

Jessica Dickerson

November 14, 2025

Honorable Members of the Committee and Esteemed Legislators,

My name is Jessica Dickerson. I am a long-time resident of San Antonio, TX, and a family member affected by the many inhumanities that exist within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). These inhumanities, whether intentional or not, cannot be mitigated under the current circumstances. TDCJ staffing ratios have been a long-running issue, making policies and procedures impossible to follow successfully. The risk to lives, both inside the walls and outside the walls, is unconscionable, and corrective measures are needed immediately.

Extreme heat, poor food quality, toxic water, and substandard medical care create broken bodies and minds, ultimately affecting the success of TDCJ's own mission statement.

*"The mission of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) is to: provide public safety, promote positive change in offender behavior, reintegrate offenders into society, and assist victims of crime."*

Several months ago, a person escaped and caused the deaths of five family members. This escape was the result of the system's inability to follow policy and procedures. Escapes have not been limited to this one instance, and the public is not safer because of these failures.

Every summer, the suicide rate within TDCJ escalates, as does the number of staff leaving the job. How is it possible to promote positive change within a system founded upon a punitive mentality meant to crush, dehumanize, and remove a person as far from normal societal behavior as the rules of TDCJ do? How rehabilitated can a person be when they leave this system less healthy in mind, body, and spirit than when they went in? These are not facetious questions. They are a direct call out to this committee, this legislature, and TDCJ to reexamine how the mission statement of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice can truly be upheld.

When I participated with the Sunset Committee a year ago, we were asked to not just speak of the problems but also to recommend solutions. At that time, I stated that there are three significant changes that could improve many of the issues that have been presented in lead-up meetings, in public testimony, and here today.

1. Install air conditioning quickly in all TDCJ facilities and maintain temperatures between 65-85 degrees. This will save lives and promote a better living/working environment for incarcerated people and state employees. It will also bring great relief to the children, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and friends of all who live and work within those walls.
2. Reduce the size of this system. Seriously consider paroling people who are eligible over the age of 50. The recidivism rate for those over the age of 50 is less than 2%, and over 60 is less than 1%. This demographic is also your most medically expensive. Reducing the size of the system helps right the staffing issues, reduces the medical costs, allows for the closure of buildings that are in need of significant repair, allows for adjustments to food budgets that would improve the health of incarcerated people, and would reduce the cost of air conditioning across the system.
3. Parole is an opaque process that needs significant reform. What it lacks in transparency affects both incarcerated people and their families and goes against promoting positive change in offender behavior. Terrorizing is the only word that I can find that adequately describes this process. The hope that excites, the plans made, and future goals outlined are all dashed and destroyed, and for the same denial reason every time, even when that denial reason doesn't fit the person or the crime. The frustration of this process creates hopelessness, and the repetitive denials wears on the resolve and positive thinking of every incarcerated person and their family members creating needless obstacles to positive offender behavior. Improving this process and offering a clear path to parole from the day a person enters the system would focus incarcerated people on achievement and, with encouragement from family members, give everyone hope for reunification.

Rehabilitation cannot occur without hope. 95% of incarcerated people return to their communities and families. Current prison conditions from the inhumane living situations to inadequate nutrition, from the contaminated water to the morale of the staff, from inadequate medical care to the lack of control incarcerated people have over their programs, education, and parole requirements, work against the mission of TDCJ, and you have the power to create positive change. Thank you for reading this testimony and considering the issues that affect lives of incarcerated people under your care and the lives of all connected to them.