

Date of Hearing: June 24, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT

Liz Ortega, Chair

SB 1012 (Smallwood-Cuevas) – As Amended May 14, 2026

SENATE VOTE: 39-0

SUBJECT: Employment of inmates

SUMMARY: Requires the Pre-Release Construction Trades Certificate Program joint advisory committee (joint advisory committee) within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to facilitate the post-release admission of graduates of the California Conservation Camp program into state-approved apprenticeship programs, and for state-approved apprenticeship programs in the building and construction trades to evaluate such individuals for admission with advanced standing based on prior coursework and work experience, as specified. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires the joint advisory committee, in consultation with the CDCR, the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), the Department of Industrial Relations (DIR), and the California Conservation Camp program, to facilitate the admission of graduates of the California Conservation Camp program, after release, into any relevant state-approved apprenticeship and for state-approved apprenticeship programs in the building and construction trades, including those in general construction, to evaluate such individuals for admission with advanced standing based on prior coursework and work experience.
 - a) Amends the enumerated responsibilities of the joint advisory committee to additionally include this requirement.
- 2) Requires that successful completion of California Conservation Camp programs, including, but not limited to, wildland firefighter training, such as environmental remediation and forestry management, emergency response, and hazardous waste cleanup, constitute qualifying experience for a state-approved apprenticeship in the building and construction trades under the Division of Apprenticeship Standards (DAS).
- 3) Requires the CDCR, in partnership with CAL FIRE and the California Conservation Camp program, to ensure that all individuals who complete the program receive a certification acknowledging their California Conservation Camp program training and work experience to ensure eligibility for state-approved apprenticeship programs in the building and construction trades.
- 4) Provides that nothing in the bill's provisions preclude state-approved apprenticeship programs outside of the building and construction trades under the DAS from evaluating California Conservation Camp program graduates for admission with advanced standing based on prior coursework and work experience.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the CDCR and provides that the primary objective of adult incarceration in the CDCR is to facilitate the successful reintegration of the individuals in the department's care

back to their communities equipped with the tools to be drug-free, healthy, and employable members of society by providing education, treatment, and rehabilitative and restorative justice programs, all in a safe and humane environment to promote personal growth for all residents, as specified. Penal Code §§ 5000-5035.

- 2) Provides that the CDCR must require every able-bodied incarcerated individual imprisoned in any state prison as many hours of faithful labor in each day and every day during the person's term of imprisonment as is prescribed by the rules and regulations of the Secretary. Penal Code § 2700.
- 3) Authorizes the CDCR to cause prisoners in the prisons of this state to be employed in the rendering of emergency services for the preservation of life or property within the state, as specified, when a county level state of emergency has been declared due to a natural disaster and the local governing board has requested the assistance of the CDCR. Penal Code § 2701.
- 4) Establishes the Pre-Release Construction Trades Certificate Program administered by the CDCR to increase employment opportunities in the construction trades for incarcerated individuals upon release. Penal Code § 2716.5(a).
- 5) Requires the CDCR to establish a joint advisory committee for the purpose of implementation of the Pre-Release Construction Trades Certificate Program.
 - a) Requires the joint advisory committee to be composed of representatives from building and construction trades employee organizations, the State Building and Construction Trades Council of California, joint apprenticeship training programs, the California Correctional Training and Rehabilitation Authority, the DAS, the Labor and Workforce Development Agency (LWDA), and any other representatives the CDCR determines appropriate.
 - b) Requires the joint advisory committee to:
 - i) Develop guidelines for the participation of inmates in preapprenticeship training programs, as described. The guidelines will provide for the integration, for all inmate preapprenticeship training programs in the building and construction trades, of the multicraft core curriculum.
 - ii) Develop and implement a prerelease construction trades certification that validates that an inmate completed instruction, skills, and competencies required by and recognized by the participating building and construction trades.
 - iii) Ensure compliance with any applicable requirements and regulations of the DAS.
 - iv) Evaluate prerelease on-the-job training opportunities to compare and match competencies with those of registered apprentices in the building and construction trades.
 - v) Explore the feasibility of the electronic tracking of each participating inmate's relevant activities to efficiently capture competencies related to the certification.

