

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 1248

INTRODUCER: Senator Stargel

SUBJECT: Family Law

DATE: March 23, 2015

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	<u>Brown</u>	<u>Cibula</u>	<u>JU</u>	<u>Pre-meeting</u>
2.	_____	_____	<u>ACJ</u>	_____
3.	_____	_____	<u>AP</u>	_____

I. Summary:

SB 1248 makes various changes to laws relating to the amount and duration of alimony awards, grounds, and procedures for modifying an alimony award due to a substantial change in circumstances, and timesharing with children.

With respect to alimony amounts, the bill establishes presumptive alimony ranges, for courts to use in determining the amount and duration of alimony awards. The presumptive amounts are determined by formulas based in part on the difference between the parties' gross incomes and the duration of their marriage. However, the combination of alimony and child support may not exceed 55 percent of the obligor's income. The bill also generally limits the duration of an alimony award to 25 to 75 percent of the duration of the parties' marriage.

The bill specifies events that constitute a substantial change in circumstances which are grounds for modifying or terminating an alimony award. These grounds include increases in the recipient's income, the involuntary underemployment or unemployment of the obligor, and the obligor's retirement. The bill also lessens the proof required to show the existence of a supportive relationship between an alimony recipient and another person.

With respect to timesharing with a child, the bill establishes a presumption that approximately equal timesharing with a child by both parents is in the child's best interest. However, a court may establish an unequal timesharing arrangement if after the consideration of a number of factors, unequal timesharing is supported by written findings of fact.

The bill provides that it does not affect the duration of existing alimony awards.

The bill applies to petitions to modify the amount of an alimony award pending as the effective date of the act and after. The effective date of the bill is October 1, 2015. However, for the court

to consider modifying alimony based on a provision of the bill, the petition must be before the court for a reason other than that provided in the bill.

II. Present Situation:

Bases for Alimony

Chapter 61, F.S., addresses dissolution of marriage proceedings. Alimony is based on both financial need and the ability to pay.¹ After making an initial determination to award alimony, the court must consider:

- The standard of living established during the marriage.
- The length of marriage.
- Ages and physical and emotional condition of the parties.
- Financial resources of the parties.
- Earning capacity, education level, vocational skill, and employability of the parties.
- Marital contributions, including homemaking, child care, and education and career building of the other party.
- Responsibilities of each party towards minor children.
- Tax treatment and consequences of alimony awards.
- All sources of income.
- Any other factor that advances equity and justice.²

The court may consider adultery by either spouse in a decision to award alimony.³

To protect an alimony award, the court may order an obligor to maintain a life insurance policy.⁴

Determination of Alimony Based on Length of Marriage

Limitations on Alimony in Florida

In determining the duration or form of an alimony award, the court applies presumptions based on the duration of the marriage. The length of marriage runs from the date of marriage until the date of the filing for dissolution of marriage.⁵

Florida law categorizes marriage lengths as follows:

- A short-term marriage is a marriage of less than 7 years.
- A moderate-term marriage is a marriage of more than 7 but less than 17 years.
- A long-term marriage is a marriage of 17 years or more.⁶

¹ Section 61.08(2), F.S.

² Section 61.08(2)(a) through (j), F.S.

³ Section 61.08(1), F.S.

⁴ Section 61.08(3), F.S.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Section 61.08(4), F.S.

Florida law appears to create a presumption in favor of permanent periodic alimony following a long-term marriage.⁷ A similar presumption appears to exist in favor of durational alimony following a moderate-term marriage or following a long-term marriage if permanent alimony is not appropriate. Durational alimony generally may not exceed the length of the marriage.⁸

The law appears to disfavor permanent alimony following a moderate-term marriage by requiring clear and convincing evidence for an award of permanent alimony. Permanent alimony for a short-term marriage is reserved for exceptional circumstances.

