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Senate Veteran Affairs committee to discuss veteran health, employment, and specialty veteran courts

El Paso – Tomorrow, the Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs and Military Installations will hear three topics: the state of veteran health and mental health in Texas, challenges facing the multiple specialty veteran courts in Texas, and the state of current veteran hiring policies among state agencies.

During its most recent session, the legislature passed laws intended to increase state agency hiring of veterans. Senate Bill 805, passed by state Sen. Donna Campbell and co-authored by state Sen. José Rodríguez, requires each state agency to establish a goal of hiring veterans to fill at least 20 percent of their total employment positions. As of the bill's passing, for the three preceding years, only five percent of all state employees were veterans, compared to nearly 20 percent of federal employees, according to Campbell's office. S.B. 805 also requires agencies with more than 500 employees to designate a veteran's liaison, and allows state agencies to give veterans a preference in their hiring policies.

Sen. Rodríguez also passed Senate Bill 389, which is intended to help veterans match their military experience with state job postings by requiring state agencies to pair their job postings with relevant occupational specialty codes. These codes are utilized by branches of the armed services to identify a specific job. By now adding these codes to state job postings, the intent is for veterans to quickly identify state jobs for which they already have relevant experience.

"Going into last session, our veterans committee found that difficulty finding appropriate work is a major obstacle for veterans trying to transition to civilian life. Nationwide, more than 700,000 veterans were unemployed, and a third of those were in the prime working ages of mid-20s to mid-40s. At minimum, Texas can make it easier for veterans to apply the valuable skills they learned in the military toward public service in state government. I look forward to hearing from our various agencies on progress made, as well as hear how we can continue to support veteran employment," Sen. Rodríguez said.

Tomorrow, the Committee will also discuss challenges facing county veteran courts. Since the legislature authorized their creation in 2009, more than a dozen counties, including El Paso, have created veteran courts, which are intended to provide specialized support and peer mentoring for veterans and reduce recidivism in the veteran population.

"Veteran courts are a tremendous resource, providing a structured, supportive environment many Texas veterans yearn for after their service. These courts also better understand issues veterans may struggle with post-deployment, including issues related to service-related injuries or substance abuse," Sen. Rodríguez said.

El Paso County's 346th District Court operates a successful veteran court which, in addition to resolving their criminal law matters, has helped dozens of veterans receive counseling and provided assistance in interacting with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Late last year the court was recognized by the Texas Veterans Commission with its Patriotism Award.

"I look forward to hearing how the legislature can continue to support veteran courts like El Paso's," Sen. Rodríguez said. "I expect one major challenge remains funding. Most courts fund their operations through state grants, but when required to hire personnel to provide vital counseling and other interventions for veterans, those dollars are quickly spread thin."

Throughout tomorrow's hearing, the Committee will receive reports and recommendations from several state agencies and organizations, including the Texas Veterans Commission, Texas Military Department, Health and Human Services Commission, Texas Workforce Commission, the University of Texas System, and multiple county veteran courts. The Committee will also receive public testimony.

The hearing begins at **9 a.m. CST** in Austin, and can be viewed live online at this following link: <http://www.senate.state.tx.us/bin/live.php>.

José Rodríguez represents Texas Senate District 29, which includes the counties of El Paso, Hudspeth, Culberson, Jeff Davis, and Presidio. He represents both urban and rural constituencies, and more than 350 miles of the Texas-Mexico border. Senator Rodríguez currently serves as the Chairman of the Texas Senate Democratic Caucus, and is a member of the Senate Committees on Education; Health and Human Services; Veteran Affairs and Military Installations; Nominations; and Agriculture, Water, and Rural Affairs.