

SUBJECT: Establishing youth camp and campground safety requirements

COMMITTEE: Disaster Preparedness & Flooding, Select — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 7 ayes — King, Bonnen, Darby, Johnson, Louderback, Moody, Wilson
0 nays
2 absent — Martinez, Virdell

SENATE VOTE: On final passage (August 21) — 28 - 0

WITNESSES: None (*considered in a formal meeting on September 1*)

DIGEST: CSSB 1 would establish safety standards and emergency plan requirements for youth camps and campgrounds.

Youth camps. CSSB 1 would require a person holding a license to operate a youth camp to submit a renewal application within 30 days of altering camp boundaries, completing construction of one or more new cabins at the camp, or completing any renovation that changed the number of beds or altered ingress or egress to a cabin.

The bill would prohibit the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) from issuing or renewing a license for a youth camp that operated one or more cabins within a floodplain, unless:

- the location of each cabin within a floodplain was due to proximity to a still body of water that was not connected to a stream, river, or other watercourse or was dammed; or
- each cabin was at least 1,000 feet from a floodway.

“Floodplain” would mean an area within a 100-year floodplain identified by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) under the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968, including any area removed by a

letter of map amendment, a letter of map revision based on fill, or a similar process conducted by FEMA. “Floodway” would mean an area identified on the most recent FEMA flood hazard map as a regulatory floodway.

The bill would require DSHS to post, maintain, and update a list of each youth camp with an active license on its website.

The DSHS executive commissioner would have to, by rule, require a youth camp operator’s emergency plan to:

- specify muster zones for campers and staff to gather in an emergency event requiring evacuation;
- establish procedures for responding to certain other emergencies not addressed by the bill, including a lost camper, fire at the camp, severe injury or illness, serious accident, or death of a camper, visitor, camp staff, or camp volunteer;
- establish procedures to identify and account for each camper affected by an emergency;
- establish procedures for communication with local emergency management services, camp administrative and medical staff, and campers’ parents or guardians; and
- designate a camp emergency preparedness coordinator.

The executive commissioner also would have to, by rule, require a youth camp operator to:

- maintain an operable radio capable of providing real-time weather alerts;
- install and maintain an emergency warning system capable of alerting all campers and camp occupants, and include a public address system operable without an internet connection;
- monitor safety alerts issued by a professional weather service and local river authorities, if applicable, or other local emergency notification systems; and
- certify the operator’s compliance.

CSSB 1 would require a youth camp operator to annually submit the camp's emergency plan for DSHS approval. If DSHS determined that the plan did not meet minimum standards, the camp operator would have to revise and resubmit the plan within 45 days of receiving notice from DSHS. Any updated plan would have to be attached to each application to renew a youth camp license. Within 10 days of a plan being approved by DSHS, the operator would have to provide a copy to the emergency management director or coordinator for the county, and if applicable, the municipality. In developing a plan, an operator could consult with an emergency management director or coordinator.

The bill would require DSHS to store emergency plans in a database and provide access to the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) and each member of the Youth Camp Safety Multidisciplinary Team. The bill also would require a youth camp operator to provide the most recent version of a camp's emergency plan to the parent or legal guardian of a camper or prospective camper, notify the parent or guardian of any camp area located within a floodplain, and ensure the parent or guardian had signed and submitted a statement acknowledging this notice.

CSSB 1 would require that, within 48 hours after each camp session began, a youth camp operator or a staff member conduct a mandatory safety orientation that notified each camper of camp boundaries and any hazards on the premises, instructed each camper on behavior expectations in an emergency, and provided developmentally appropriate instruction on emergency procedures in accordance with the camp's emergency plan. At least annually, an operator would be required to:

- provide each camp staff member and volunteer with an up-to-date copy of the emergency plan;
- ensure that each camp staff member and volunteer successfully completed training on the plan in compliance with DSHS requirements;
- instruct them in proper emergency procedures under the plan; and
- maintain documentation of each staff member's and volunteer's

successful completion of the training.

The bill also would require a youth camp operator to conspicuously post the emergency plan's evacuation route in each cabin and ensure each route was illuminated at night.

DSHS could not grant a waiver from these requirements. Emergency plans would be confidential and not subject to disclosure under the Public Information Act.

CSSB 1 would require a youth camp operator to provide and maintain for the camp broadband internet services using end-to-end fiber optic facilities and a secondary internet connection through a broadband service distinct from the first.

The bill would repeal certain provisions requiring the involvement of youth camp operators and certain other stakeholders before DSHS rule changes regarding youth camp license fees and in developing rules for youth camps.

