

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Judiciary

BILL: SB 746

INTRODUCER: Senator Wright

SUBJECT: Public Records/Judicial Assistants

DATE: March 5, 2019

REVISED: _____

ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1. Tulloch	Cibula	JU	Favorable
2. _____	_____	GO	_____
3. _____	_____	RC	_____

I. Summary:

SB 746 makes the following information for current or former judicial assistants to justices and judges exempt from the disclosure requirements of the public records laws:

- The judicial assistant's address, date of birth, and telephone number.
- The names, home addresses, telephone numbers, dates of birth, and places of employment of the judicial assistant's spouse and children.
- The names and locations of schools and day care facilities attended by the judicial assistant's children.

The effective date of the bill is July 1, 2019.

II. Present Situation:

Public Records Law

The Florida Constitution provides that the public has the right to inspect or copy records made or received in connection with official governmental business.¹ This applies to the official business of any public body, officer, or employee of the state, including all three branches of state government, local governmental entities, and any person acting on behalf of the government.²

Chapter 119, F.S., known as the Public Records Act, constitutes the main body of public records laws.³ The Public Records Act states that

¹ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(a).

² *Id.*

³ Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes.

[i]t is the policy of this state that all state, county, and municipal records are open for personal inspection and copying by any person. Providing access to public records is a duty of each agency.⁴

The Public Records Act typically contains general exemptions that apply across agencies. Agency- or program-specific exemptions often are placed in the substantive statutes relating to that particular agency or program.

The Public Records Act does not apply to legislative or judicial records.⁵ Legislative records are public pursuant to s. 11.0431, F.S. Public records exemptions for the Legislature are codified primarily in s. 11.0431(2)-(3), F.S., and adopted in the rules of each house of the Legislature.

A public record includes virtually any document or recording, regardless of its physical form or how it may be transmitted.⁶ The Florida Supreme Court has interpreted public records as being “any material prepared in connection with official agency business which is intended to perpetuate, communicate, or formalize knowledge of some type.”⁷

The Florida Statutes specify conditions under which public access to governmental records must be provided. The Public Records Act guarantees every person’s right to inspect and copy any state or local government public record at any reasonable time, under reasonable conditions, and under supervision by the custodian of the public record.⁸ A violation of the Public Records Act may result in civil or criminal liability.⁹

Only the Legislature may create an exemption to public records requirements.¹⁰ An exemption must be created by general law and must specifically state the public necessity justifying the exemption.¹¹ An exemption serves an identifiable purpose if it meets one of the following statutory purposes, the Legislature finds that the purpose of the exemption outweighs open government policy, *and* the purpose cannot be accomplished without the exemption:

- It allows the state or its political subdivision to effectively and efficiently administer a program, and administration would be significantly impaired without the exemption;¹²

⁴ Section 119.01(1), F.S.

⁵ *Locke v. Hawkes*, 595 So. 2d 32 (Fla. 1992). Also see *Times Pub. Co. v. Ake*, 660 So. 2d 255 (Fla. 1995).

⁶ Section 119.011(12), F.S., defines “public record” to mean “all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, tapes, photographs, films, sound recordings, data processing software, or other material, regardless of the physical form, characteristics, or means of transmission, made or received pursuant to law or ordinance or in connection with the transaction of official business by any agency.” Section 119.011(2), F.S., defines “agency” as “any state, county, district, authority, or municipal officer, department, division, board, bureau, commission, or other separate unit of government created or established by law including, for the purposes of this chapter, the Commission on Ethics, the Public Service Commission, and the Office of Public Counsel, and any other public or private agency, person, partnership, corporation, or business entity acting on behalf of any public agency.”

⁷ *Shevin v. Byron, Harless, Schaffer, Reid and Assoc. Inc.*, 379 So. 2d 633, 640 (Fla. 1980).

⁸ Section 119.07(1)(a), F.S.

⁹ Section 119.10, F.S. Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes, as are the penalties for violating those laws.

¹⁰ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(c).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Section 119.15(6)(b)1., F.S.

- Releasing sensitive personal information would be defamatory or would jeopardize an individual's safety. If this public purpose is cited as the basis of an exemption, however, only personal identifying information is exempt;¹³ or
- It protects trade or business secrets.

