



Testimony for House Bill 1956 – Council Member Brenda Stardig

April 11th, 2019

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Corrections Committee.

My name is Brenda Stardig, Council Member for District A in the City of Houston, Chair of the Public Safety Committee for Houston's City Council, and I am here to testify FOR House Bill 1956 regarding transparency of housing for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

Houston is a unique place in Texas: we are not only the largest city in the state, we are also the largest city without zoning in the country. As a District Council member, I can tell you the active role local officials play in helping to protect the quality of life for our neighborhoods.

As Chair of the Public Safety Committee, I am proud of the work we have done to address the challenges we face in Houston. One of those challenges we faced is the lack of regulation for several types of facilities and how it affects public safety.

A 2017 fire in a boarding home and a fire in an unlicensed lodging facility resulted in three deaths and the emergency evacuation of 29 elderly and disabled residents. Working with the Mayor, we formed an internal working group of City departments to review and revise relevant ordinances that would address this dangerous situation.

We identified 3 types of group homes — 1) boarding homes, 2) lodging facilities, and 3) correctional and alternate housing facilities — needing stronger building safety regulations because no other regulatory body at the state or federal level governed the facility safety issues.

In 2018, after lots of work by myself and public safety agencies, Houston City Council passed a set of regulations to better address the permitting and safety inspections.

At the time of the ordinance approval, Houston had 99 approved alternate housing facilities within the corporate limits whereas Austin had 31, Dallas - 27 and Fort Worth – 12. San Antonio has less than 10. This was concerning information.

Currently, local governments have no role in the approval of these facilities and can only obtain location and occupancy data through a cumbersome TPIA process. This bill would require notification for political subdivisions of facilities, which in our case means meeting the requirements of our new ordinance, and for TDCJ to respond to request for information.

- I appreciate that Chairman Dutton added to our bill a provision to include both the local State Representative and State Senator on these notifications from TDCJ

What we are getting is the notification, not closing down existing facilities. The Mayor makes clear in his remarks on the bill that this isn't about limiting second chance opportunities, but it is about public safety and compliance with our local ordinance.

Currently, local governments can only obtain location and occupancy data through a cumbersome public information request process. Let's make the process easier and more transparent by passing House Bill 1956.

Again, this is a bill simply requiring notification. We at the local level make the decisions on what ordinances we pass, and in this case I am particularly proud of how we have done so.

All we are asking of the Legislature is to help us get the information to help TDCJ comply with our local ordinance. Given Houston has more TDCJ housing than Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, and San Antonio COMBINED, helping inform our local public safety ordinances is a very small but important part of protecting the public.

I want to thank Chairman Dutton for carrying this bill, for the Chairman and Committee Members for hearing House Bill 1956, and I hope you can pass this bill to help all Texas communities by adding this level of transparency to TDCJ housing.