



News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 11, 2013

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Huffman Files Legislation to Bring Transparency to Texas’ Specialty Courts

Governor Perry offers his support for Senate Bill 462

AUSTIN—State Sen. Joan Huffman, R-Houston, today filed Senate Bill 462, which addresses the need for accountability in the operation and performance of the state’s growing number of specialty courts. In the last ten years, specialty courts in Texas have increased from nine to around 140. Huffman’s legislation requires them to register with the Criminal Justice Division (CJD) of the governor’s office and follow best practices to ensure that the programs are effectively accomplishing their intended purpose.

“My first concern is protecting public safety,” Senator Huffman said. “We want to be sure the specialty courts continue to do what they were designed to do: keep nonviolent offenders from going deeper into the criminal justice system. A state registry will help ensure that specialty courts are held accountable for the outcomes of participants.”

SB 462 comprises recommendations made by the Governor’s Criminal Justice Advisory Council, of which Huffman is an ex officio member. The major provisions of the bill include:

- Making specialty courts that fail to register with the CJD ineligible to receive state or federal grant money.
- Developing outcome and evidence-based best practices to serve as guidance for courts.

- Requiring the collection of minimal but standardized performance data.
- Consolidating numerous existing specialty court statutes in one place so they're easier to follow.

Governor Rick Perry expressed his support for Huffman's bill.

"Specialty courts are an effective alternative to incarceration for some offenders," Perry said.

"Texas should be exploring all of our options to improve the criminal justice system."

Additionally, SB 462 has the backing of state Rep. Tryon Lewis, R-Odessa, the chairman of the House Committee on Judiciary and Civil Jurisprudence and a former state court judge.

"I am honored to join Senator Huffman in working to create oversight and guidance for the specialty dockets currently operating in some courts in our state," Lewis said. "I am confident that we will pass a bill that Texas can be proud of."

Specialty courts oversee case-by-case treatment programs for nonviolent offenders such as drug offenders, drunk drivers, veterans, and the mentally ill. The goal of the courts is to rehabilitate offenders who have the potential of becoming productive citizens, rather than incarcerating them at a higher cost to taxpayers. Participants in the programs must abide by strict rules and terms of the courts or face imprisonment.

"Right now, there's little or no guidance relating to the operation of specialty courts," said Huffman, the vice chairwoman of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee. "Establishing performance measures and collecting data will help the Legislature determine current and future funding of the system."

Senator Joan Huffman represents District 17, which comprises Brazoria, Fort Bend and Harris counties. Huffman currently serves as chairwoman of the Texas Senate Republican Caucus and as vice chairwoman of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee. She is a member of the Finance, State Affairs, and Health and Human Services Committees, as well as the Sunset Advisory Commission. Huffman and her family reside in Houston.

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