



## Heat, Hurricane and Now the Cold

Once again families are raising their voices about the harsh and cruel environment of our state prisons. This time its not the heat or a hurricane but the frigid cold without adequate heat in some areas of the prison units that is the issue.

TIFA was receiving multiple reports from family members whose loved ones were suffering from the cold because of no heat as a result of broken or turned-off heaters, broken windows and drafty facilities. Some units were not allowing jackets or beanies in the frigid dayrooms and others were not passing out additional blankets.

When a legislative office and news agencies started calling TIFA for more information on these units, TIFA put out a request on the TIFA Facebook page for a list of units with a lack of heat and the buildings or wings were their loved ones were located. In 24 hours, our first 'Roll Call' generated a list of over 30 units with heating problems.

TIFA was contacted by news agencies in Houston, San Antonio, Austin, and Ft Worth. The news quickly spread across the state and after these initial articles

other news outlets picked up the story.

Many of the news agencies requested information from TDCJ and the TDCJ spokesman Robert Hurst said that all prison units were "operating with adequate heating." However, TDCJ did respond and started fixing broken heaters and distributing more blankets.

Jeff Edwards, who is litigating the heat lawsuit, told the *San Antonio Current* that the flip side of his case — extremely low temperatures — isn't any different.

"I can't say I'm surprised," he told the *Current* after the first storm hit earlier this month. "TDCJ's inability to manage these aging facilities is astounding. They don't seem to even have the vague knowledge of a core constitutional right."

Edwards blames a lot of the problem on TDCJ's strict understanding of its budget.

"The mindset is that they have a specific budget and there isn't any money to go toward repairs. That nothing can be moved. That mindset needs to change," Edwards said. "When people on a tight budget don't have heat in these conditions, they move things around and find a way to pay for the heat."

Jennifer Erschabek, the Executive

Director of TIFA said, "Its not just TDCJ. The Texas Legislature is going to have to either provide additional funding to support and repair the TDCJ infrastructure or close more prisons and focus the funding on the prisons that remain open. To not do this and have people vulnerable to extreme heat or extreme cold would be deliberate indifference." n

## Breaking News!! Texas Prisons Talk Settlement in Heat Lawsuit

*This article by Gabrielle Banks was originally published by the Houston Chronicle on January 30, 2018 and reprinted with their permission. Edited for space.*

Texas prison officials are in settlement talks this week with the Austin law firm that sued over heat-related deaths during the summers, and they are also considering a resolution to the case involving the threat of perilous heat to elderly and medically compromised inmates at the Pack Unit.

According to an individual familiar with the case, the TDCJ is meeting with attorneys from Edwards Law to mediate several wrongful death suits brought by the families of inmates who died during heat waves in 2011 and 2012. Also officially on the table this week is the class action lawsuit brought by inmates at the geriatric Pack Unit which, like many prisons across Texas, does not have air conditioning in its housing units.

Both the TDCJ spokesman and Jeff Edwards, lead attorney for the wrongful death and the Pack Unit cases, declined to comment.

TDCJ has stated in court documents that 22 inmates died from heat stroke at 15 Texas prisons since 1998.

One victim was Larry McCollum, a 58-year-old cab driver from the Dallas area imprisoned for writing bad checks. He was found by fellow prisoners at the

## 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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tifa@tifa.org

And you can find us on Facebook.

**Note:** We read all mail that is received but cannot answer every letter. Our mission is strengthening families through support, education and advocacy.



**From Board  
Chair  
Jaymi  
Furniss-Jones**

## Fresh Changes for the Board of Directors

**W**elcome TIFA families to 2018! TIFA's Board of Directors is excited to announce that with the growth of TIFA and the services TIFA offers to families across the state, we are keeping things fresh.

With all of these exciting changes, also comes some big losses for TIFA. Like all nonprofit Boards, our Board of Directors adheres to predetermined term limits. In 2017, Board terms ended for Rita Castro, Patt Jackson, Sybille Quigtar and Robert Elzner. Each of these members brought years of experience, insight and passion to TIFA, and we are grateful for their service. We are so fortunate that some of our experienced former board members remained with TIFA to serve on the ground through daily acts of life-changing support.

Patti Kassel also completed her term as Chair of the Board. The Board of Directors elected Thomas Sawyer as Vice Chair, Patti Kassel as Treasurer and myself as Chair. All of our information has been updated and is available to read on the website (<http://tifa.org/board-of-directors/>).

Now, with a new year and some new blood on Board, we are free to continue pursuing our vision as we support our bold Executive Director, our generous chapter chairs and our lionheart members in your efforts to share accurate information and provide support for each other. And the Board of Directors is steadfast in our work to secure funding for the services we provide and grow the ways in which we offer those services.

Each of us is proud to be a part of the TIFA community. We are open to all feedback and suggestions that all of you can provide. We are counting on your insight in order to support you and other families surviving the TDCJ experience. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or ideas you may have. n

**From Executive  
Director  
Jennifer  
Erschabek**



## A Movement for Change

**O**n January 20th 2018, hundreds of thousands of women (and men) all across the country rallied during the Women's March. They wanted their voices heard; they vowed not be quiet, not be controlled. They vowed to work for a world where all are equal and all have value. A world where we as human beings are linked and not ranked by race or labels or our past.

