
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Anna Caballero, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

AB 799 (Celeste Rodriguez) - Prisons: death benefit for incarcerated firefighters

Version: May 29, 2025

Urgency: No

Hearing Date: June 23, 2025

Policy Vote: PUB. S. 6 - 0

Mandate: No

Consultant: Liah Burnley

Bill Summary: AB 799 would require the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to pay a death benefit for the death of any incarcerated crew members in the California Conservation Camp Program, as specified.

Fiscal Impact: CDCR anticipates that this bill will result in minimal ongoing General Fund costs given the limited number of firefighter deaths over the previous decade. However, these costs could be increased significantly depending on the interpretation of the language around physical and mental incapacitation of incarcerated firefighters in this bill. Currently, data is not available on the number of hand crew members who have become mentally or physically incapacitated. Regarding the average annual compensation for fire camp participants, CDCR indicates high-level estimates for calendar year 2022 at \$719.26 and 2023 at \$754.76. (See staff comments)

Background: CDCR operates 35 minimum-security conservation camps with CAL FIRE and the Los Angeles County Fire Department. Conservation camp workers support government agencies during emergency responses to fires, floods, and other disasters. CDCR reports that as of January 2025, there were approximately 1,872 incarcerated people working in conservation camps, 1,150 of whom were fire line-qualified crewmembers. Incarcerated hand crews use hand tools to aid fire suppression by clearing brush and establishing firelines during wildland fires. An incarcerated conservation camp worker is paid \$5.80 to \$10.24 per day depending on their level of experience and the difficulty of the assignment. When working as an emergency firefighter, they are paid an additional \$1 per hour, which is reimbursed by CALFIRE from the State Emergency Fund. Incarcerated people working in conservation camps may also earn credits to reduce the length of their incarceration, and may be eligible for expedited criminal record expungement upon release.

Proposed Law:

- Requires CDCR to pay a death benefit for the death of any state prison incarcerated individual hand crew member assigned to the California Conservation Camp program, if the crew member dies during any of the following circumstances:
 - During performance of their duties on an active deployment;
 - During performance of their duties completing firefighter Conservation Camp training; or,

- While physically or mentally incapacitated due to their performance of their duties as described above.
- Requires the death benefit to be paid within 60 days of the death.
- Requires the death benefit to be paid to the beneficiary designated by the crew member to receive the death benefit.
- Provides that the death benefit shall be the sum of the following amounts:
 - \$50,000; and,
 - An amount equal to 50% of the annual compensation earned by the deceased crew member during the 12 months immediately preceding their death.

Staff Comments: CDCR indicates that this bill will result in minimal cost. However, the costs are sufficient to meet this Committee's suspense threshold. By way of example, if one incarcerated crewmember is entitled to receive the death benefit, CDCR would pay around \$52,000.

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