



NEWS



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Dustin Gardiner, San Francisco Chronicle

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Prisoner firefighters arrive at the scene of the Water Fire in Whitewater (Riverside County) on Aug. 2. Photo: JOSH EDELSON / AFP via Getty Images

SACRAMENTO — As California battles through another devastating wildfire season, state legislators have passed a bill that would make it easier for formerly incarcerated people to become firefighters.

AB2147 by Assemblywoman Eloise Gómez Reyes, D-San Bernardino, would allow people who have trained at state fire camps in prison to have their criminal records more quickly expunged upon release.

Every year, several thousand California prisoners volunteer to help the state fight wildfires. They are trained at a camp and often work alongside full-time firefighters, digging fire lines and thinning forests.

But many who serve on prison fire hand crews cannot get jobs doing the same work upon their release. Their criminal records prevent them from becoming emergency medical technicians, a certification that cities and counties require for firefighters.

“If we are willing to allow an incarcerated person to volunteer and help fight fires — protecting lives and property while putting their lives at risk — then we should be willing to allow (them) an opportunity to receive an expungement,” Reyes said in a statement.

The bill received final legislative approval Sunday, on a 51-12 vote in the Assembly, with most Democrats in support. One Democrat, Assemblyman Rudy Salas of Bakersfield, and 11 Republicans cast the “no” votes.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has until Sept. 30 to decide whether to sign the legislation.

The Peace Officers Research Association of California, a statewide federation of police unions, opposed the bill, saying it could put people in need of emergency assistance at risk.

“To fully expunge a felon’s record in exchange for this work is not warranted, is dangerous to the public and fails to recognize the impact to the victims of the inmate’s crimes,” the group said in a statement.

Under the bill, people released from prison could petition a court to have their records expunged immediately. They would have to have worked on a fire hand crew and be lower-level offenders to be eligible.

The bill would exclude anyone convicted of murder, kidnapping, rape, lewd acts on a child under 14, a crime requiring registration as a sex offender, arson or any offense punishable by life in prison.

Those who qualify could have their felony records cleared and parole terminated. Currently, people released from prison typically must wait years to get their records expunged in order to attain EMT certification.

California has suffered from a shortage of firefighters this summer, as historic fires have torched more than 1.7 million acres, killed seven people and burned 3,200 homes and other structures.

That shortage has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. California released thousands of incarcerated people early to slow the spread of the virus in prisons, which reduced its ranks of prison hand crews.

Reyes said the bill could also help prevent former offenders from committing further crimes by providing them a stable path to employment.

“Those that have served on the fire lines deserve a second chance,” she tweeted after the bill passed.

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/politics/article/California-legislators-push-to-let-former-15528706.php>