change in the person's eligibility to receive visitors.

SB 213 – Relating to the continuation and functions of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice, the TDCJ, Windham, the Board of Pardons and Paroles, and the Correctional Managed Health Care Committee. Establishes a case management committee for inmates. (This is related to recommendations made by the Sunset Review Committee.)

SB 1802 – Relating to the reporting of certain information regarding inmates and the use of administrative segregation by the TDCJ.

Additional Budget Items Requested (but not yet approved) for the 2014-2015 Biennium by TDCJ and the Board of Pardons & Paroles (BPP)

Items requested by TDCJ

- General Obligation bond proceeds for repair and rehabilitation of TDCJ facilities.
- Correctional Managed Health Care to include salary adjustments for health care provider staff, replacing critical capital equipment and transportation vehicles. restoration of key health care provider positions.
- Electronic Document Management System (EDMS) for the capture, storage, management, and retrieval of electronic records across the agency's statewide network.



- Community Services and Corrections Department (CSCD) state health insurance cost increases.
- CSCD funding to maintain community corrections and diversion programs throughout the state.
- Replacement of vehicles that exceed twice the agency's replacement schedule (this includes the buses used to transport inmates).
- 100 additional reentry transitional coordinators to conduct pre-release reentry support services on all correctional facilities.
- General Obligation bond proceeds for the construction of seven 80-bed housing dorms for correctional officers (for understaffed units).
- 98 full-time equivalent positions for parole supervision as a result of a higher parolee population growth.
- Expansion of TCOOMMI's (Texas Correctional Office on Offenders with Medical or Mental Impairments) current service capacity for parolees with serious mental illnesses.
- Replacement of approximately 8,700 obsolete personal computers throughout the agency.

Items requested by BPP

- Consultant services to modify parole guidelines to establish parole rates and a peer review process.
- Replacement of personal computers, servers, printers, and software upgrades.
- Vehicle replacements.
- Seven additional hearing officers.
- Two additional voting commissioners.
- Relocate the Huntsville Institutional Parole Office (includes equipment and furniture costs). ■

New Items in the TDCJ Commissary

In the near future look for these new items on the TDCJ commissary list.

- Tomato Basil soup with Vegetables
- Beans and Franks
- Sweet Pickle Relish
- Fuze Teas (a Coca Cola Company product) - Lemon and Green Tea

And in the Fall of 2013 look for Shelf Stable Pizza and Turkey Bites. The Turkey Bites are small meat sticks that are cut into bite-size pieces. These items may be available on eComm depending on the quantities TDCJ receives and if they can get adequate stock in the units across the state.

Questions and Answers about the TDCJ ECOMM Direct Purchase Program for Friends and Family – Care Packages

The TDCJ Commissary and Trust Fund Department has initiated an on-line program where friends and family may purchase up to \$50 of commissary items every calendar quarter for eligible offenders. The items available for purchase include the top 100 selling items which include snacks, hygiene products, and correspondence supplies as well as some new packaged items. The amount a family member purchases does not affect the amount that offenders may spend on commissary items from funds deposited in their trust fund account. In addition to offenders on commissary restriction, offenders in General Population and State Jail levels 4 and 5, Protective Custody levels 5 and 6 and Administrative Segregation levels 2 and 3, are not eligible to receive commissary purchases through this program.

Website Link:

www.texas.gov/eCommDirect

Q. Can an offender purchase care package items at their commissary units if they wish?

A. Yes, the items for purchase on-line are also available at the unit

commissaries. The offender may purchase items based on his custody level every spend period and the amount will be charged against their “spend” of \$85 every two weeks.

Q. Why are items available on-line only some of the time?

A. In order for items to be available on-line for care packages, the item must be available in at least 65% of the unit commissary inventories.

Q. If an offender purchases a care package, will this affect how much a family member can purchase during the quarter?

A. No. An eligible offender may receive \$50 in purchases every calendar quarter through an eComm purchase.

Q. When you use eCommDirect to put money into an offender’s trust fund, is there a fee?

A. Yes, a \$2.50 transaction fee + 2.25% of the amount deposited will be assessed per Trust Fund deposit. For additional fee information please contact Texas.gov at 877-452-9060.