The DSHS executive commissioner would have to adopt rules required under the bill by January 1, 2026. A youth camp operator would not be required to submit an emergency plan to DSHS until April 1, 2026.

Campgrounds. CSSB 1 would require the operator of a campground, meaning a commercial property designed to provide cabins for transient overnight guest use or a recreational vehicle park, to install and maintain in each cabin located within a floodplain an emergency ladder capable of providing roof access. The bill also would require an operator to develop an emergency evacuation plan for:

- evacuating campground occupants from floodplain areas on issuance of a flash flood or flood warning;
- evacuating campground occupants on issuance of an evacuation order by the county or municipal emergency management director or coordinator; and

- sheltering occupants in place upon issuance of a tornado warning or an order to shelter in place.

The bill would require a campground operator to implement the applicable evacuation plan on the National Weather Service's issuance of a flash flood, flood, or tornado warning. An operator would be required to send a copy of the evacuation plan to the county or municipal emergency management director or coordinator. The plan would be confidential and not subject to disclosure under the Public Information Act.

CSSB 1 would require a campground other than one owned or controlled by the state, a state agency, or a political subdivision to comply with the National Fire Protection Association 1194, Standard for Recreational Vehicle Parks and Campgrounds, 2021 Edition, with certain exceptions. Governmental entities could adopt policies, rules, ordinances, or orders regulating environmental health and sanitation, electrical distribution system safety, liquefied petroleum gas storage and dispensing safety, or fire protection, only if they did not impose standards more stringent than those specified by the National Fire Protection Association.

The bill's requirements for campgrounds also would have to be included by DSHS rule in the health and safety standards for youth camps.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect 91 days after the end of the legislative session.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

CSSB 1, the Heaven's 27 Camp Safety Act, would improve camper safety by requiring youth camps to meet basic emergency preparedness standards, including developing and submitting safety plans, restricting the location of cabins in floodplains and hazardous areas, establishing evacuation protocols, and maintaining emergency equipment, such as reliable dual broadband internet connections for uninterrupted communication during emergencies. The bill also would introduce enhanced training requirements for camp counselors, equipping them with knowledge of inclement weather and designated escape routes to enable

them to flexibly pivot from standard practices when emergency conditions warrant a different course of action. Additionally, by establishing similar safety requirements for other types of recreational campgrounds, CSSB 1 would improve the safety of campers across the state in a natural disaster.

The severe July 4 floods along the Guadalupe River, which claimed at least 135 lives, including more than two dozen young girls and counselors at Camp Mystic, exposed critical safety gaps in camp emergency preparedness. Many camps, including those outside of Kerr County, have no formal plans, procedures, or training in place for emergencies. By introducing safety standards, such as requiring camps to have updated evacuation plans, a designated emergency preparedness coordinator, cabins with working weather-alert radios, and independently powered speaker systems, CSSB 1 would ensure that all camps, particularly youth camps, have enforceable safety protocols designed to save lives, closing gaps in emergency preparedness and preventing complacency in disaster preparedness within the camping industry.

CSSB 1 also would ensure youth camps are held to the same safety standards as schools and daycares by imposing basic safety standards and staff training protocols. The bill would protect the lives of campers by prohibiting the licensure of youth camps operating with cabins within a floodplain and commercial properties that receive letter of map amendments from FEMA from bypassing the bill's safety requirements.

Additionally, CSSB 1 would ensure that parents were informed of safety protocols and risks associated with a camp by requiring camps to disclose a copy of their emergency plans to campers' parents and legal guardians. Establishing procedures for communicating with parents, as well as with different emergency management entities, would prioritize the safety of campers and increase transparency and accountability. No parent should fear sending their child to camp in Texas, and the bill would provide for meaningful reform that honors the memory of those lost by ensuring camps are never caught unprepared again.

CRITICS

While improving camp safety and protecting youth campers is important,

SAY: CSSB 1 would significantly expand state oversight of youth camp operations. The bill's floodplain prohibitions also could impose millions of dollars in rebuilding costs on youth camps, potentially forcing many to close permanently. Camps contribute billions to the state economy, providing employment opportunities to local families and young people who may be looking for seasonal work. In addition to reducing opportunities for youth to experience the lasting benefits of attending camp, the closure of youth camps could have negative effects on jobs and local businesses in the Texas counties that rely on the camping industry, such as Kerr County.

NOTES: According to the Legislative Budget Board, the fiscal implications of the bill cannot be determined due to the number of additional staff and specific class titles needed to promulgate rules relating to the resident youth camp emergency plans, and to review and approve those plans which are unknown.