Further, the exemption must be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law. Additionally, a bill enacting an exemption may not contain other substantive provisions¹⁴ and must pass by a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting in each house of the Legislature.¹⁵

When creating or expanding a public records exemption, the Legislature may provide that a record is 'confidential and exempt' or 'exempt.'¹⁶ Records designated as 'confidential and exempt' may be released by the records custodian only under the circumstances defined by the Legislature or pursuant to a court order. Records designated as 'exempt' may be released at the discretion of the records custodian under certain circumstances.¹⁷

Open Government Sunset Review Act

The Open Government Sunset Review Act (the Act) prescribes a legislative review process for newly created or substantially amended public records or open meetings exemptions,¹⁸ with specified exceptions.¹⁹ It requires the automatic repeal of such exemption on October 2nd of the fifth year after creation or substantial amendment, unless the Legislature reenacts the exemption.²⁰ The Act provides that a public records or open meetings exemption may be created or maintained only if it serves an identifiable public purpose and is no broader than is necessary to meet such public purpose.²¹

¹³ Section 119.15(6)(b)2., F.S.

¹⁴ The bill may, however, contain multiple exemptions that relate to one subject.

¹⁵ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(c).

¹⁶ If the Legislature designates a record as confidential, such record may not be released to anyone other than the persons or entities specifically designated in the statutory exemption. *WFTV, Inc. v. The Sch. Bd. of Seminole*, 874 So. 2d 48, 53 (Fla. 5th DCA 2004).

¹⁷ *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So. 2d 683 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991).

¹⁸ Section 119.15, F.S. An exemption is substantially amended if the amendment expands the scope of the exemption to include more records or information or to include meetings as well as records (s. 119.15(4)(b), F.S.). The requirements of the Act do not apply to an exemption that is required by federal law or that applies solely to the Legislature or the State Court System (s. 119.15(2), F.S.).

¹⁹ Section 119.15(2)(a) and (b), F.S., provide that exemptions that are required by federal law or are applicable solely to the Legislature or the State Court System are not subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act.

²⁰ Section 119.15(3), F.S.

²¹ Section 119.15(6)(b), F.S. In examining an exemption, the Review Act asks the Legislature to carefully question the purpose and necessity of reenacting the exemption, and specifically requires that the Legislature consider the following questions:

- What specific records or meetings are affected by the exemption?
- Whom does the exemption uniquely affect, as opposed to the general public?
- What is the identifiable public purpose or goal of the exemption?
- Can the information contained in the records or discussed in the meeting be readily obtained by alternative means? If so, how?
- Is the record or meeting protected by another exemption?
- Are there multiple exemptions for the same type of record or meeting that it would be appropriate to merge?

General Public Records Exemptions for State Agency Personnel

There are three general public records exemptions that apply to all state agency personnel: disclosure of an employee's (1) social security number, (2) medical information, and (3) personal identifying information of dependent children who are insured by an agency group insurance plan.²²

(1) Social Security Numbers

Social security numbers of all current and former agency personnel are confidential and exempt when held by the employing agency.²³ An employing agency may only release social security numbers for the following reasons:

- It is required by law.
- A receiving government agency needs the social security number to perform its duties.
- The employee consents to disclose his or her social security number.²⁴

In addition, there is a general exemption for social security numbers which applies to the public that makes social security numbers confidential and exempt.²⁵ This exemption applies to any agency that holds anyone's social security number, including those belonging to the personnel of that agency. This exemption, however, permits the agency to disclose social security numbers of agency personnel in order to administer health or retirement benefits.²⁶

(2) Medical Information

An agency employee's medical information is also exempt from public disclosure if the medical information could identify the employee. This exemption applies to prospective, current and former employees.²⁷

(3) Personal Identifying Information

The personal identifying information of a dependent child of an agency employee who is insured by an agency group insurance plan is exempt from public disclosure. This exemption applies to the children of current and former employees and is also retroactively applied.²⁸

Public Records Exemptions for Enumerated Personnel

Provisions in s. 119.071(4)(d), F.S., make exempt from public disclosure the personal identification and location information of enumerated agency personnel, their spouses and their children. The employing agency as well as the employee may assert the right to the exemption

²² Section 119.071(4)(a) and (b), F.S.

²³ Section 119.071(4)(a)1., F.S.

²⁴ Section 119.071(4)(a)1., F.S.

²⁵ Section 119.071(5)(a)5., F.S.

²⁶ Section 119.071(5)(a)5.f. and g., F.S.

²⁷ Section 119.071(4)(b)1., F.S.