Families in Texas are also coming together to make changes in the criminal justice system, to be the voice for those who do not have a voice. We too, are creating a movement for change to strengthen and protect families who are involved in the criminal justice system.

These changes begin by investing in our children and their futures, which means keeping the bulk of them out of the justice system entirely. Instead of prosecuting and punishing them as adults, ending the school-to-prison pipeline and treating kids as kids no matter what they've done. This means raising the age of criminal responsibility to age 18. And when they have been prosecuted as youth, giving a Second Look at long sentences.

Next we need to work to bridge the gap between the justice and public health systems. A staggering number of people with mental health and substance use problems are in jail and prison or headed in that direction. The criminal justice system is filled with people where access to health and mental health care is limited.

And when people are incarcerated, there should be in an environment that safeguards against physical, medical and mental neglect and abuse. The system should provide rehabilitation, vocational and college opportunities to everyone who wants and needs them, giving people the tools needed to build a new life once they are released.

The reentry process needs to be enhanced so that it welcomes returning

family members back by providing access to affordable housing, job opportunities and the support needed to succeed.

We need to bring our incarcerated loved ones home and out of exile. We need to continue to organize and rally. We need to build TIFA so that our voices will be heard, so that we can achieve change in the criminal justice system.

Our families need our incarcerated loved ones and they need us. We will continue to work to make our families and communities whole again. n

**Lawsuit (Cont. from page 1)**

Hutchins Unit convulsing on his bunk on July 22, 2011 and arrived at the hospital with a body temperature of 109 degrees. His family removed life support six days later.

Following a hearing as the summer began to heat up in June 2017, U.S. District Court Judge Keith P. Ellison issued a hard-hitting emergency injunction in July, ordering prison officials to provide air conditioning for heat sensitive inmates at the Pack Unit.

Rather than install air conditioning units, which officials said were prohibitively costly, TDCJ opted to fulfill the judge's mandate by shipping more than 1,000 medically vulnerable inmates to facilities that already had air conditioning.

The matter became complicated weeks later when Hurricane Harvey forced evacuations at three prisons along the Brazos River. Given the road conditions and the urgency of the situation, TDCJ at that time chose to ship inmates from the Stringfellow Unit in Rosharon to take up the empty beds at the Pack Unit. The inmates' lawyers then asked the judge to broaden the group included in the class action to include new, heat vulnerable inmates who had come in from the Stringfellow Unit. The judge made it clear that anyone at Pack was part of that order.

The discussions between the inmates' lawyers and prison officials include possible remedies for several of the families who sued in the federal Southern District of Texas over their loved ones' heat-related deaths at prisons across Texas, according to court documents. In addition, the prison is discussing a permanent solution to the case involving air conditioning at the Pack Unit. n



## New Family Members- Have You Read the Handbook?

By Becky Haigler - Dallas

One of the changes to the recently updated TDCJ website is a copy of the latest **Offender Orientation Handbook**, dated February 2017.

Upon entering the TDCJ, everyone shall be provided with the latest revised copy of the Offender Orientation Handbook. People who are currently incarcerated within the TDCJ shall have access to revised copies when revisions to the Offender Orientation Handbook are made. Handbooks written in Spanish shall be given to offenders whose primary language is Spanish. Rules shall be explained to those who cannot read them and to people whose primary language is neither English nor Spanish.

According to this information from the handbook, and a phone call with Michelle Lewis of TDCJ Plans and Operations Office, which oversees updates to the handbook, our loved ones should be able to request a copy of the updated document. Especially if it has been a while since they got their copy, it would be a good idea to get the latest version. Inmates can drop an i-60 to request the new handbook. The title page gives the document number as i-202. Some units have their own booklet of rules and regulations but this document has procedures that should be standard across all units. Many of the questions families have are answered in the handbook. If a unit is not following the procedures detailed in this handbook, it would be worth the time to have some respectful correspondence with the warden to determine why.

For families, the document is in PDF format and can be viewed online or downloaded to your computer or phone. The Table of Contents is seven pages long but page numbers given there are clickable links to take you easily to the

information you are interested in. There are four major chapter divisions: 1. Offender Access to Services and Standards for Behavior, 2. Offender Visitation Rules and Regulations, 3. Offender Correspondence Rules, and 4. Rules Governing Offender Access to the Courts, Counsel, and Public Officials.

Chapter 1 is the most extensive. It is where you will find information about popular topics like beards and hairstyles, and the very important section on Safe Prisons/PREA (Prison Rape Elimination Act). General behavior rules, educational opportunities, parole, and grievance procedures are also detailed in Chapter 1. It is a wealth of information that we should be aware of to be the best support and advocates for our loved ones that we can be. Most of Chapter 2 is repeated in a separate TDCJ document concerning visitation, also available on the website.