Limitations on Alimony in Other States

Some states have limited alimony based on the duration of the marriage:

- Colorado: Provides a table that calculates the term of support for marriages of at least 3 years and up to 20 years in length. After 20 years of marriage, the court may award an indefinite term of alimony.⁹
- Delaware: Permits alimony for a period of up to 50 percent of the length of marriage, except that if a party is married for 20 years or longer, alimony may be indefinite.¹⁰
- Maine: Provides a rebuttable presumption that general support may not be awarded if the parties were married for less than 10 years as of the date of the filing of the petition.¹¹
- Texas: Disfavors alimony for marriages of less than 10 years unless the obligee meets certain conditions and if so, caps the duration of alimony at 5 years. Alimony is capped at 20 percent of the payor's gross income, or \$2,500 a month, whichever is less.¹²
- Massachusetts: No longer authorizes permanent alimony in most dissolution of marriage cases. Limits permanent alimony awards to marriages of 20 years or longer if the award is otherwise appropriate. Reserves the possibility of permanent alimony for shorter marriages if an award is in the interests of justice.¹³
- Utah: Prohibits alimony awards for a duration longer than the length of the marriage, unless the court finds extenuating circumstances.¹⁴

Forms of Alimony

Florida Law

Florida law recognizes various forms of alimony, including bridge-the-gap, rehabilitative, durational, and permanent periodic alimony.¹⁵ See the table on the next page for additional information on the various types of alimony authorized under current law.

⁷ Section 61.08(8), F.S.

⁸ Section 61.08(4), F.S.

⁹ Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. s. 14-10-114.

¹⁰ Del. Code Ann. title 14, s. 1512

¹¹ Me. Rev. Stat. Ann. title 19-A, s. 951A.

¹² Tex. Fam. Code Ann. Sections 8.054 and 8.055.

¹³ Mass. Gen. Laws Chapter 208, Section 49.

¹⁴ Utah Code Ann. s. 30-3-5.

¹⁵ Section 61.08(1), F.S.

Types of Alimony				
	<i>Bridge-the-gap</i>	<i>Rehabilitative</i>	<i>Durational</i>	<i>Permanent</i>
<i>Purpose</i>	Allows a party to transition from being married to being single upon showing legitimate short-term need.	Assists a party in becoming self-sufficient through skills training, education, or work experience.	Provides a party with economic assistance for a set period of time after a marriage of short or moderate duration, or a marriage of long duration if no need exists for a permanent award.	Provides for the needs and necessities of life as established during the marriage for a party who lacks the financial ability to maintain needs.
<i>Length of Time</i>	Up to 2 years.	Temporary.	Set period of time but not to exceed length of marriage.	Permanent.
<i>Modifiable/ Termination</i>	Not modifiable in amount or duration. Can terminate upon death or remarriage of recipient.	Modifiable upon a showing of a substantial change in circumstances, including cohabitation. Can be terminated upon noncompliance or completion of the rehabilitative plan.	Modifiable or terminated based on a substantial change in circumstances, including cohabitation. Length of award may not change unless exceptional circumstances are shown. Terminates upon death or remarriage of recipient.	Modifiable upon a substantial change in circumstances, including cohabitation. Terminates upon death or remarriage of recipient.
<i>How Established</i>		Requires inclusion of a specific and defined rehabilitative plan.		Awardable if appropriate for a marriage of long duration, upon a showing of clear and convincing evidence for a marriage of moderate duration, and with written findings of exceptional circumstances for a marriage of short duration.

Modification and Termination of Alimony

Four bases exist for a court to reconsider an alimony award, including whether to terminate alimony:

- A substantial change in circumstances of either party;
- Cohabitation by the obligee;
- Remarriage by the obligee; or
- Death of either party.¹⁶

Substantial Change of Circumstance

A motion for modification may be made by either party for the court to consider a substantial change in circumstances.¹⁷ If the court modifies support on this basis, the court may modify support retroactively to the date of the filing of the action.¹⁸

Cohabitation

To modify alimony on an assertion of cohabitation between the alimony obligee and a third party, the court must find:

- The existence of a supportive relationship between the recipient and a third party; and
- That the recipient lives with the third party.

