

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF ANALYSIS**

**BILL #:** HB 479                      Offense of Stalking  
**SPONSOR(S):** Stargel  
**TIED BILLS:**                              **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** SB 82

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<b>REFERENCE</b>	<b>ACTION</b>	<b>ANALYST</b>	<b>STAFF DIRECTOR</b>
1) Criminal Justice (Sub)	6 Y, 0 N	Kramer	De La Paz
2) Public Safety & Crime Prevention			
3) Judiciary			
4)			
5)			

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**SUMMARY ANALYSIS**

HB 479 adds “cyberstalking” to the offense of stalking contained in s. 784.048, F.S. Cyberstalking is harassment through the use of electronic mail or electronic communication. Also, the bill widens the scope of threats that constitute stalking by including threats creating a reasonable fear of death or bodily harm to the recipient’s dependent, sibling, spouse or parent. Currently, only threats creating a reasonable fear of violence against the recipient of the threat constitute stalking.

## FULL ANALYSIS

### I. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

#### A. DOES THE BILL:

- |                                      |   |                             |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. Reduce government?                | Yes <input type="checkbox"/>            | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Lower taxes?                      | Yes <input type="checkbox"/>            | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Expand individual freedom?        | Yes <input type="checkbox"/>            | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Increase personal responsibility? | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input type="checkbox"/>            |
| 5. Empower families?                 | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input type="checkbox"/>            |

For any principle that received a “no” above, please explain:

#### B. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

Section 784.048 prohibits the offense of stalking. The section provides that any person who willfully, maliciously and repeatedly follows or harasses another person commits the offense of stalking, a first degree misdemeanor. The term “harass” is defined to mean engaging in a course of conduct<sup>1</sup> directed at a specific person that causes substantial emotional distress<sup>2</sup> and serves no legitimate purpose.

Aggravated stalking is a third degree felony and occurs when any person stalks another person and:

- the offender makes a credible threat<sup>3</sup> with the intent to place that person in reasonable fear of death or bodily injury;
- the victim was under 16 years of age; or
- the offender was subject to an injunction against repeat violence, domestic violence or dating violence or another court imposed prohibition of conduct toward the victim or the victim’s property

HB 479 adds “cyberstalking” to the list of ways in which a stalking offense can be committed. As a result, if an offender willfully, maliciously and repeatedly follows, harasses, or *cyberstalks* another person, they commit the offense of stalking. The bill defines the term “cyberstalk” to mean engaging “in a course of conduct to communicate, or cause to be communicated, words, images, or language by or through the use of electronic mail or electronic communication, directed at a specific person, causing substantial emotional distress to that person and serving no legitimate purpose.”

HB 479 also expands the scope of aggravated stalking to include threats made against the child, sibling, spouse, parent or dependent of the person to whom the harassment is directed. Currently, the offense is limited to threats made directly against the victim.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “course of conduct” is defined to mean “a pattern of conduct composed of a series of acts over a period of time, however short, evidencing a continuity of purpose. Constitutionally protected activity is not included within the meaning of ‘course of conduct.’ Such constitutionally protected activity includes picketing or other organized protests.” s. 784.048(1)(b), F.S.

<sup>2</sup> In determining whether an incident or series of incidents creates substantial emotional distress for a victim, courts have used an objective standard – whether a reasonable person be put in substantial emotional distress when subjected to such conduct. *Bouters v. State*, 659 So.2d 235, 238 (Fla. 1995).

<sup>3</sup> The term “credible threat” means “a threat made with the intent to cause the person who is the target of the threat to reasonably fear for his or her safety. The threat must be against the life of, or a threat to cause bodily injury to, a person.”

C. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1: Amends s. 784.048; defining term "cyberstalk" and including within the offense of stalking; revising elements of offense to include threats against family members.

Sections 2-5: Reenacts ss. 775.084, 790.065, 921.0022, and 960.001 to incorporate by reference the amendments made by bill to s. 784.048..

Section 6: Provides effective date.

**II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT**

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

2. Expenditures:

The Criminal Justice Impact Conference has not met to consider whether this bill would have any prison bed impact on the Department of Corrections. It is possible that many cyberstalking cases can be prosecuted under current law.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

2. Expenditures:

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

**III. COMMENTS**

A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

1. Applicability of Municipality/County Mandates Provision:

The bill appears to be exempt from the requirements of Article VII, Section 18 of the Florida Constitution because it is a criminal law.

2. Other:

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

**IV. AMENDMENTS/COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE CHANGES**