

**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.)

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Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Criminal Justice Committee

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BILL: SB 150

INTRODUCER: Senator Ring

SUBJECT: Sports Coaches/Criminal History Record Checks

DATE: February 10, 2010

REVISED: \_\_\_\_\_

ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1. Erickson	Cannon	CJ	<b>Favorable</b>
2. _____	_____	CA	_____
3. _____	_____	JU	_____
4. _____	_____	JA	_____
5. _____	_____	_____	_____
6. _____	_____	_____	_____

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**I. Summary:**

The bill provides that, before a person in this state is hired or recruited as a sports coach of an “independent youth athletic team” (the team must be based in this state), the “sanctioning authority” of this team must screen the person through the public website on sexual offenders and sexual predators maintained by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and the Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website maintained by the United States Department of Justice. Alternatively, the sanctioning authority may use a commercial consumer reporting agency that conducts background screenings in compliance with the federal Fair Credit Reporting Act using information from the state and national websites. The sanctioning authority must disqualify an applicant for sports coach from acting as a sports coach if the applicant appears in either registry.

The sanctioning authority must provide written notification to the sports coach of his or her right to obtain a copy of the screening report. An applicant disqualified from acting as a sports coach may appeal to the sanctioning authority regarding the accuracy and completeness of any information contained in the screening report. Unless otherwise prohibited by state or federal law, an applicant appealing his or her disqualification as a sports coach may be placed on probationary status pending resolution of the appeal.

The sanctioning authority must annually sign an affidavit, under penalty of perjury, stating that all persons who have applied for a position as a sports coach of an independent youth athletic team under its jurisdiction have been screened in compliance with the screening requirements of the bill. The affidavit must be maintained in the files of the sanctioning authority and provided to anyone upon request.

The bill further provides that, in any civil action brought against a sanctioning authority in which it is alleged that the sanctioning authority was negligent in the hiring of a sports coach because of sexual misconduct committed by the sports coach, a rebuttable presumption is created that the sanctioning authority was not negligent in the hiring of the sports coach if the sanctioning authority conducted a screening of the sports coach by participating in the Volunteer and Employee Criminal History System (VECHS) of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and made a reasonable effort to contact references. In this same type of civil action, if the VECHS and reference checks are not conducted by the sanctioning authority, a rebuttable presumption is created that the sanctioning authority was negligent in the hiring of the sports coach. The bill also encourages sanctioning authorities of youth athletic teams to participate in the VECHS program.

The bill creates an unnumbered section of the Florida Statutes. The bill also includes language that does not appear to be intended for codification.

## **II. Present Situation:**

### **Criminal History Screenings**

According to information received from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), there is currently no Florida law that requires sports coaches for independent youth athletic teams to be screened against state or national sex offender registries.<sup>1</sup> However, other state laws may suggest that such background screenings must occur, or may prohibit or limit a convicted sexual predator's contact with minors altogether.

### **Background Screenings for Employment at Parks, Playgrounds, and Daycare Centers**

Current law provides that a state agency or governmental subdivision, prior to making any decision to appoint or employ a person to work, whether for compensation or as a volunteer, at any park, playground, day care center, or other place where children regularly congregate, must conduct a search of that person's name or other identifying information against the registration information regarding sexual predators and sexual offenders maintained by the FDLE.<sup>2</sup> The screening requirements of the bill are similar to the screening requirements of s. 943.04351, F.S., insofar as both require a search of the state sex offender registry, but different in that the bill also requires a national sex offender registry search.

### **Prohibited Employment for Registered Sexual Predators**

Existing law provides that it is a third degree felony for a registered sexual predator who has been convicted of or found to have committed, or has pled nolo contendere or guilty to, regardless of adjudication, any specified sexual offense to work, whether for compensation or as a volunteer, at any business, school, daycare center, park, playground, or other place where children regularly congregate.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding the bill, it appears that a person would be precluded from acting as a sports coach of an independent youth athletic team (at least to the extent of contact with children) if the person is a registered sexual predator as described in s. 775.21(10)(b), F.S.

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis of SB 150 (January 6, 2010), Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

<sup>2</sup> Section 943.04351, F.S.

<sup>3</sup> Section 775.21(10)(b), F.S.

**Volunteer and Employee Criminal History System (VECHS)**

Pertinent to the bill, the FDLE has described the Volunteer and Employee Criminal History System (VECHS) as follows:

Through the VECHS program, FDLE and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) provide to qualified organizations (not individuals) in Florida state and national criminal history record information on applicants, employees, and volunteers. With this criminal history information, the organizations can more effectively screen out those current and prospective volunteers and employees who are not suitable for contact with children, the elderly, or the disabled.