To determine whether a relationship is supportive, the court will examine:

- The extent to which the obligee and the third party hold themselves out as a married couple;
- The length of time that the third party has resided with the obligee;
- Whether the obligee and the third party have jointly purchased property;
- The extent to which the obligee and third party commingle financial assets; and
- The extent to which one of the parties supports the other party.¹⁹

The burden is on the obligor to show by a preponderance of evidence that a supportive relationship exists.²⁰

¹⁶ Section 61.08(8), F.S.

¹⁷ Section 61.14(1)(a), F.S. Courts have found a substantial change in circumstance where an obligor's health deteriorated due to two heart attacks. He was unable to continue gainful employment and received social security disability income as his full income (*Scott v. Scott*, 2012 WL 5621672, 1 (Fla. 5th DCA 2012)). An obligor demonstrated a showing of a substantial change in circumstance through a detrimental impact on his business in manufacturing cathode ray television tubes due to advancing technology that made his product obsolete. The court also noted that the obligor was forced to remove money from family trust accounts to meet his alimony obligation. (*Shawfrank v. Shawfrank*, 97 So. 3d 934, 937 (Fla. 1st DCA 2012)). The court found a substantial change in circumstance where financial affidavits showed that the obligee's income jumped from \$1,710 to \$4,867 a month, making her income higher than the obligor's income of \$3,418 a month. (*Koski v. Koski*, 98 So. 3d 93, 94 (Fla. 4th DCA 2012)).

¹⁸ Section 61.14(1)(a), F.S.

¹⁹ Section 61.14(b), F.S.

²⁰ Section 61.14(1)(b)1., F.S.

Parenting and Time-sharing

Florida Law

The public policy of the state is for each minor child to have “frequent and continuing contact with both parents.”²¹ Additionally, a court must order shared parental responsibility for a minor child unless the court finds that shared responsibility would be detrimental to the child.²² In determining timesharing with each parent, a court must evaluate the relative fitness of each parent on 19 specific statutory factors plus “any other factor that is relevant” to the court’s determination.

Equal Time-sharing in other States

No state has required the court to order equal time-sharing or joint custody of minor children. A number of states, in addition to Florida, provide in law a presumption that joint custody is in the best interest of the child. These states are the District of Columbia, Idaho, Minnesota, New Mexico, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Other states provide the presumption only if the parents agree. These states are Alabama, California, Connecticut, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, New Hampshire, and Vermont.²³

Several state legislatures recently amended laws on child custody to encourage equal time-sharing. Arkansas codified a preference for joint custody.²⁴ The South Dakota Legislature passed a law that permits the court to order joint physical custody when the court has awarded joint legal custody if it is in the best interest of the child.²⁵ The Utah Legislature enacted a rebuttable presumption for joint legal custody. Grounds for rebutting the presumption include domestic violence and physical or mental needs of a parent or child.²⁶

Child Support Enforcement

Congress passed into law Title IV-D of the Social Security Act²⁷ to require states to provide specific child support enforcement services to receive federal funding under the Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC) Program.²⁸ Services are available to single-parent families on public assistance who are entitled to child support from the other parent.

Florida established the Child Support Enforcement Application and Program Revenue Trust Fund to provide a trust fund for deposits of Title IV-D program income.²⁹ The trust fund is administered by the state Department of Revenue.³⁰ The clerk of the court of each circuit

²¹ Section 61.13(2)(c)1., F.S.

²² Section 61.13 (2)(c)2., F.S.

²³ National Conference of State Legislatures, *Shared/Joint Custody Enactments 2012* (Feb. 2015).

²⁴ AR s. 901.

²⁵ South Dakota House Bill 1055 (Chapter 141).

²⁶ Utah HB 88 (Chapter 269); HB 107 (Chapter 271).

²⁷ 42 USC §§ 651-669 (1988)

²⁸ Ashish Prasad, *Rights Without Remedies: Section 1983 Enforcement of Title IV-D of the Social Security Act*, 60 U.CHI. L. REV. 197, 197 (1993).

