

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 Education

BILL: SPB 7008

INTRODUCER: For consideration by the Education Committee

SUBJECT: OGSR/Animal Medical Records/State College of Veterinary Medicine

DATE: November 8, 2019

REVISED: _____

ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1. Brick	Sikes		Pre-meeting

I. Summary:

SPB 7008 saves from repeal the current public records exemption relating to animal medical records held by or transferred to any state college of veterinary medicine accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education.

The bill takes effect October 1, 2020.

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

[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.

¹ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(a).

² *Id.*

³ Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes.

⁴ Section 119.01(1), F.S.

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 Further, the exemption must be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law. A bill enacting an exemption may not contain other substantive provisions¹² and must pass by a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting in each house of the Legislature.¹³

When creating or expanding a public records exemption, the Legislature may provide that a record is ‘confidential and exempt’ or ‘exempt.’¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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

¹³ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(c)

¹⁴ 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).

¹⁵ *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So. 2d 683 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991).

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,¹⁶ with specified exceptions.¹⁷ The Act provides that an exemption automatically repeals on October 2nd of the fifth year after creation or substantial amendment; in order to save an exemption from repeal, the Legislature must reenact the exemption or repeal the sunset date.¹⁸ In practice, many exemptions are continued by repealing the sunset date rather than reenacting the exemption.

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.¹⁹ An exemption serves an identifiable purpose if it meets one of the following purposes *and* the Legislature finds that the purpose of the exemption outweighs open government policy and 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;²⁰
- 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;²¹ or
- It protects trade or business secrets.²²

The Act also requires specified questions to be considered during the review process.²³ In examining an exemption, the Act directs the Legislature to carefully question the purpose and necessity of reenacting the exemption.

If, in reenacting an exemption or repealing the sunset date, the exemption is expanded, then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are required.²⁴ If the exemption is reenacted or saved from repeal without substantive changes or if the exemption is narrowed, then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are *not* required. If the Legislature allows an exemption to sunset, the previously exempt records will remain exempt unless provided for by law.²⁵

¹⁶ Section 119.15, F.S. Section 119.15(4)(b), F.S., provides that an exemption is considered to be substantially amended if it is expanded to include more records or information or to include meetings.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Section 119.15(3), F.S.

¹⁹ Section 119.15(6)(b), F.S.

²⁰ Section 119.15(6)(b)1., F.S.

²¹ Section 119.15(6)(b)2., F.S.

²² Section 119.15(6)(b)3., F.S.

²³ Section 119.15(6)(a), F.S.

²⁴ FLA. CONST. art. I, s. 24(c).

²⁵ Section 119.15(7), F.S.

Confidentiality of Animal Medical Records

Section 474.2165, F.S., prohibits the disclosure of records or information concerning the medical condition of a patient of veterinary medical services to any person other than the client or the client's legal representative or other veterinarians involved in the care or treatment of the patient, except upon written authorization of the client. However, such records may be furnished without written authorization under the following circumstances:²⁶

- To any person, firm, or corporation that has procured or furnished such examination or treatment with the client's consent.
- In any civil or criminal action, unless otherwise prohibited by law, upon the issuance of a subpoena from a court of competent jurisdiction and proper notice to the client or the client's legal representative by the party seeking such records.
- For statistical and scientific research, provided the information is abstracted in such a way as to protect the identity of the patient and the client, or provided written permission is received from the client or the client's legal representative.

Section 474.2167, F.S., provides an exemption from public record disclosure requirements for animal medical records held by or transferred to any state college of veterinary medicine accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education.²⁷

Confidential and exempt animal medical records may be disclosed to another governmental entity in the performance of its duties and responsibilities and in accordance with the existing laws governing veterinary medical records at a private clinic.

Section 474.2167 provides for future review and repeal of the public records exemption on October 2, 2020.

Chapter 2015-62, L.O.F., which established the exemption from public record disclosure requirements for animal medical records, included a public necessity statement that provided the rationale for the exemption. This rationale recognized that the release of such animal medical records compromises the confidentiality protections otherwise afforded the owners of such animals treated by licensed veterinarians in this state. Furthermore, this exemption permits a state college of veterinary medicine accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education to effectively and efficiently carry out its mission to educate students in veterinary medicine.²⁸

Open Government Sunset Review Findings and Recommendations

In June 2019, the Senate Education Committee and the House Oversight, Transparency & Administration Subcommittee, in consultation with the Florida Board of Governors, sent an Open Government Sunset Review Questionnaire to the University of Florida (UF) College of

²⁶ Section 474.2165(4), F.S.

²⁷ The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Council on Education is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) as the accrediting body for schools and programs that offer the professional Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree (or its equivalent) in the US and Canada, and may also approve foreign veterinary colleges. *See* <https://www.avma.org/professionaldevelopment/education/accreditation/colleges/pages/coe-pp-overview-of-the-coe.aspx> (last visited Aug. 2, 2019).

²⁸ Ch. 2015-62, L.O.F.

Veterinary Medicine, which is the only state college of veterinary medicine accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education.²⁹

The UF College of Veterinary Medicine responded that it achieves its core business of training the next generation of veterinarians through clinical teaching material provided by the animals that visit the UF Veterinary Hospital.³⁰ If the exemption is repealed, the UF Veterinary Hospital would be the only veterinary medical practice in the state of Florida without confidentiality protections for records and information concerning veterinary medical services. The UF College of Veterinary Medicine recommended the exemption be reenacted to enable the continued training of the next generation of veterinarians who will meet the future needs of animal owners in Florida.

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

SPB 7008 saves from repeal the current public records exemption relating to animal medical records held by or transferred to any state college of veterinary medicine accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education.

The bill takes effect October 1, 2020.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

Vote Requirement

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting for final passage of a bill creating or expanding an exemption to the public records requirements. This bill continues a current public records exemption beyond its current date of repeal; thus, the bill does not require an extraordinary vote for enactment.

Public Necessity Statement

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires a bill creating or expanding an exemption to the public records requirements to state with specificity the public necessity justifying the exemption. This bill continues a current public records exemption without expansion. Thus, a statement of public necessity is not required.

Breadth of Exemption

²⁹ Email, Florida Board of Governors (June 27, 2019); and University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine, *Open Government Sunset Review Questionnaire (Animal Medical Records)* (July 8, 2019).

³⁰ University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine, *Open Government Sunset Review Questionnaire (Animal Medical Records)* (July 8, 2019).

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires an exemption to the public records requirements to be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law. The purpose of the law is to protect the confidentiality of animal medical records held by or transferred to any state college of veterinary medicine accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education. This bill exempts only animal medical records held by or transferred to any state college of veterinary medicine accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education from the public records requirements. The exemption does not appear to be broader than necessary to accomplish the purpose of the law.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None.

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 474.2167 of the 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.

This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's introducer or the Florida Senate.