According to Ms. Lewis, the handbook is revised at least every two years to update security issues and may be revised more frequently to reflect policy changes. For example, the February 2017 handbook shows that males may grow a four inch "religious beard," regardless of the religion they claim. A new policy implemented in December 2017 allows them to do some shaping and trimming of the beard, shave chin and neck areas, and eliminate the moustache if they wish. Another policy change allows all males to purchase two items of religious headgear from the commissary and to wear the headgear at any time, not only in their cell and at religious services. These changes will show up in a new version of the handbook soon.

Ms. Lewis invites our questions about the handbook at her email: michelle.lewis@tdcj.texas.gov

If you are not yet familiar with this important resource, please take time to read through the Offender Orientation Handbook. In coming newsletters, we will have other short articles introducing sections of the handbook. You can find a copy of the handbook on the TDCJ website under "Offender Information." n



TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE  
OFFENDER ORIENTATION HANDBOOK  
Approved by the  
Texas Department of Criminal Justice  
Director of the Correctional Institutions Division



# TIFA News

## TIFA Membership on the Move

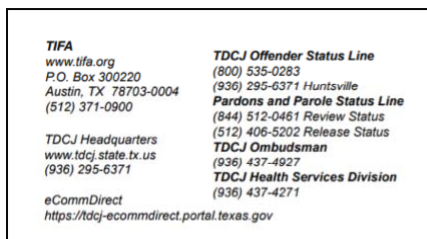
By Patti Kassel - New Braunfels

**Yes, the only things we can count on in life are taxes and change.**

TIFA Membership is under new management since December. Thanks to Louise Elzner for the many years she managed our membership. We are currently developing improved New Member and Member Renewal processes to be more efficient and streamlined. Over the past 4 years, our membership has more than tripled, and our previous method of processing membership was very time consuming.

Along with many administrative changes, that I won't bore you with, we have also changed our membership card. It is now branded with bright colors, displaying our new logo, membership expiration date and listing "members since" data. The backside list more pertinent contact numbers and information for your convenience.

Here's a picture of the new membership card.



Renewing your membership on time is very appreciated and important. In the past year, we have started to remove members from Members' Facebook shortly after memberships expires. Additionally, you will not receive weekly news blast or the quarterly newsletter will not be emailed to you or mailed to your loved one (if

Basic Plus member). As always, you can conveniently find your renewal date on your membership card.

If you or your loved one's contact information changes, please notify us with the new information through either our website [www.tifa.org](http://www.tifa.org), email us at [membership@tifa.org](mailto:membership@tifa.org) or call (512) 371-0900. We will get your information changed as soon as possible, usually the same day. Updates completed through the website are changed automatically.

Thank you for your membership and support of our important cause. Through our membership fees, we are fulfilling our mission by helping families and their loved one's through support, education and advocacy. [n](#)

## TIFA 2018 Parole Packet Workshops!

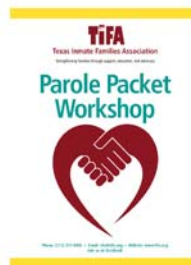
TIFA has scheduled our **Parole Packet Workshops for 2018**. For registration and more information visit our website at [TIFA.org/events](http://TIFA.org/events). The cost to attend is \$50 for members and \$85 for nonmembers (which includes a membership).

**Sat Feb 24th, 2018**  
Waco 10 am - 2 pm  
Waco Hispanic Chamber of Commerce  
915 La Salle Ave  
Waco, TX 76706

**Sat. March 31st, 2018**  
New Braunfels 10 am - 2 pm  
Peace Lutheran Church-Cafe  
1147 South Walnut  
New Braunfels, TX 78132

**Sat. Aug 18th, 2018**  
Houston 10 am - 2 pm  
CrossWalk Center  
2103 N Main  
Houston, TX 77009

**To be announced**  
Dallas  
Lover's Lane  
Methodist Church



At these workshops TIFA will provide a workbook that includes information on:

- Good Time, Work Time and Flat Time
- Parole and Mandatory Supervision Eligibility Timeframes
- The Parole Timeline
- The Risk Assessment Instrument and the Offender Severity Class
- Voting Options
- Parole Board, Prison Units and Contact Information
- Helpful Phone Numbers and Web Sites
- A sample parole packet [n](#)

## Review of the Operations of State Counsel for Offenders

By Paula Hudson

The header on the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) webpage regarding the State Council for Offenders says, "The mission of the State Council for Offenders (SCFO) is to provide attorneys and legal staff, independent of the TDCJ, to represent or assist indigent offenders with legal problems."<sup>1</sup> It would be logical to assume this means that these attorneys and staff are dedicated to serving offenders.

The reality appears to be quite the opposite. The first, rather glaringly obvious problem with this statement is the people charged with serving offenders are employees of the people who have complete control over the lives and futures of their clients. Worse, much worse than that, that very agency is remunerated by the labor of those very clients and has an investment in keeping the client inside the system.

A child in middle school can see the obvious conflict of interest. If an attorney's job is on the line, or knows they will face either tacit or explicit punishment for not complying with the wishes of the agency over the needs of the client, it is impossible for the clients to receive proper advice and care.