²⁹ Section 61.1814(1), F.S.

³⁰ *Id.*

operates a depository for alimony transactions, support, maintenance, and support payments.³¹ A fee is collected for payments made in non-Title IV-D cases to fund the depository.³²

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

This bill makes various changes to laws applicable to dissolution of marriage cases in the areas of alimony, support, and time-sharing with children.

Alimony

Under the bill, a court must determine the amount of an alimony award in a multi-step process, from making initial findings, applying guidelines, and considering other factors, including factors which might justify a deviation from guidelines. The bill also establishes presumptive alimony duration ranges which range from 25 to 75 percent of the length of the marriage. The bill does not maintain the distinctions in current law relating to the duration or purposes of bridge-the-gap, rehabilitative, durational, or permanent alimony.

Initial Findings

In determining alimony, a court must make initial written findings based on:

- The amount of each party's monthly gross income, including potential income and actual or potential income from nonmarital property distributed to each party; and
- The years of marriage.

The courts must look at net income, rather than gross income, in calculating alimony and support. In instances in which trial courts have erroneously used a party's gross income, the appellate courts have routinely reversed those decisions.³³ In instances in which an obligor is self-employed, the court may start with gross income and subtract from it ordinary business expenses to arrive at net income.

This bill specifies that income considered in alimony calculations is gross income. Gross income is recurring income from any source and includes:

- Income from salaries, overtime pay, and wages, including tips declared to the IRS or tips imputed to bring the employee's gross earnings to the minimum wage for the number of hours worked, whichever is greater, commissions, bonuses; and dividends, and severance pay;
- Pension pay and retirement benefits actually received;
- Trust income and distributions regularly received, relied upon, or readily available to the beneficiary, royalties, annuity payments, capital gains, rent, interest; and continuing monetary gifts;
- Payments received as an independent contractor for labor or services, which must be considered income from self-employment; money drawn by a self-employed person for personal use that is deducted as a business expense, and expense reimbursements or in-kind

³¹ Section 61.181(1)(a), F.S.

³² Section 61.181(2)(a) and (b), F.S.

³³ *Kingsbury v. Kingsbury*, 116 So. 3d 473, 474(Fla. 1st DCA 2013); *Vanzant v. Vanzant*, 82 So. 3d 991, 993 (Fla. 1st DCA 2011); *Vega v. Vega*, 877 So. 2d 882, 883 (Fla. 3d DCA 2004).

payments or benefits received by a party in the course of employment, self-employment, or operation of a business which reduces personal living expenses;

- Workers' compensation; unemployment benefits, social security benefits, including those actually received based on disability, disability insurance benefits and funds paid from health, accident, disability, or casualty insurance if the insurance replaces wages; and
- Income from general partnerships, limited partnerships, closely held corporations, or limited liability companies, except that if the party is a passive investor with a minority interest in the company, income is limited to actual cash distributions received.

Gross income does not include:

- Child support payments received;
- Public assistance benefits;
- Social security benefits received by a parent on behalf of a minor child due to death or disability of a parent or stepparent; and
- Earnings or gains on retirement accounts, including individual retirement accounts, except that the earnings or gains are income if a party takes a distribution from the account, and if a party is able to take a distribution tax-free and chooses not to, the court may consider as income the distribution that could have been taken.

For income from self-employment, rent, royalties, proprietorship of a business, or joint ownership of a partnership or closely held corporation, gross income equals gross receipts minus ordinary and necessary expenses. Ordinary and necessary expenses do not include amounts allowable by the IRS for the accelerated component of depreciation expenses or investment tax credits or any other business expenses determined by the court to be inappropriate for determining gross income for purposes of calculating alimony.

The bill defines "potential income" as income which could be earned by a party using best efforts, and includes potential income from employment, investment of assets, or use of property in a financially prudent manner. Potential income from employment is income a party could reasonably expect to earn working at a locally available, full-time job based on the person's education, training, and experience. A person is considered to be underemployed if he or she is not working full-time in a position which is appropriate based on his or her education, training, and experience, and which is available in the local area. A person is not underemployed if he or she is enrolled in an educational program that can reasonably expect to result in higher income upon completion. A court generally must impute income to a party who is voluntarily unemployed or underemployed.