Generally, to be qualified to participate in the VECHS program, an organization (public, private, profit, or non-profit) must provide “care”<sup>4</sup> or “care placement services” ... to children, the elderly, or the disabled.

The VECHS program is not available to organizations currently required to obtain criminal history record checks on their employees and/or volunteers under other statutory provisions, such as day care centers. Those organizations must continue to follow the statutory mandates that specifically apply to them. If, however, an organization is required to obtain state and national checks on only specific types of employees or volunteers, the VECHS program may be able to process requests for state and national checks on the organization’s other employees or volunteers.

To become a qualified organization and to obtain criminal history record information through the VECHS program at FDLE, an organization will need to do the following:

- Submit an application to FDLE explaining what functions the organization performs that serve children, elderly, or disabled persons;
- Sign an agreement that the criminal history information would be used only to screen employees and volunteers of that organization for employment purposes;
- Submit \$54.25 for each employee or \$33.25 for each volunteer fingerprint card submission; and
- Submit \$43.25 for each employee or \$33.25 for each volunteer electronic submission.

If an organization becomes qualified and provides the required information for criminal history record requests, FDLE, with the assistance of the FBI, will provide the organization with the following:

- An indication that the person has no criminal history, i.e., no serious arrests in state or national databases, if there are none;
- The criminal history record (RAP sheet) that shows arrests and/or convictions for Florida and other states, if any; and
- Notification of any warrants or domestic violence injunctions that the person may have.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The word “care” is defined in s. 943.0542, F.S. (access to criminal history information provided by the FDLE to qualified entities) to include the provision of recreation to children.

**Sexual Predator and Offender Information**

The FDLE compiles information regarding sex offenders and makes that information available to the public. The information on the FDLE's public website of sexual offenders and sexual predators comes from the following sources: the Florida Department of Corrections, the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, and various law enforcement officials.<sup>6</sup> The Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website of the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) allows the public to search participating states' (and other jurisdictions') websites for public information regarding the presence or location of offenders who, in most cases, have been convicted of sexually violent offenses against adults and children and certain sexual contact and other crimes against victims who are minors.<sup>7</sup>

**Liability for Negligent Hiring**

Section 768.096, F.S., provides that in civil actions for the death of, or injury or damage to, a third person caused by the intentional conduct tort of an employee, the employee's employer is presumed not to have been negligent in hiring the employee if, before hiring the employee, the employer conducted a background investigation of the prospective employee and investigation did not reveal any information that reasonably demonstrated the unsuitability of the prospective employee for the particular work to be performed or the employment in general. The background investigation must include:

- Obtaining a criminal background check obtained from the FDLE of information reported and reflected in the Florida Crime Information Center as of the date of the request;
- Making reasonable efforts to contact references and former employers of the prospective employee concerning the suitability of the prospective employee for employment;
- Requiring the prospective employee to complete a job application form that includes questions requesting detailed information regarding previous criminal convictions and whether the prospective employee has ever been a defendant in a civil action for intentional tort;
- Obtaining, with written authorization from the prospective employee, a check of his or her driver's license record if relevant to the work to be performed; or
- Interviewing the prospective employee.

If the employer elects not to conduct an investigation prior to hiring, there is no presumption that the employer failed to use reasonable care in hiring an employee.

**III. Effect of Proposed Changes:****Definitions**

The bill defines an "independent youth athletic team" or "team" as an athletic team that is based in this state and that:

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<sup>5</sup> See Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Volunteer And Employee Background Checks, at the following link: <http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/content/getdoc/9023f5ac-2c0c-465c-995c-f949db57d0dd/VECHS.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> See Florida Department of Law Enforcement at the following link: <http://offender.fdle.state.fl.us>

<sup>7</sup> See United States Department of Justice at the following link: <http://www.nsopr.gov>

- Includes a minor as a team member;
- Is sanctioned by an independent organization; and
- Is not sanctioned by or affiliated with a public or private school.

This definition appears to encompass national (non-school) youth sports organizations such as Little League Baseball and Pop Warner, though the bill could also encompass non-school youth sports organizations that operate only in this state or only in a particular locality in this state.