Q. Is the monetary amount you spend on a care package separate from the money you put into the trust fund?

A. Yes. You can spend 50.00 per calendar quarter on care packages, the following day you can send \$100.00 for the inmate’s trust fund for the same inmate, with no problems. There is a charge for each transaction. \$3.75 for online commissary transaction and a \$2.50 + 2.25% fee assessed per Trust Fund deposit.

Q. How do you know how much you can still spend in the current quarter for gift items?

A. In the upper right hand corner of the page it will tell you how much is still available for the quarter. Until you reach the entire limit of \$50.00 there is no time limit on how often you can place orders. Remember, you can only place ONE order per day and it’s \$3.75 PER order. After \$50.00 you can only send money for the current quarter.

Q. When I place an order for the care package is all that stuff sent to him or does he pick it up from the store there at his unit? How does that work? Does he have to wait until his commissary day?

A. TDCJ has 72 hours from the first business day the commissary receives the order to get the items to the offender. The offender is allowed to pick his package up at the commissary when it is ready.

Look for Part 2 of Direct Purchase Q & As in the next edition of the TIFA Contact.

In the next issue of the TIFA Contact look for the following articles:

The Results of the 83rd Texas Legislature

The Financial Impact of Incarceration on Families Summary

Part 2 of Direct Purchase Q & As in the next edition of the TIFA Contact

The Upcoming Parole Workshops for 2013

Information from the TDCJ Quarterly Meeting



Texas Inmate Families Association

Strengthening families through support, education, and advocacy

TIFA
PO Box 300220
Austin, TX 78703-0004

CONTACT
Vol.18 No.1

TIFA Chapters

Amarillo

1st Monday, 7:00 pm
Buchanan Street United Methodist Church
617 N. Buchanan 
Amarillo, TX 79107
(806) 626-7728

Austin

1st Tuesday, 6:30 pm
Sunrise Community Church
4430 Manchaca Road
(just south of Ben White Blvd.)
Austin, Texas 78745
(512) 371-0900

Beaumont

1st Tuesday, 6:30 pm
St. Jude Thaddeus Catholic Church Family Life Center
6825 Gladys
Beaumont, Texas 77726
(409) 246-8146

Carrollton

2nd Tuesday, 7:00 pm
Church of the Nazarene
1529 E. Hebron Parkway
Carrollton, TX 75010
(512) 371-0900

Conroe

4th Monday, 6:30 pm
Montgomery County Library
104 IH-45 N
Conroe, TX 77301
(936) 228-0905

Corpus Christi

1st Monday, 7:00 pm
Molina Neighborhood Center
614 Horne Road
Corpus Christi, TX 78416
(361) 461-4954

Dallas

3rd Wednesday, 6:30 pm
Oak Lawn United Methodist Church
3014 Oak Lawn Avenue
Dallas, TX 75219
(214) 734-9037
Lynnies@gmail.com

Ft. Worth

1st Monday, 6:30 p.m
Ol' South Pancake House
1507 S. University Drive
Fort Worth, TX 76107
(817) 798-9010

Houston

2nd Tuesday, 6:30 pm
Acres Home Branch Library
8501 West Montgomery
Houston, TX 77088
(832) 393-1700

Killeen

3rd Tuesday, 7 pm
Central Christian Church
1301 W. Trummier Road
Killeen, TX 76541
(254) 690-3341

Rio Grande Valley

(San Benito)
No regular meeting, but materials and help are available at:
START Center
743 N. Sam Houston
San Benito, Texas 78586
(956) 399-7818

San Antonio

2nd Tuesday, 7:00 pm
St. Vincent De Paul Catholic Church Parish Hall
4222 Southwest Loop 410
(Frontage road - between Hwy 90 and Valley Hi exit)
San Antonio, Texas
(210) 680-3505

If you are interested in starting a TIFA chapter in your area, please contact the TIFA office.

It only takes 3 TIFA members to organize a new chapter. We will provide chapter guidelines and support.

(512) 371-0900