The court must consider years of marriage based on whole years, calculated from the date of marriage until the date of the filing for dissolution.

This bill creates a rebuttable presumption against alimony for marriages of 2 years or less. The party seeking alimony may rebut the presumption by showing:

- The party seeking alimony has a clear and convincing need for alimony;
- The party from whom alimony is sought has an ability to pay alimony; and
- An inequity would result if the court does not award alimony.

If the court finds that the party rebuts the presumption, the court must provide written findings. Alimony will then be awarded under the formula.

Alimony Guidelines

This bill establishes formulas for use by the court after making its initial findings in alimony determinations, unless the parties agree to an amount otherwise. After making initial findings, the court will calculate the presumptive alimony ranges based upon two formulas. The formulas provide a presumptive range for alimony as follows:

- At the low end of the range: $0.0125 \times$ the years of marriage \times the difference between the monthly gross income of the parties; and
- At the high end of the range: $0.020 \times$ the years of marriage \times the difference between the monthly gross income of the parties.

<i>Difference in Monthly Income</i>	Presumptive Alimony Amount Ranges							
\$20,000	Low	\$750	\$1,250	\$2,500	\$3,000	\$3,750	\$5,000	\$5,000
	High	\$1,200	\$2,000	\$4,000	\$4,800	\$6,000	\$8,000	\$8,000
\$15,000	Low	\$563	\$938	\$1,875	\$2,250	\$2,813	\$3,750	\$3,750
	High	\$900	\$1,500	\$3,000	\$3,600	\$4,500	\$6,000	\$6,000
\$10,000	Low	\$375	\$625	\$1,250	\$1,500	\$1,875	\$2,500	\$2,500
	High	\$600	\$1,000	\$2,000	\$2,400	\$3,000	\$4,000	\$4,000
\$9,000	Low	\$338	\$563	\$1,125	\$1,350	\$1,688	\$2,250	\$2,250
	High	\$540	\$900	\$1,800	\$2,160	\$2,700	\$3,600	\$3,600
\$8,000	Low	\$300	\$500	\$1,000	\$1,200	\$1,500	\$2,000	\$2,000
	High	\$480	\$800	\$1,600	\$1,920	\$2,400	\$3,200	\$3,200
\$7,000	Low	\$263	\$438	\$875	\$1,050	\$1,313	\$1,750	\$1,750
	High	\$420	\$700	\$1,400	\$1,680	\$2,100	\$2,800	\$2,800
\$6,000	Low	\$225	\$375	\$750	\$900	\$1,125	\$1,500	\$1,500
	High	\$360	\$600	\$1,200	\$1,440	\$1,800	\$2,400	\$2,400
\$5,000	Low	\$188	\$313	\$625	\$750	\$938	\$1,250	\$1,250
	High	\$300	\$500	\$1,000	\$1,200	\$1,500	\$2,000	\$2,000
\$4,000	Low	\$150	\$250	\$500	\$600	\$750	\$1,000	\$1,000
	High	\$240	\$400	\$800	\$960	\$1,200	\$1,600	\$1,600
\$3,000	Low	\$113	\$188	\$375	\$450	\$563	\$750	\$750
	High	\$180	\$300	\$600	\$720	\$900	\$1,200	\$1,200
\$2,000	Low	\$75	\$125	\$250	\$300	\$375	\$500	\$500
	High	\$120	\$200	\$400	\$480	\$600	\$800	\$800
<i>Years of Marriage</i>		3	5	10	12	15	20	25
		Years	Years	Years	Years	Years	Years	Years

The court retains flexibility to determine alimony within the presumptive alimony ranges.