Compounding the glaringly obvious, base-level insanity in the setup is the inequity in funding between prosecutors

and defense attorneys in this very same agency. In an article in the Texas Observer by Michael Barajas, a Review of Operations by the State Bar of Texas revealed an astonishing disparity in pay and resources between the lawyers who defend the offenders and the office of the prosecutors. The Observer noted that there is more than a million dollars difference in the budgets of the two divisions.<sup>2</sup> On top of the budgetary and salary disparities, the resources allotted to the defenders are indisputably inferior.

A million dollars more dedicated to prosecution, inferior resources allotted to defenders, and an agency controlled in reality by the whims of the TDCJ despite its mission statement... what could possibly be wrong with this scenario?

It is imperative that the SCFO should be completely independent of the TDCJ and should be audited by an independent body on a regular basis. While these seem painfully obvious, no one is foolish enough to think such a transition would be easy. The TDCJ will fight hard to maintain control and as with so many issues in the Texas penal system, few people are willing to put in the time and resources to make such a change .

But because something is hard does not change the vital necessity. The key is finding people to spearhead the change. n

<sup>1</sup><https://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/divisions/scfo/index.html>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.texasobserver.org/new-report-finds-surprise-indigent-defense-attorneys-shouldnt-be-under-the-control-of-the-state-prison-system/>

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**Editor's Note:** In Dec 2017, the State Bar of Texas' Legal Services to the Poor in Criminal Matters Committee (LSPCM) published its Review of the Operations of State Counsel for Offenders. The Review employed the American Bar Association's (ABA) Ten Principals of a Public Defense System as a measure to assess SCFO operations and relied upon a survey of current and former SCFO employees as well as prosecutors from the Special Prosecutors Unit.

Excerpts taken from the report:

**Review of the Operations of State Counsel for Offenders Report by the State Bar of Texas Legal Services to the**

**Poor in Criminal Matters Committee**

**Introduction**

*State Counsel for Offenders (SCFO) provides "indigent offenders who are incarcerated in the TDCJ with legal counsel or representation that is independent of the TDCJ-Correctional Institutions Division." SCFO is organized into four sections: Criminal Defense; Civil Defense; Appellate; and Legal Services.*

*Attorneys in the Criminal Defense Section represent indigent inmates indicted for allegedly committing felonies while incarcerated in a TDCJ facility.*

*Attorneys in the Civil Defense Section "represent indigent offenders who are subject to court proceedings under the Sexually Violent Predator (SVP) civil commitment statute."*



*The Legal Services Section assists inmates in a variety of legal matters, including immigration removal proceedings; biennial reviews and petitions for release for clients under a civil commitment order; prisoner exchange programs with foreign governments; assistance to inmates in filing Petitions for Discretionary Review (PDRs); nunc pro tunc motions to correct errors in a judgment; and other legal matters.*

*Finally, the Appellate Section represents inmates in civil commitment appeals; criminal appeals where an attorney in the Criminal Defense section represented the inmate; and occasionally writs of habeas corpus.*

*The Appellate Section also has "Time Specialist" legal assistants who assist inmates with time credit issues; parole and mandatory supervision eligibility questions; and applications for shock probation or a time-cut. SCFO "will not help offenders with civil rights issues, TDCJ policy or procedure issues, fee-generating cases, and various*

*other legal issues depending upon the circumstances."*

*Besides the Office of Capital and Forensic Writs, SCFO is the only other statewide public defender office in the State of Texas.*

**Recommendations-**

*The Committee is most concerned with SCFO's lack of independence from TDCJ, inappropriate interference by SCFO management into staff attorneys' representation of clients, and lack of parity with the prosecution function in regard to prisoners charged with crimes allegedly committed in correctional institutions, parity of institutional independence, and parity of resources.*

*The Committee also believes that a more comprehensive review of SCFO's operations may be helpful. If such a review were conducted, the most appropriate entity to carry that out would be the Texas Indigent Defense Commission, the state agency that is most qualified to review the operations of a Texas public defender office.*

*As such, the State Bar of Texas' Legal Services to the Poor in Criminal Matters Committee recommends that:*

- (1) SCFO should be an agency that is funded and operated independently from TDCJ and TBCJ.*
- (2) State funding for SCFO and the defense of indigent inmates charged with crimes committed in TDCJ institutions, as well as the defense of indigent offenders who are subject to court proceedings under the Sexually Violent Predator (SVP) civil commitment statute, should be increased in order to provide quality, effective representation.*
- 3) In lieu of the creation of an independent SCFO and parity in funding between SCFO and the prosecution function, the Texas Indigent Defense Commission (TIDC) should coordinate with the TDCJ to conduct an evaluation of the operations of SCFO. A report including the results of the study should be submitted to the Legislative Budget Board and the Governor not later than September 1, 2018.*

To read an article in **The Voice** with a link to the entire report you can follow this link <http://www.voiceforthedefenseonline.com/story/review-operations-state-counsel-offenders> n

# The New Texas Judicial Commission on Mental Health

According to the Texas Health and Human Services, of the 27 million people who live in Texas, approximately 1 million adults experience serious mental illness; roughly half of these adults have serious and persistent mental illnesses including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Substance use disorders frequently accompany mental illness; an estimated 1.6 million adult Texans have substance use disorders.