Under the bill, a “sports coach” means a person who is authorized by a sanctioning authority to be responsible for leading an independent youth athletic team and any person assisting the coach who:

- Works or volunteers or is to work or volunteer for the independent youth athletic team 20 or more hours within a calendar year;
- Has or is to have unsupervised contact with minors; or
- Serves or is to serve as a chaperone for minors on any overnight activity related to the team.

If a person, whether hired or recruited as a volunteer, meets any one of these descriptions and is authorized by a sanctioning authority to be responsible for leading an independent youth athletic team, or assist the coach in leading the team, he or she is a “sports coach” subject to the screening.

The bill provides that a “sanctioning authority of an independent youth athletic team” or “sanctioning authority” includes the independent organization having authority to sanction an independent youth athletic team, any local office of that organization, and any office or entity that is authorized to perform any of its functions or represent its interests.

The bill defines “minor” by cross-referencing the definition contained in s. 1.01, F.S., which defines “minor” as any person who has not attained the age of 18 years.

### **Required Screenings**

The bill provides that, before a person in this state is hired or recruited as a sports coach of an independent youth athletic team, the sanctioning authority of this team must screen the person through the public website on sexual offenders and sexual predators maintained by the FDLE and the Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website maintained by the DOJ. Alternatively, the sanctioning authority may use a commercial consumer reporting agency that conducts background screenings in compliance with the federal Fair Credit Reporting Act using information from the state and national websites. The sanctioning authority must disqualify an applicant for sports coach from acting as a sports coach if the applicant appears in either registry. It is the applicant’s appearance in the state or national sex offender registry, rather than a conviction for any particular sexual offense, that disqualifies him or her as a sports coach.

### **Notification of Screening Process, Appeal, and Probationary Period**

The bill provides that the sanctioning authority must provide written notification to the sports coach of his or her right to obtain a copy of the screening report. An applicant disqualified from acting as a sports coach may appeal to the sanctioning authority regarding the accuracy and completeness of any information contained in the screening report. Unless otherwise prohibited

by state or federal law, an applicant appealing his or her disqualification as a sports coach may be placed on probationary status pending resolution of the appeal.

This probation provision appears to give a sports coach access to minors on the team prior to a final determination regarding whether the coach is a sexual predator or sexual offender. If it is the intent of the Legislature to preclude a coach's access to minors prior to completion of the sex offender registry screening, elimination of this probationary period may be necessary.

Alternatively, the Legislature could retain the probationary period provision and could prohibit the sports coach from having unsupervised access to minors during this probationary timeframe.

### **Affidavit Requirement**

The bill provides that the sanctioning authority must annually sign an affidavit, under penalty of perjury, stating that all persons who have applied for a position as a sports coach of an independent youth athletic team under its jurisdiction have been screened in compliance with the screening requirements of the bill. The affidavit must be maintained in the files of the sanctioning authority and provided to anyone upon request.

Perjury by false written declaration is a Level 1 third degree felony.<sup>8</sup> While the maximum penalty for a third degree felony is 5 years in state prison,<sup>9</sup> a nonprison sanction would be an available sentencing option for a first-time offender convicted of only this offense.<sup>10</sup> Because the sanctioning authority is defined as an organization, office, or entity, a non-prison sentence may be more likely than if the statute was directed against an individual. It is unclear whether there are other consequences for failing to execute an affidavit annually, or who would assume enforcement authority over satisfaction of the affidavit requirement.

### **Civil Liability for Negligent Hiring**

In any civil suit brought against a sanctioning authority for harm caused by a sports coach, a rebuttable presumption<sup>11</sup> is created that the sanctioning authority was not negligent in hiring the sports coach if the sanctioning authority conducted a screening of the sports coach by participating in the VECHS program and made a reasonable effort to contact the applicant's references.

The provisions of the bill creating a rebuttable presumption against negligent hiring for taking certain steps is analogous to the negligent hiring provision contained in s. 768.096(1), F.S. Section 768.096(1), F.S., provides that employers are also required to obtain a criminal background check, obtain an application with detailed questions regarding prior criminal history, and interview the prospective employee, in addition to requesting reference checks.

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<sup>8</sup> Sections 92.525 and 921.0023, F.S. This perjury offense is unlisted in the offense severity ranking chart in s. 921.0022, F.S. Pursuant to s. 921.0023, F.S., an unlisted third degree felony is a Level 1 offense.

<sup>9</sup> Section 775.082(3)(d), F.S.

<sup>10</sup> Sections 921.0024 and 921.00241, F.S.