Bases for Alimony (Considered by the Court after Presumptive Alimony is Calculated):

Presumptive alimony may then be established by the court within the presumptive ranges, based on the following:

- The financial resources of the obligee and the obligor, including the actual or potential income from nonmarital or marital property or any other source and the ability of each spouse to meet his or her reasonable needs;
- The standard of living of the parties during the marriage considering that there will be two households to maintain after the dissolution of marriage and that neither party may be able to maintain the same standard of living they had while married;
- The equitable distribution of marital property, including whether an unequal distribution of marital property was made to reduce or alleviate the need for alimony;
- Both parties' income, employment, and employability, obtainable through reasonable diligence and additional training or education, and any necessary reduction in employment due to parenting or circumstances of the parties;
- Whether a party could reduce the need for alimony by pursuing additional educational or vocational training, including the length of time required and anticipated costs of training;
- Whether one party has historically earned higher or lower income than that at the time of trial;
- Whether a party has foregone or postponed economic, educational, or employment opportunities during the course of the marriage;
- Whether either party has caused the unreasonable depletion or dissipation of marital assets;
- The amount of temporary alimony and the number of months temporary alimony was paid to the recipient spouse;
- The age, health, and physical and mental condition of the parties, including health care needs and costs;
- Significant economic or noneconomic contributions to the marriage or to the economic, educational, or occupational advancement of a party, including services rendered in homemaking, child care, education, and career building of the other party, payment by one spouse of the other spouse's separate debts, or enhancement of the other spouse's personal or real property;
- The tax consequence of the alimony award; and
- Any other factor necessary to provide equity and justice between the parties.

If the court awards alimony, the court must include in written findings that the obligor has the financial ability to pay alimony.

Under no circumstance may a court order alimony and child support that, when combined, constitutes more than 55 percent of the obligor's net income. This change appears to codify case law, as appellate courts have reversed awards of trial courts where the percent of income awarded as support is considered unreasonable. The Fourth District Court of Appeal found that the trial court committed an abuse of discretion in awarding combined alimony and child support totaling 58 percent of the obligor's net income.³⁴ The appellate court noted that the trial court had legitimate grounds on which to order permanent alimony. The former wife earned only a two-year college degree and supported her husband as a teacher's aide while he secured a law

³⁴ *Thomas v. Thomas*, 418 So. 2d 316, (Fla. 4th DCA 1982).

school education. She then became a homemaker. However, the court noted that the excessive award left the obligor with just \$330 a month on which to live after paying for rent and a car loan.³⁵

In *Casella v. Casella*, the same appellate court ruled clearly excessive an award of combined alimony and child support that approached 70 percent of the husband's net income.³⁶ A 1990 case, the court reversed the trial court on the basis that the award left the obligor with just \$800 a month on which to live.

Deviation from Guidelines

The court may determine an award of alimony that is outside either or both of the presumptive alimony amount and alimony duration ranges only if the court makes specific written findings that the application of the ranges is inappropriate or inequitable after considering all the factors used as the bases of alimony.

Even if the court does not intend to award alimony at the time, the court may reserve the issue of alimony by awarding alimony of \$1.00 a year under the durational guidelines if:

- A party who has traditionally been the breadwinner temporarily lacks the ability to pay support but is reasonably anticipated to have the ability to pay in the future; or
- A party is presently able to work but for whom a medical condition with a reasonable degree of medical certainty may inhibit the ability to pay in the future.

The courts routinely award nominal alimony to reserve the issue of alimony at a later date.³⁷

Tax and Alimony

Unless otherwise stated in the agreement between the parties or by the court through judgment or order, alimony is deductible from income by the obligor and included in the income of the obligee for tax purposes.

The agreement between the parties may provide, or the court may order alimony to be nondeductible from income by the obligor and not includable in the income of the obligee.

Payment of Alimony in Depository

Under the bill, for orders on alimony entered into on or after January 1, 1985, the court must order that payments of alimony be made through a depository. For orders on alimony entered before January 1, 1985, upon appearance by one or both parties before the court to modify or enforce the order, the court must modify the order require that alimony payments to be made through the depository.

³⁵ *Id.* at 316-317.