Texans with mental health issues and the communities in which they live frequently find

themselves navigating the challenges of mental illness in jails, hospital emergency departments, adult criminal and juvenile justice agencies, schools, and

child protective services. These settings often are more expensive and less effective for treating mental illness.

In Texas, according to the report, *Texas Behavioral Health Landscape (December 2014)* (Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute):

- Approximately 20- to 24-percent of the inmate population has a mental health need.
- Adults with untreated mental health conditions are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than the general population.
- A 2010 study concluded that nearly eight adults with severe and persistent mental illness were in jail or prison in Texas for every adult in a state psychiatric hospital.
- In fiscal year 2011, the TDCJ spent more than \$130 million on services for mental health and substance use disorders.
- As of 2014, the Texas Correctional Office on Offenders with Mental or Medical Impairments (TCCOMMI) spent

\$21.9 million to support care coordination for offenders with special needs.

In January 2018, there was a hearing at the Texas Supreme Court that was held to establish a new judicial commission on mental health. The Supreme Court invited the Court of Criminal Appeals to join the commission, leaning on their expertise in criminal cases. The Supreme Court handles civil cases and juvenile matters.

The commission — made up of judges from the state's two highest courts, the Supreme Court and the Court of Criminal Appeals — will be a brainstorming group aiming to serve defendants who suffer from mental illness and make recommendations regarding improvements to the administration of justice for those suffering from or affected by mental illness.

In the coming weeks, an order will be signed to formally launch the Texas Judicial Commission on Mental Health and will meet for the first time to discuss plans to better serve those Texans suffering from unmet mental health needs.

The state has made progress in other areas concerning mental health. In the recent legislative session, a new law was passed to create grant programs to reduce arrests, recidivism, and incarceration of individuals who suffer from mental illness. House Bill 13, encourages local stakeholders to create locally driven solutions to mental health challenges within their respective communities and could bring the state \$30 million through a matching grant program to support community health programs for people experiencing mental illness.

Mental health programs for military veterans were established in the 2013 and 2015 sessions.

"We have more alternatives today than we've ever had," said Sonja Gaines, associate commissioner for intellectual and developmental disabilities and behavioral health services at the Health and Human Services Commission. "There is still a great need, but we have made great strides."

Mental health courts can be another

problem-solving court that can be utilized to reduce recidivism by requiring criminal justice clients with mental illness to be directly accountable to a court on an ongoing basis for compliance with a treatment plan. In this way, these courts can help break the cycle of incarceration by treating the problem and not the symptom.

According to the Texas Public Policy Foundation-- "by using mental health courts to connect people with mental illness with community-based treatment, jails and tax dollars can be put to better use, public safety can be improved, and communities can be made healthier." n

## Writing a Support Letter for a Parole Packet

The "parole packet" is a collection of information submitted to the Board of Pardons and Paroles by you in support of a parole release. Your loved one does not need to make, nor have made, a "parole packet" to obtain a favorable board vote. And more is not always better. (If you are incarcerated and do not have family support, just do a packet that contains a presentation on how you plan to be successful and your future plans.)

What a parole packet can be is a positive argument about how your loved one has changed so the bad behaviors in the past will not happen again. If he was young and immature how has he learned to make better decisions. If he was not previously focused in school how has he now earned a GED or college credit. If alcohol or drugs were a problem what kind of programs has he attended to help with the problem and how will he continue his sobriety. The packet should demonstrate and talk about what is good in his life.

### THE LETTERS OF SUPPORT -

Individuals who are incarcerated in the Texas prison system are encouraged by the Board of Pardons and Paroles to provide evidence of support for their release on parole. One way to do this is through letters supporting their release. The information below is provided for those who have questions about such letters.





**SUPPORT LETTERS FOR THE PAROLE FILE**

- There are no rules for support letters or how many. Just a few good ones that cover the support areas would be good. These are only guidelines and suggestions. You must use what fits your own special situation. Do not be afraid to ask people to write letters. Many people care and want to help. And your request for help may give them a better understanding of the correctional process.

**WHAT IS A LETTER OF SUPPORT? -**

Letters of support are evidence that your loved one has a network of friends and family to help when he is released. A parole letter tells the parole board that somebody knows and cares about him, that he has free world input while in prison and someone will help when he gets out. The parole letter is also an opportunity to talk about your loved one's good attributes and thus offset the bad things that appear in his criminal record.

**WHO WRITES SUPPORT LETTERS? -**

A packet needs a few clear and concise letters stating the nature of support -- financial, vocational, residential, etc. from family members, close friends and loved ones, relatives, aunts, uncles, and grandparents who will be providing the support. (If you are incarcerated and don't have family support you can get letters from others sources such as respected members of the community, a mentor, school teachers, religious teachers, students, counselors, etc.) And remember, a letter from a prospective employer can be a very valuable letter.