²⁸ Section 119.071(4)(b)2., F.S.

by submitting a written request to each agency which holds the employee's information.²⁹ Additionally, all of these exemptions have retroactive application.³⁰

Justices and Judges

In Florida, the justices of the Supreme Court and the judges in Florida's five District Courts of Appeal, 20 Circuit Courts, and 67 County Courts adjudicate all legal matters and oversee the legal profession.³¹ Additionally, all judges and justices preside over matters that may be emotionally charged, from a trial, appeal, or other type of review of a criminal proceeding to dependency and other domestic or family law matters.³²

In 1991, the Legislature enacted a public records exemption for current justices and judges and their families.³³ Because public necessity statements were not required for public records exemptions prior to the adoption of Article I, section 24, Florida Constitution, there is no public necessity statement explaining why the exemption was created.

In 2012, the Legislature expanded this exemption to include the dates of birth of the enumerated personnel as well as their family members.³⁴ The public necessity statement provided that dates of birth can be used to perpetrate fraud and that releasing dates of birth can cause great financial harm to an individual. In addition, the Legislature expanded the exemption to include former justices and judges as well as their families. The public necessity statement for this expansion indicated that justices and judges as well as their family members can be targets of revenge and that risk continues after justices and judges complete their public service.³⁵

In 2017, the Legislature expanded this exemption to also exempt from disclosure the names of the justices' or judges' spouses and children.³⁶

Judicial Assistants

Judicial assistants are assigned to justices or judges to provide administrative, secretarial and clerical support and to complete tasks of high responsibility. At the trial court level in particular, the judicial assistant is generally responsible to: maintain the judge's professional and personal calendar; coordinate with attorneys to schedule hearings and trials; prepare orders, notices, and other correspondence; and prepare financial disclosures and travel vouchers. Most significantly, trial court level judicial assistants interact "with attorneys and litigants and their family members to resolve problems such as scheduling conflicts or other case-related issues."³⁷

²⁹ Section 119.071(4)(d)3., F.S.

³⁰ Section 119.071(4)(d)3., F.S.

³¹ FLA CONST. art V. *See also* Florida Courts, <http://www.flcourts.org/florida-courts> (last visited Feb. 24, 2019).

³² FLA CONST. art V., ss. 3.(b), 4.(b), 5.(b), 6.(b) (setting out the jurisdiction of the supreme court, district courts of appeal, circuit courts, and county courts, respectively); ss. 26.012, 34.01, F.S. (setting out the jurisdiction of the circuit and county courts, respectively).

³³ Ch. 91-149, Laws of Fla.

³⁴ Ch. 2012-149, Laws of Fla.

³⁵ Ch. 2012-149, Laws of Fla.

³⁶ Ch. 2017-66, Laws of Fla.

³⁷ Florida State Courts System Class Specification, Class Title: Judicial Assistant – Circuit Court, *Examples of Work Performed*, available at <https://www.flcourts.org/content/download/217825/1972896/Judicial-Assistant-Circuit-Court-508.pdf>.

Based on this type of interaction, several trial court judicial assistants have reported that attorneys, litigants, or a litigant's family members have held the judicial assistant responsible for an adverse decision made by the judge. These judicial assistants reported instances of a litigant or litigant's family members showing up at the judicial assistant's home, contacting the judicial assistant on his or her personal cell phone, making threats against the judicial assistant, or naming the judicial assistant in a civil law suit.³⁸

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Section 1 of the bill expands the public records exemption applicable to judges and justices in s. 119.071(4)(d)2.e., F.S. to include the justices' and judges' judicial assistants. If passed, the following information for current or former judicial assistants will become exempt:

- The judicial assistant's address, date of birth, and telephone number.
- The names, home addresses, telephone numbers, dates of birth, and places of employment of the judicial assistant's spouse and children.
- The names and locations of schools and day care facilities attended by the judicial assistant's children.

Additionally, the bill extends the automatic repeal date for s. 119.071(4)(d)2.e., F.S., from October 2, 2022 to October 2, 2024.

Section 2 sets out the public necessity statement for expanding the foregoing exemption to judicial assistants. The public necessity statement provides that, because judicial assistants and their family members are at risk as targets of revenge or fraud by disgruntled litigants who know the judicial assistants' names, the personal information of former and current judicial assistants and their family members should be exempt from public disclosure.

Section 3 provides that the effective date of the bill is July 1, 2019.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

Because the bill expands a public records exemption, pursuant to Article I, section 24(c) of the Florida Constitution, a two-thirds majority vote in each chamber is required to pass the bill into law.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

³⁸ See Judicial Assistants Association of Florida, *JA Threats* (2019) (on file with Senate Judiciary Committee).

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None identified.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

None.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill substantially amends section 119.071, Florida Statutes.

IX. Additional Information:

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None.