³⁶ *Casella v. Casella*, 569 So. 2d 848, 849 (Fla. 4th DCA 1990). The court stopped short of ruling that a particular percentage constitutes a bright-line rule, and instead, ruled that each case must be determined individually.

³⁷ *Lightcap v. Lightcap*, 14 So. 3d 259, 260 (Fla. 3d DCA 2009). "Here the trial court did not abuse its discretion when it granted the former wife nominal alimony. Nominal alimony would permit her to apply for modification upon a proper showing if and when the former husband achieves his full earning potential in the future."

Alimony payments do not need to be directed through the depository:

- If there is no minor child; or
- If there is a minor child and both parties agree to payment without the depository.

However, a payee may subsequently file an affidavit with the depository that an obligor has been in default or arrearages in payment. The depository must notify all parties within 15 days after receipt of the affidavit that future payments will be directed to the depository. A Title IV-D agency, currently the Department of Revenue, can also request payments to be made through the depository.

Timesharing with Children

This bill creates a rebuttable presumption that approximately equal timesharing with a minor child by both parents is in the best interest of the child. A party may overcome the presumption by providing evidence based on factors that affect the welfare and interests of the child and the circumstance of the family.

In addition to the factors currently in law, this bill adds the following:

- The amount of timesharing requested by each parent; and
- The frequency that a parent would likely leave the child in the care of a nonrelative on evenings and weekends when the other parent would be available and willing to provide care.

If the initial permanent timesharing schedule does not provide for approximately equal timesharing the court order must include written findings of fact justifying its order for unequal timesharing.

Substantial Change in Circumstance Justifying the Modification of Alimony

Existing law authorizes the court to modify alimony upon a showing of a substantial change in circumstances.

Under the bill, upon the filing of a petition by the obligor, the court must temporarily suspend the obligor's payment of alimony while the petition is pending. However, if either party unreasonably pursues or defends an action, the other party is entitled to pay reasonable attorney fees and costs of the prevailing party.

Rebuttable Presumption

This bill creates a rebuttable presumption that alimony must be modified or terminated if the courts finds that the obligor's retirement is a substantial change in circumstance.

The presumption can be rebutted by the following factors:

- The age of the parties;
- The health of the parties;
- Assets and liabilities of the parties;
- Earned or imputed income of the parties;
- The ability of the parties to maintain part-time or full-time employment; and

- Any other factor deemed relevant by the court.

New Grounds for a Substantial Change in Circumstance

This bill establishes new substantial changes in circumstance:

- If the actual income of a party is more than the amount the court imputed to the party when the court determined alimony, the other party may seek an immediate modification of alimony. An increase in an obligor's income does not constitute a basis for modification unless at the time the court established alimony, the court determined that the obligor was underemployed or unemployed but did not impute income at his or her maximum potential income.
- If an obligor becomes involuntarily underemployed or unemployed for 6 months after the court enters its final order for alimony, the obligor is entitled to an immediate modification of alimony.
- Retirement is a substantial change in circumstance if:
 - The obligor has reached the age for eligibility to receive full retirement benefits under the Social Security Act and has retired;
 - The obligor has reached the customary retirement age for his or her occupation and has retired from that occupation; or
 - The obligor retires early and the court determines that the retirement is reasonable based upon the obligor's age, health, motivation for retirement, and impact on the obligee.

At least one court has refused modification of alimony on the basis that an obligor voluntarily retired early. Here the court held that the obligor did not establish voluntary retirement as a circumstance beyond his control.³⁸ In this case, the obligor retired early at the age of 63, after 40 years of steady employment.³⁹

Remarriage of Obligor is not a Substantial Change in Circumstance

The bill clarifies that remarriage of the obligor is not a substantial change in circumstance.

Financial information of a subsequent spouse of a party paying or receiving alimony is inadmissible and may not be considered as part of any modification action unless a party is claiming that his or her income has decreased since the marriage. If the party makes this claim, financial information is admissible for a limited purpose.