- vi) Explore the prerelease awarding of formal credit for apprenticeship hours recognized by joint apprenticeship training programs and the DAS.
- vii) Facilitate the admission of graduates of inmate preapprenticeship programs, after release, into state-approved apprenticeship programs and for apprenticeship programs to evaluate such individuals for admission with advanced standing based on prior coursework and work experience. Penal Code § 2716.5(b).
- 6) Establishes the California Conservation Camp Program to provide for the training and use of the inmates and wards assigned to conservation camps in the furtherance of public conservation. Provides that it is the policy of the state to require the inmates and wards assigned to such camps to perform public conservation projects including, but not limited to, forest fire prevention and control, forest and watershed management, recreation, fish and game management, soil conservation and forest and watershed revegetation. Public Resources Code §§ 4951-4958.
- 7) Establishes the CAL FIRE to oversee and administer programs related to forest health and fire prevention and response. Public Resources Code § 701.
- 8) Establishes the DIR in the LWDA, and vests it with various powers and duties to foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners of California, to improve their working conditions, and to advance their opportunities for profitable employment. Labor Code § 50.
- 9) Establishes the DAS within the DIR to oversee apprenticeship programs and requires the Chief of the DAS to perform various functions to promote the welfare of apprentices. Labor Code § 3070 et seq.
- 10) Creates, within the DAS, the California Apprenticeship Council, which issues rules and regulations that establish standards for minimum wages, maximum hours, and working conditions for apprentice agreements in the building and construction trades and for firefighter occupations, as specified. Labor Code § 3070 et seq.

FISCAL EFFECT: According to the Senate Appropriations Committee:

- CDCR would incur significant annual costs for additional workload associated with program development and expansion, interdepartmental coordination and the validation and tracking of training skills and competencies.
- CalFire and DIR would likely incur minor costs to participate with the joint advisory committee to facilitate the admission of graduates of the program into apprenticeship programs.

COMMENTS:

Pre-Release Construction Trades Certificate Program:

In 2018, the Legislature established via SB 866 (Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review, Chapter 53, Statutes of 2018) the Pre-Release Construction Trades Certification Program, administered by the CDCR, to increase employment opportunities in the construction trades for incarcerated individuals after release. The program is overseen by a joint advisory committee composed of representatives from building and construction trades employee organizations, the

State Building and Construction Trades Council of California, joint apprenticeship training programs, the California Correctional Training and Rehabilitation Authority, the DAS, the LWDA, and any other representatives the CDCR determines appropriate.

One of the joint advisory committee's current mandates is to facilitate the admission of graduates of inmate preapprenticeship programs, after release, into state-approved apprenticeship programs in which they will be evaluated for admission with advanced standing based on prior coursework and work experience.

This bill would additionally require the joint advisory committee to facilitate the admission of graduates of the California Conservation Camp program into state-approved apprenticeship programs, and for state-approved apprenticeship programs in the building and construction trades to evaluate such individuals for admission with advanced standing based on prior coursework and work experience, as specified.

Conservation (Fire) Camps Program:

According to the CDCR's website, "CDCR, in cooperation with CAL FIRE and the Los Angeles County Fire Department (LACFD), jointly operates 35 conservation camps, commonly known as fire camps, located in 25 counties across California. All camps are minimum-security facilities and staffed with correctional staff.

Participants in CDCR's Conservation (Fire) Camp Program support state, local and federal government agencies as they respond to all types of emergencies such as fires, floods, and other natural or manmade disasters. When not assigned to an emergency, crews complete community service projects in areas close to their camp.

Fire-fighting crews, also known as hand crews, use hand tools to aid in fire suppression during wildland fires. They do not use water or hoses.

Participants can also work as camp support and maintenance staff including cooks, laundry workers, landscapers and water treatment plant operators."

The CDCR is responsible for the selection, supervision and discipline of camp participants. When responding to a wildfire or working on conservation projects, a CAL FIRE captain is responsible for the inmates' custody and acts as the supervisor for the hand crew, which can include up to 17 people. When the hand crews end their shift and return to either the camp or a base camp, custody transfers back to CDCR staff.

Inmates participating in the camps receive the same entry-level training as CAL FIRE's seasonal firefighters, and ongoing training from CAL FIRE throughout the program. After completing the training, program participants become certified wildland firefighters.

An incarcerated person must volunteer for the fire camp program, and some individuals are ineligible for fire camp assignment based on their convictions. To be eligible, volunteers must have "minimum custody" status, or the lowest-security classification based on good behavior in prison, ability to follow rules, and participation in rehabilitative programs.

With the passage last year of AB 247 (Bryan, Chapter 681, Statutes of 2025), fire camp participants now receive an hourly wage of \$7.25 per hour while assigned to an active fire incident, regardless of skill level.