**HOW MANY SUPPORT LETTERS? -**

At the time of the parole interview, three to ten support letters should be enough. Remember, more is not better. Friends and family can send individual letters to the parole board or you can put them into the parole packet and send it all at once. Letters that arrive at the Austin office AFTER the file has been pulled and electronically forwarded to the IPO will be scanned and also forwarded to the appropriate location. And information such as letters and certificates can always be given to the IPO during the IPO interview.

There are several general areas of information to be included in support letters that someone might write for someone anticipating parole. Support letter writers need to:

1. State their name, age and occupation. If they have been on the current job for a number of years, state the number of years they have been similarly employed.
2. State their relationship and the number of years they have known your loved one.
3. Their belief that, despite your loved one's mistake, they are a good person and the reason they feel this way.
4. Their belief that your loved one will be a useful and law abiding citizen if given the opportunity. They may describe improvements in their attitude, behavior, or efforts they have made to improve themselves. If they will provide housing, give the address and a phone number. They can mention other kinds of help they can provide, for instance, clothing or transportation.

Other people (besides family and friends) who will write a support letter may include the same type of information. If they are willing to help in some way, they may include that in the letter. Some people are willing to help, but don't have money or a job to offer. They can offer to spend time with your loved one doing something positive and worthwhile, or they can offer advice and encouragement. This kind of help is also necessary for someone just released from prison.

**SUGGESTED FORMAT FOR SUPPORT LETTERS FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

Parole Board Member  
Board of Pardons and Paroles  
P.O. Box 13401  
Capitol Station  
Austin, Texas 78711

Re: Name TDCJ #  
Name of Unit  
City, Texas, zip

Dear Parole Board Member,

In the first paragraph, the writer should state their name, age, and occupation. State their relationship with your loved one (e.g. friend, relative, teacher, employer, co-worker, etc.). If they have been on the same job for a number of years, state the number of years they have been similarly employed or anything that will demonstrate stability or good character.

In the second paragraph, describe why they believe, in their opinion, your loved one deserves the chance for parole. Tell about improvements he/she has made since being incarcerated such as education and treatment programs. Discuss your loved one's positive attitude and feelings of responsibility and remorse.

In the third paragraph the writer can talk about their willingness to be supportive and how, e.g. if they will provide housing, give address and phone number if they have one, transportation, job offer. Other people who are willing to help, but don't have money or a job to offer, can be supportive and offer advice and encouragement.

In the last paragraph the writer can recommend that the parole board grant parole and thank them for their consideration.

Sincerely,

Your name  
Contact Information

The SCFO Legal Handbook, CHAPTER 7 - PAROLE AND MANDATORY SUPERVISION located in the unit Law Library has more information on parole packets. Good luck with your parole review. n



**How Can you Help TIFA?**

You can help TIFA by connecting your purchases with the programs below. It does not cost you anything other than time to sign up and using your card when you make purchases. Also, ask your family and friends to connect with these companies.

**AmazonSmile** – Go to smile.amazon.com and sign in. You can then select TIFA as your charity.

**Randall's/Tom Thumb** – Take your Randall's card to the customer service counter and fill out an application for the Good Neighbor Program. All you need is your card number and the charity number for TIFA is **13339**.

**Kroger** – Go to Kroger.com and register or go to the store for a card. If you register on line, you can choose you own ID. The number to use for Kroger's rewards program for TIFA is **82117**. n



## Bringing Solitary Watch to Readers Behind the Wall

<http://solitarywatch.com/2018/01/19/bringing-solitary-watch-to-readers-behind-the-wall/>

**S**olitary Watch is a nonprofit national watchdog group that investigates, documents, and disseminates information on the widespread use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons and jails. Their mission is to provide the public --and people in prison and their families--with the first centralized source of unfolding news, original reporting, firsthand accounts, and background research on solitary confinement in the United States. Their hope is that such information will catalyze discussion, debate, and change

on a vital domestic human rights issue.

*This is from a recent email announcing Solitary Watch's more recent publication:*

"The only people who cannot access Solitary Watch's work online are also its most important potential readers: the men, women, and children who live in solitary confinement. For this reason, we have long been producing a print edition in newsletter format, published as many times a year as we can afford. The print edition now reaches thousands of incarcerated individuals, and every week we receive close to 50 new requests from inside prisons, as word of mouth spreads by the various means people use to communicate while locked down alone 23 hours a day (for example, "fishing," a practice described in detail in "Voices from Solitary: A Mouse and a Murderer."

It is always difficult to decide what stories and "news briefs" to include in our print edition. Because people in solitary deserve to know the truth about the practice they are enduring, we report on the ever-increasing body of evidence showing the harms caused by prolonged isolation. But we also share news of the growing movement against long-term solitary. Our readers inside know better than anyone how intractable the carceral state can be, and they know that change

will take time. But many write to tell us how much it means to them that people on the outside are aware of their existence, acknowledge their suffering, and care enough to try to stop it. Others respond with the remarkable first-hand accounts that make up our "Voices from Solitary" series.