Supportive Relationship

Regarding the change in circumstance that is the presence of a supportive relationship between an obligee and another person, this bill expands the requirement that the relationship currently exist, to one which existed within the previous year before the date of the filing of the petition for modification or termination of alimony.

The bill adds as factors for the court to use in determining to modify alimony based on a supportive relationship provisions that favor the obligee:

³⁸ *Ward v. Ward*, 502 So. 2d 477, 478 (FLA. 3D DCA 1987).

³⁹ *Id.*

- Whether the obligor's failure, in whole or in part, to comply with all court-ordered financial obligations contributed to the need to have a supportive relationship; and
- The need and extent to which an obligee provides caretaking assistance to a live-in relative, or receives care from them.

This bill requires the obligor to demonstrate by a preponderance of the evidence that a supportive relationship exists or has existed within the previous year. Once the burden of proof is met, the burden of proof shifts to the obligee. Current law does not specify a burden of proof. This change appears to make it easier for the obligor to establish a supportive relationship.

If an obligor prevails in a showing of a supportive relationship, reduction or termination of alimony is retroactive to the date of the filing of the petition.

Advancing Trial

The court must give priority to cases that have remained pending for more than 2 years from the initial date a party files a petition if a party requests that the case advance to trial.

Application of the Bill

This bill does not affect the duration of alimony awards in existence on the effective date of the bill. However, if grounds exist under current law to modify the amount of a preexisting alimony award, the formulas, factors, and other provisions of the bill will apply to the resolution of a petition for modification.

The bill takes effect October 1, 2015.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

The bill does not affect cities or counties.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. Other Constitutional Issues:

Most alimony awards are based on marital settlement agreements (MSAs), which are incorporated into final judgments in dissolution of marriage cases. Courts consider these MSAs as contracts. Courts interpret challenges to MSAs on the same basis as other forms

of contract.⁴⁰ “A marital settlement agreement entered into by the parties and ratified by a final judgment is a contract, subject to the laws of contract.”⁴¹

Although, existing s. 61.14, F.S., gives courts broad authority to modify MSAs, the power of the legislature to reach back to existing contracts is restricted by Article I, s. 10, of the Florida Constitution which provides, in part: “No . . . ex post facto law or law impairing the obligation of contracts shall be passed.” As such, the extent to which the Legislature may authorize the provisions of the bill to apply to preexisting alimony awards is not clear.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

To the extent that the bill more clearly defines gross income, provides guidelines for alimony, and establishes new bases for a substantial change in circumstance justifying a modification of alimony, this bill may reduce time spent in litigation which will reduce costs.

C. Government Sector Impact:

The Office of the State Courts Administrator (OSCA) anticipates that the bill would have an indeterminate impact on judicial workload, due to the substantial revisions in determining alimony.⁴²

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

The child support guidelines in section 61.30, F.S., define gross income differently than the way gross income is defined in the bill. The reason for the different definitions is not apparent.

⁴⁰ The First District Court of Appeal applied contract law in determining whether to admit parol evidence, or evidence outside the contract (MSA), on the basis that the contract language contains a latent ambiguity (*Toussaint v. Toussaint*, 107 So. 3d 474, 477-478 (Fla. 1st DCA 2013)). A latent ambiguity, requiring extrinsic evidence, existed where an MSA failed to address financing of college education and the contract otherwise provided for equal payments for education costs (*Riera v. Riera*, 86 So. 3d 1163, 1166—67 (Fla. 3d DCA 2012)). The court found no breach of contract from the plain language of the MSA. (*McCord v. McCord*, 94 So. 3d 719 (Fla. 2nd DCA 2012)).

⁴¹ *Ferguson v. Ferguson*, 54 So. 3d 553, 556 (Fla. 3d DCA 2011).

⁴² Office of the State Courts Administrator (OSCA), *2015 Judicial Impact Statement* (Mar. 20, 2015).

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill substantially amends the following sections of the Florida Statutes: 61.071, 61.08, 61.13, 61.14, and 61.30.

This bill creates section 61.192, 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.