Camp participants also earn credits for time served. According to the CDCR website, “Most incarcerated fire crew members receive 2-for-1 credits, meaning they receive two additional days off their sentence for every one day they serve on a fire crew. Camp volunteers who work as support staff, but not on a fire crew, receive day-for-day credits, meaning they receive one day off their sentence for every one day they serve as a firefighter.”¹

The Conservation Camp Program can lead to several post-release benefits, as well, including advanced training and criminal record expungement. Many former participants go on to work for CAL FIRE and the United States Forest Service.

According to the author:

“SB 1012 recognizes the tremendous skill and sacrifice of incarcerated individuals who serve in the California Conservation Fire Camp program by ensuring they have access to equitable pathways that lead to real opportunities upon release. For too long, the state has relied on incarcerated fire camp participants while offering limited opportunities for stable employment once they return home.

SB 1012 expands the state’s commitment to fire camp participants by ensuring they receive the support needed to continue serving California after their time has been served. In doing so, this bill helps address critical public safety workforce needs, reduces recidivism, and creates pathways to meaningful careers.”

The author adds that the measure supports equity per HR 39 (Gipson, 2021) in that, “During the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, over 1,000 incarcerated individuals were deployed as first responders. Unfortunately, despite this experience, their training and work experience are often not recognized in ways that allow them to pursue related careers in wildfire mitigation, forestry and vegetation management, and other skilled trades.

SB 1012 will support equitable and sustainable pathways for formerly incarcerated individuals to access union-affiliated skilled trades careers by ensuring that successful completion of the Fire Camp program results in clear eligibility and streamlined admission into state-approved apprenticeships in the building and construction trades after release.”

Arguments in Support

The California State Council of Laborers, co-sponsor of this measure, writes that “these opportunities benefit the entire state, far beyond the individuals themselves. When we bridge the gap between fire camps and union careers, we reduce recidivism by transitioning individuals directly into high-road utility and construction jobs; strengthen the economy by converting a formerly dependent population into tax-paying, skilled workers who contribute to California's infrastructure; and enhance public safety by creating a specialized pipeline of workers trained in

¹ <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/faq-conservation-fire-camp-program/>

vegetation and forestry management, ensuring California has a permanent, professional workforce to combat the ongoing climate and wildfire crisis.”

Arguments in Opposition

None on file.

Prior and Related Legislation

AB 2483 (Elhawary) of 2026 would require CAL FIRE to implement a standardized process to ensure any individual who successfully completes training in a CAL FIRE firefighting training camp while incarcerated receives official written certification before their release from prison and would require CAL FIRE to award hiring preferences to certain qualified formerly incarcerated individuals. Pending in the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee.

SB 75 (Smallwood-Cuevas) of 2025 would have required the CDCR, in partnership with the DIR and recognized building and construction trades councils, to establish the Pre-apprenticeship Pathways to Employment Pilot Program to provide incarcerated individuals with access to pre-apprenticeship training aligned with state-registered apprenticeships in the building and construction trades, no later than January 1, 2028. Vetoed by Governor Newsom.

AB 247 (Bryan), Chapter 681, Statutes of 2025, requires that individual hand crew members incarcerated in a state prison or county jail, or a ward hand crew member placed at Pine Grove Youth Conservation Camp, be paid an hourly wage of \$7.25 while assigned to an active fire incident.

SB 423 (Smallwood-Cuevas) of 2025 would have established the Firefighter Hiring Pipeline Program, the Local Handcrew Pilot Program, and expanded access to certain community college courses for firefighting-related education. This bill was gutted and amended into a new bill with unrelated provisions, and is in the Assembly Local Government Committee.

AB 1380 (Elhawary) of 2025 would have directed CAL FIRE to implement a standardized process to ensure that all individuals who complete CAL FIRE’s firefighting training program while incarcerated receive official written certification before their release; required CAL FIRE to award hiring preference to qualified formerly incarcerated individuals; and tracked incarcerated individuals who have completed the firefighting training program and report to the Legislature the effectiveness of the program. Held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 2147 (Reyes), Chapter 60, Statutes of 2020, allows a person who has successfully participated in the California Conservation Camp Program or in a county incarcerated individual hand crew to petition for expungement of their conviction.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Nextgen California (Sponsor)
California State Council of Laborers (Co-Sponsor)
Associated General Contractors, California Chapters
California Federation of Labor Unions, AFL-CIO
California Forestry Association
Chrysalis Center
Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program
Guiding Rage into Power Training Institute
Initiate Justice
Los Angeles Conservation Corps
The American Civil Liberties Union California Action

Opposition

None

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