

Date of Hearing: August 20, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 423 (Smallwood-Cuevas) – As Amended May 23, 2025

|                   |                   |       |        |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------|--------|
| Policy Committee: | Public Safety     | Vote: | 9 - 0  |
|                   | Natural Resources |       | 13 - 0 |

Urgency: No                      State Mandated Local Program: No                      Reimbursable: No

**SUMMARY:**

This bill establishes and expands educational and training programs for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated firefighters, and authorizes a pilot program in Los Angeles County for formerly incarcerated firefighters.

Specifically, among other provisions, this bill:

- 1) Requires CDCR and the CCCCCO to, by January 1, 2028, expand access to community college courses that lead to degrees or certificates for incarcerated people serving on conservation camp handcrews or institutional firehouses, as specified.
- 2) Requires CAL FIRE, the California Conservation Corps (CCC), and CDCR to operate an enhanced firefighter training and certification program (“enhanced firefighter program”) at the Ventura Training Center (VTC), or a successor facility in the southern region of the state.
- 3) Permits CAL FIRE to contract with accredited private postsecondary institutions or nonprofit organizations to deliver the content of the enhanced firefighter program.
- 4) Makes provisions related to the enhanced firefighter program contingent upon appropriation.
- 5) Authorizes the fire chief of the County of Los Angeles Fire Department (“fire chief”) to establish a local handcrew pilot program (“pilot program”) in collaboration with an authorized employee representative of the County of Los Angeles Fire Department.
- 6) Specifies the pilot program shall operate for five years, and authorizes the fire chief to end the program before it has operated for five years.
- 7) Specifies the fire chief may enroll in the pilot program formerly incarcerated people who have successfully completed one or more of the following: the California Conservation Camp program crew, relevant programming at Camp David Gonzales, training at the enhanced firefighter program, or work at an institutional firehouse.
- 8) If the fire chief establishes the pilot program, requires the fire chief to develop metrics to evaluate the efficacy and success of the program, evaluate the program according to those metrics, and report the findings of the evaluation to the Legislature and the Governor.

- 9) Specifies the pilot program shall not replace or restrict existing or future programs and training offered to formerly incarcerated individuals, nor displace, replace, or reduce currently employed firefighters, handcrew personnel, or other existing positions in the County of Los Angeles Fire Department.
- 10) Makes provisions related to the pilot program contingent upon appropriation.

**FISCAL EFFECT:**

- 1) Costs to CCCC (Proposition 98 General Fund (GF)) to expand community college courses for incarcerated firefighters. CCCC reports the work required by this bill is already ongoing through its Rising Scholars Network program (see below). The 2025-26 state budget increases annual funding for the program from \$25 million to \$35 million ongoing Proposition 98 GF to support its expansion, and there is trailer bill language eliminating the cap on the number of campuses that may operate a Rising Scholars program. CCCC believes the workload and other costs needed to fulfill this bill's requirements are absorbable within this existing funding for the Rising Scholars program.
- 2) Costs to CAL FIRE (GF), possibly in the tens of millions of dollars annually, to operate the enhanced firefighter program. CAL FIRE estimates costs of \$26.1 million in year one of implementation, \$13.6 million in year two, and \$13.2 million annually thereafter. This estimate includes 15 new staff positions to develop, design, and operate the training program and ensure compliance with all state and federal requirements. This estimate also includes significant funding for operating costs including extractor and dryers for cleaning personal protective equipment, leasing of training engines while awaiting the actual delivery of state-owned fire engines requested, fire ground props, and classroom materials. CAL FIRE reports it would need an increased GF appropriation to implement this bill, as well as budget bill language to allow for extended encumbrance and expenditure related to deferred maintenance and special repairs.
- 3) Costs to CDCR (GF), possibly in the millions of dollars to tens of millions of dollars annually, to expand access to community college courses in conservation camps and operate the enhanced firefighter program. For the community college expansion, CDCR anticipates one-time costs in the millions of dollars to establish internet infrastructure and procure equipment, including laptops, for more than 30 conservation camps. CDCR also anticipates ongoing costs of several million dollars annually to fund the delivery of coursework and for staffing needed to support the educational programs. For the enhanced firefighter program, CDCR contends the bill is unclear about whether the intent is to enhance the current programmatic offering at VTC or to codify current operations at the site. CDCR reports it currently expends approximately \$2 million annually for the existing program at VTC. If CDCR must expand its operations, it will incur additional costs. Actual costs will depend on the scope of the expansion but may be in the hundreds of thousands to low millions of dollars annually.
- 4) Costs to the CCC (GF) of an unknown but potentially significant amount to help operate the enhanced firefighter program.

- 5) Cost pressures (General Fund) of an unknown but potentially significant amount to fund the pilot program. Depending on the scope of operations, these costs pressures could be in the hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars annually for the duration of the pilot program.

#### COMMENTS:

- 1) **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 crew members. Incarcerated hand crews use hand tools to aid fire suppression by clearing brush and establishing firelines during wildland fires. People who successfully participate in a conservation camp or county hand crew may be eligible for expedited criminal record expungement upon release – a reform enacted by the Legislature to help formerly incarcerated firefighters find full-time work in firefighting after their release.

Additionally, CAL FIRE, the CCC, and CDCR operate an enhanced firefighter training and certification program at the VTC in Ventura County. VTC began training participants in October 2018 and accepts trainees who have recently been part of a trained firefighting workforce in fire camps or institutional firehouses operated by CAL FIRE and CDCR. Members of the CCC are also eligible to participate. Participants in the certification program are provided with additional rehabilitation and job training skills to help them be more successful after completion of the program. Cadets who complete the program will be qualified to apply for entry-level firefighting jobs with local, state, and federal firefighting agencies. According to the author's office, this bill seeks to codify these existing operations at VTC, though, as discussed above, that is not entirely clear from the text of the bill.

The Rising Scholars Network was formally established in 2021 to provide educational support to currently and formerly incarcerated people through the California Community Colleges. According to the CCCCCO, the Rising Scholars Network is comprised of 93 community colleges, serving 126 correctional institutions statewide and 84 on-campus programs.

- 2) **Purpose.** The author seeks to strengthen existing educational and training programs for incarcerated firefighters to support their future employment. According to the author:

For too long, the state has exploited our incarcerated fire crews putting them in harm's way with little opportunity for employment upon release. SB 423 expands our states commitment to our incarcerated fire crews by ensuring they receive the supports they need to be better prepared to continue their service to the state, after their time has been served.

This bill is sponsored by Legal Services for Prisoners with Children and is supported by a number of criminal justice reform groups.