Our Fall 2017 print edition went out to more than 5,000 people, along with our annual holiday card featuring an image created by someone held in solitary. If you know someone in solitary confinement who would like to be added to our mailing list, please email their mailing address to [info@solitarywatch.com](mailto:info@solitarywatch.com). The printing and mailing of the Solitary Watch print edition are made possible entirely through the generosity of our readers in the free world who support our work."

If you are an incarcerated person in solitary and would like to be placed on the mailing list to receive print newsletters, please write to Solitary Watch, PO Box 11374, Washington, D.C. 20008. <sup>n</sup>

## Rumor Has It...

By Lauren Johnson



**I** remember the first time I went to prison back in 2001, I was young and naively optimistic. Someone came out to the rec yard and was telling us about the Christmas kick-out that TDCJ would be doing, releasing prisoners.

Much like Santa Claus, I knew it sounded too good to be true but I also wanted to believe! I wanted to have a little hope that maybe the person holding the keys would show mercy and compassion around the holidays or even that they wanted to save on costs before the end of the year. Any excuse would do.

I quickly learned that this was a rumor that had been going around since long before my days of trouble and mischief.

I also remember the resource list posted on the wall of my Changes classroom with all the benefits that you could get upon release. Again, that sounded too

### A Special Offer for those who are currently incarcerated in the TDCJ

\_\_\_\_\_ I would like a \$10.00 (one year/4 issues) subscription to the TIFA Contact Newsletter

I understand that this is not a TIFA membership. My \$10 includes four(4) issues of a yearly subscription. TIFA is not responsible for any lost issues that are not provided because of a change in unit OR TDCJ failure to deliver. The subscriber is responsible for notifying TIFA of ALL address changes at least 45 days prior to the next issue. Issues will be delivered in the middle of Feb, May, Aug, and Nov of each year. Please notify TIFA if your unit changes or you are released.

\_\_\_\_\_ \$\_\_\_\_\_ Donations are always cheerfully accepted!

\_\_\_\_\_  
Inmate Name (please print clearly)

\_\_\_\_\_  
TDCJ Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
TDCJ Unit

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Please mail your TDCJ Trust Fund money order to:**

TIFA

PO Box 300220

Austin, TX 78703



good to be true but since it was posted in the classroom it seemed to have a level of legitimacy to it. I copied down each of the things and who to contact upon my release only to find out that the majority of the resources had either never existed or were otherwise not accessible.

I know that there have been some papers that are circulating through the system on the subject of work time credit/parole reform/ HB 2120.

There are a few versions created by some people who just recently learned about the bill that TIFA started working on even before the last legislative session and are on fire now to take steps to help.

However, there is a little misinformation in at least one version of the mailer. Since then some edits have been made to the document but once something gets out it is hard to reign it back in.

Specifically I want to make clear that we are working hard to make reforms happen but once a bill begins its process we have opportunities for input but cannot control what amendments may get attached along the way. So passing a bill is no guarantee that people will do 1/4 or 1/3 of their time before they are eligible for a parole review. And parole is still at the discretion of the parole board.

We still have a year to do some education and outreach before the next legislative session begins in 2019. I don't say any of this to discourage you. I remain hopeful that we can do things that some may say is impossible.

Criminal justice reform appears to continue to be an area of agreement regardless of political affiliations.

I just want you to be armed with more facts than rumors. There is always the possibility that we are able to get something through next session, or it could be a few sessions of work, we won't know until we know. We will keep you updated along the way and we will do our best to clarify when the rumor mills begin to spin too far off track.

In the meantime, stay focused and on track, build your knowledge and help educate others.

Till next time, Lauren Johnson n

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## Texas inmates didn't deserve a cold shoulder this winter

*This editorial was originally published by the Fort Worth Star-Telegram on January 5, 2018 and reprinted with their permission.*

The Editorial Board  
January 05, 2018 06:00 PM

**W**hat would you have done, during these last few weeks of bitter cold, had a neighbor told you that his heater was broken?

You would have offered to help, right?

A blanket, a space heater, a spare bedroom for a night.

Perhaps if you're handy, you would have tried to fix the heater yourself.

Would your willingness to assist a person in need be tempered if you knew she was a convicted criminal?

We hope not. We hope most people feel compassion and not disdain for other people in need, regardless of their criminal status.

During our recent cold snap an unknown number of Texas prison inmates reportedly spent several weeks shivering. Heating at some state facilities was woefully inadequate.

Jennifer Erschabek, the executive director of the Texas Inmate Families Association (TIFA), used social media to ask families of inmates about the conditions at state prisons. She received an overwhelming response and compiled a list of about two dozen units that were experiencing heat problems, including the Allred Unit near Wichita Falls.

Eschabek said members of Fort Worth's TIFA chapter were in touch with the warden, who told them a part to fix the heater had been ordered and was on its way.

That was cold comfort for the inmates waiting heat, a basic service.

Robert Hurst, a public information officer with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, told the Star-Telegram Editorial Board that all TDCJ facilities are currently operating with adequate heat, that temporary heaters are brought in when necessary, and "extra blankets and coats are made available to offenders at all times."