<sup>11</sup> Once evidence rebutting a presumption is introduced, "the presumption does not automatically disappear; it remains in effect even after evidence rebutting the presumption has been introduced. The jury must decide if the evidence is sufficient to overcome the presumption, that is, it is not overcome until the trier of fact believes that the presumed fact has been overcome by whatever degree of persuasion is required by the substantive law of the case." 23 FLA. JUR 2D *Evidence and Witnesses* s. 100.

The negligent hiring statute expressly provides that failing to conduct the criminal background check, interview, and other requirements does not raise the presumption that an employer is liable under a negligent hiring theory.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the bill provides that failure to participate in the VECHS program and make a reasonable effort to contact references creates a rebuttable presumption that the authority was negligent in hiring the sports coach.

It is unclear whether volunteer coaches would fall within the scope of the civil liability provision. The provision references negligence in “hiring” a coach. Although the definition of “sports coach” does not reference pay or other compensation, the use of “hiring” in the civil liability provision may suggest a traditional employer/employee relationship with compensation and/or other benefits. Thus, it is unclear if a sanctioning authority would be liable for acts of a volunteer coach, even if it completes the screening process and the appropriate reference checks. It is unclear in Florida whether entities are liable for intentional acts of volunteers in the context of negligent hiring or negligent retention. If a court were to determine that a sanctioning authority could be liable for intentional acts of volunteers in a negligent hiring or retention context, a volunteer may also fall within the ambit of the civil liability provision in the bill.

### **Use of the VECHS Program**

The bill encourages sanctioning authorities to participate in the VECHS program authorized under the National Child Protection Act and s. 943.0542, F.S.

### **Effective Date**

The bill provides that the effective date of the act is July 1, 2010.

### **Other Potential Implications:**

Pursuant to s. 943.0435(1)(a)1.b., F.S., a person is required to register as a sexual offender in this state if he or she establishes or maintains a residence in this state and was or would be required to register as a sexual offender, sexual predator, or other similar designation in another state. Since the laws of the state in which the offense was committed will determine whether the person was required to register in that state, it is possible that applicants for sports coaches with similar criminal histories could be treated differently depending on the sexual offense committed and where it was committed.

Offenses requiring registration are almost exclusively sexual offenses, but not all qualifying sexual offenses involve a victim who is a minor. Further, there are numerous violent offenses committed upon minors that are not sexual offenses. Also, registration laws do not necessarily require that every person convicted of a sexual offense be registered. For example, while Florida’s registry laws contain an extensive list of sexual offenses, those laws do not reach back to require registration of every living person who was convicted of a listed Florida sexual offense. Also, a person may have been charged with a sexual offense but ultimately been convicted of a non-sexual offense like battery. This battery offense would not qualify the person for registration.

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<sup>12</sup> Section 768.096(3), F.S.

**IV. Constitutional Issues:****A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:**

None.

**B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:**

None.

**C. Trust Funds Restrictions:**

None.

**V. Fiscal Impact Statement:****A. Tax/Fee Issues:**

None.

**B. Private Sector Impact:**

The sex offender registry screening requirements of the bill should have a nominal impact on the sanctioning authorities. The state and national registries are public websites that can be accessed by persons with minimal computer skills, and searches can be conducted relatively quickly. Those sanctioning authorities electing to perform searches via a commercial consumer reporting agency may incur moderate expenses for the screening. However, it is possible that sanctioning authorities may pass these screening costs on to sports coach applicants and incur no costs from this screening requirement.

Screening through the VECHS program does require payment of a fee (see discussion in “Present Situation” section of this analysis). While the bill does not require sanctioning authorities to do a VECHS search of a sports coach, not doing so would create a rebuttable presumption of negligent hiring (as described in the bill).

**C. Government Sector Impact:**

The Criminal Justice Impact Conference (CJIC) provides the final, official estimate of the prison bed impact, if any, of legislation. The CJIC met on February 23, 2010, and projected that SB 150 will not have a prison bed impact.<sup>13</sup>

The FDLE reports no projected fiscal impact from the bill.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Criminal Justice Impact Conference, February 23, 2009. See the following link:  
<http://edr.state.fl.us/conferences/criminaljustice/Impact/cjimpact.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Analysis of SB 150 (January 6, 2010), Florida Department of Law Enforcement.



**VI. Technical Deficiencies:**

None.

**VII. Related Issues:**

None.

**VIII. Additional Information:**

**A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:**

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

None.

**B. Amendments:**

None.

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

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