



CITY OF HOUSTON

Sylvester Turner

Mayor

P.O. Box 1562
Houston, Texas 77251-1562

Telephone – Dial 311
www.houstontx.gov

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The Honorable Drew Darby
Chairman, House Select Committee on Mass Violence Prevention
P.O. Box 2910
Austin, Texas 78768

To the Members of the House Select Committee on Mass Violence Prevention,

As Mayor of the City of Houston, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in response to the charge to, “Evaluate the ongoing and long-term workforce needs of the state related to cybersecurity, mental health, law enforcement, and related professionals.” I would like to focus my testimony on the issues raised by House Bill 1091 by Rep. Hubert Vo during the 86th Legislative session.

As the most diverse city in the nation, Houston has an increased need for officers that speak multiple languages and come from diverse backgrounds. Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo, in an attempt to increase the pool of qualified candidates for employment with the police department, advocated for HB 1091. This legislation sought to allow legal permanent residents who have served their country and were honorably discharged from the United States military to become Peace Officers in the state of Texas.

Currently, applicants must be citizens. Acknowledging legal permanent residents (LPRs) who serve on the front lines in the military are just as capable of serving on the front lines of our community as peace officers, this bill would allow police departments to increase recruiting pools and provide employment opportunities for veterans upon discharge.

Benefit to the PDs and communities

Now more than ever police departments are very cognizant of the need for a diverse workforce that reflects the changing demographics of our communities. This bill would allow us to tap into a promising group of applicants to satisfy both needs by providing an avenue for these applicants to continue their service.

Veterans, especially those who are foreign-born, can bring needed diversity to police departments, both in culture and language skills, which are extremely important to building trust within communities. This is especially true in diverse communities like Houston.

From our experience, veterans perform well and make good officers. They show the understanding of service to a greater cause and a sense of purpose that should be fostered when they return. They understand unit cohesion, have a servant's heart, and are familiar with basic foundations, such as chain of command. The challenge of finding enough quality law enforcement candidates has never been greater, nor has the need for quality law enforcement professionals. Anyone eligible to defend our country should be eligible to serve our communities by keeping the streets safe. This bill will allow us to access a diverse, talented, hardworking and patriotic pool of candidates.

This proposed policy is an important step in the evolution of modern police departments. Over the years, requirements for being a police officer have changed. Qualifications have evolved. Gender, height, race, and other restrictions have been removed and the focus should be on one's knowledge, skills, commitment, and ability to perform the job effectively.

As honorably discharged veterans, these potential applicants have demonstrated an allegiance to the United States and have shown a spirit for service. They have also undergone security checks and extensive training. HPD would rather remove this barrier to application than propose lower educational requirements or reduction in other standards simply to increase recruiting. Houston cannot afford to do that.

In order to address any concerns on timing, I am supportive of a provision including a minimum military service time of 2 years for this legislation.

Selective hiring

The law enforcement hiring process is incredibly selective and removing a citizenship requirement provides no guarantee that any LPRs will be hired. In many departments, upward of 90 percent of applicants for law enforcement officer positions are rejected. Removing a citizenship requirement is not a magic solution that will immediately fill all vacancies or diversify a police force, but it may help.

The need for potential officers, especially from diverse backgrounds, must be addressed, and this is a population we're ignoring for no justifiable reason. HB 1091 sought to open that door and provide an opportunity to veterans that may benefit departments and our communities.

- In 2009, nearly 8 percent of military personnel on active duty were foreign-born, and more than 30,000 LPRs were serving as of 2013.
- HPD currently has 5200 officers, of which around 1900 are veterans. Almost 1/3 of our department are veterans.

About one million individuals each year establish lawful permanent resident status in the United States. Obtaining this status, commonly known as receiving a "green card," permits an individual to live and work in the United States on a permanent basis. They can get jobs, own property, and receive financial aid to public universities and join the military. In recent years, about half of new LPRs have been new arrivals to the United States, while the rest —slightly more than half —already were present in the United States and adjusted from a different status.

The majority of people who obtain green cards qualify because they are immediate family members of U.S. citizens or LPRs. The rest qualify under employment-based preferences, as

refugees or asylees, or in other qualifying categories, including Diversity Immigrant visas (commonly referred to as the green-card lottery).

Rep. Vo, himself a former Legal Permanent Resident before becoming a United States citizen and before becoming the first Vietnamese member of the Texas Legislature in 2005, was able to pass the bill out of the Texas House.

We owe it to the men and women who have served this country to pass this measure in 2021. This will improve our departments and make them more reflective of the communities they serve.

Sincerely,



Sylvester Turner
Mayor