Erschabek disputes some of that. She said at some units, guards regularly checked building temperatures, fixed heaters, covered windows and offered blankets. But the inmates at other facilities were not so lucky.

She attributes the winter heating woes to TDCJ's limited state funding.

In the summer inmates suffer from too much heat. Most state prisons and jails don't have air conditioning and the inmates live with suffocating conditions when triple-digit weather sets in.

An ongoing lawsuit is demanding the state improve summer conditions. While they're at it they should fix the heating for winter.

The Texas state prison system is the largest in the nation. But increasingly tight budgets have made maintenance and upkeep a challenge.

We know there are plenty of underfunded state services. This is one where lawmakers have an obligation to ensure Texans in state facilities are living in conditions that are humane and safe.

"We understand that they're there for punishment," said Erschabek, "but not for torture."

She's right.

<http://www.star-telegram.com/opinion/editorials/article193290349.html> n



You are not Alone!



## Texas Inmate Families Association

Strengthening families through support, education, and advocacy

TIFA  
PO Box 300220  
Austin, TX 78703-0004

**CONTACT**  
Vol.23 No. 1 Jan 2018

## TIFA Chapters

### **Amarillo**

Currently Reorganizing  
Check our website  
[www.tifa.org](http://www.tifa.org)  
for meeting information

### **Austin- Central**

2nd Tuesday, 7:00 pm  
AGE Center  
3710 Cedar Street  
Austin, Tx 78703  
(512) 371-0900

### **Beaumont**

1st Tuesday, 6:30 pm  
St. Jude Thaddeus Catholic  
Church Family Life Center  
6825 Gladys  
Beaumont, TX 77726  
(409) 617-8395

### **Conroe**

Last Monday, 7:00 pm  
Eagle's Nest Ministries  
1450 Blake Road  
Conroe, TX 77304  
(281) 435-9908

### **Corpus Christi**

2nd Tuesday, 7:00 pm  
New Life Behavior Ministries  
3833 S. Staples, Suite S-103  
Corpus Christi, TX 78411  
(361) 813-7106

### **Dallas**

3rd Wednesday, 6:30 pm  
Lover's Lane Methodist Church  
9200 Inwood Rd Oxford Rm #103/105  
Dallas, TX 75220  
214-792-0649

### **Ft. Worth**

1st Monday, 6:30 pm  
St. Christopher Episcopal Church  
3550 S.W. Loop 820  
Fort Worth, TX 76133  
(817) 798-9010

### **Houston**

2nd Tuesday, 7:00 pm  
CrossWalk Center  
2103 N Main  
(N Main at Marie, entrance on the  
Keene Street side)  
Houston, TX 77009  
(281) 435-4143

### **Humble**

2nd Thursday, 7:00 pm  
First United Methodist Church  
800 E Main St  
Humble, Texas 77355  
(936) 442-0859

### **Killeen - Harker Heights**

2nd Thursday, 6:00 pm  
VFW (Ladies Auxiliary)  
201 VFW Dr  
Harker Heights, TX 76548  
(254) 289-9429

### **McAllen**

3rd Tuesday, 6:00  
Calvary Baptist Church  
Slayton Building 2nd Floor  
1600 Harvey Drive  
McAllen, Texas 78501  
(956) 280-0951

### **Nacogdoches/Lufkin**

3rd Saturday 10:00 am  
First Baptist Church  
411 North Street  
Nacogdoches, TX 65961  
(936) 564-4546

### **New Braunfels**

1st Thursday, 7:00 pm  
Peace Lutheran Church-Cafe  
1147 South Walnut  
New Braunfels, TX 78132  
(210) 606-8584

### **Paris**

2nd Saturday at 2:00 pm  
Christ Community Church (in building  
with Nautilus fitness)  
116 S Collegiate Dr  
Paris, TX 75460  
(903) 495-0018

### **Pearland - South Houston**

3rd Tuesday, 6:30 pm (exc Nov  
& Dec)  
Manvel Bible Chapel  
4230 FM 1128  
Pearland, TX 77584  
(831) 592-3438

### **San Angelo**

2nd Thursday at 6:00 pm  
Immanuel Baptist Church  
90 E 14th St  
San Angelo, TX 76903  
(512) 371-0900

### **San Antonio**

2nd Tuesday, 6:30 pm  
St. Vincent De Paul Catholic  
Church Parish Hall  
4222 Southwest Loop 410  
San Antonio, TX  
(210) 387-1558

### **Tyler**

2nd Thursday, 6:30 pm  
Freedom Fellowship  
2915 SSE Loop 323  
Tyler, Texas 75701  
(903) 504-9771

### **Waco**

3rd Thursday, 6:30 pm  
Waco Hispanic Chamber  
of Commerce  
915 La Salle Ave  
Waco, TX 76706

*Check our website and calendar for new TIFA Chapters starting near you. [www.tifa.org](http://www.tifa.org)  
If you are interested in starting a TIFA chapter in your area, please contact the TIFA office. (512) 371-0900 or send an email to [tifa@tifa.org](mailto:tifa@tifa.org)*