

**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 Committee on Governmental Oversight and Accountability

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**BILL:** CS/SB 492

**INTRODUCER:** Children, Families, and Elder Affairs Committee and Senator Young

**SUBJECT:** Public Records/Victim of Alleged Sexual Harassment/Identifying Information

**DATE:** March 31, 2017      **REVISED:** \_\_\_\_\_

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Hendon	Hendon	CF	<b>Fav/CS</b>
2.	Kim	Ferrin	GO	<b>Pre-meeting</b>
3.			RC	

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**Please see Section IX. for Additional Information:**

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE - Substantial Changes

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**I. Summary:**

CS/SB 492 creates an exemption from the public records law for identifying information of an alleged victim of sexual harassment.

The bill provides the exemption is subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act and unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature shall be repealed on October 2, 2022.

This bill requires a two-thirds vote of each chamber for passage because it creates a public records exemption.

The bill is not expected to have a fiscal impact on the state and will become effective upon becoming law.

**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.<sup>1</sup> This applies to the official business

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<sup>1</sup> FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(a).

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.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the Florida Constitution, the Florida Statutes provide that the public may access legislative and executive branch records.<sup>3</sup> Chapter 119, F.S., constitutes the main body of public records laws, and is known as the Public Records Act.<sup>4</sup> The Public Records Act states that

it 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.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Public Records Act, a public record includes virtually any document or recording, regardless of its physical form or how it may be transmitted.<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> A violation of the Public Records Act may result in civil or criminal liability.<sup>8</sup>

The Legislature may create an exemption to public records requirements.<sup>9</sup> An exemption must pass by a two-thirds vote of the House and the Senate.<sup>10</sup> In addition, an exemption must explicitly lay out the public necessity justifying the exemption, and the exemption must be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the exemption.<sup>11</sup> A statutory exemption which does not meet these criteria may be unconstitutional and may not be judicially saved.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> The Public Records Act does not apply to legislative or judicial records. *Locke v. Hawkes*, 595 So. 2d 32 (Fla. 1992). Also see *Times Pub. Co. v. Ake*, 660 So. 2d 255 (Fla. 1995). The Legislature’s records are public pursuant to s. 11.0431, F.S. Public records exemptions for the Legislatures are primarily located in s. 11.0431(2)-(3), F.S.

<sup>4</sup> Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes.

<sup>5</sup> Section 119.01(1), F.S.

<sup>6</sup> 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” to mean 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.”

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

<sup>8</sup> Section 119.10, F.S. Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes, as are the penalties for violating those laws.

<sup>9</sup> FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(c).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Halifax Hosp. Medical Center v. New-Journal Corp.*, 724 So. 2d 567 (Fla. 1999). See also *Baker County Press, Inc. v. Baker County Medical Services, Inc.*, 870 So. 2d 189 (Fla. 1st DCA 2004).

When creating a public records exemption, the Legislature may provide that a record is “confidential and exempt” or “exempt.”<sup>13</sup> Records designated as “confidential and exempt” may be released by the records custodian only under the circumstances defined by the Legislature. Records designated as “exempt” are not required to be made available for public inspection, but may be released at the discretion of the records custodian under certain circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

### **Open Government Sunset Review Act**

The Open Government Sunset Review Act (referred to hereafter as the “OGSR”) prescribes a legislative review process for newly created or substantially amended public records or open meetings exemptions.<sup>15</sup> The OGSR 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.<sup>16</sup>

The OGSR 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.<sup>17</sup> 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;<sup>18</sup>
- 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;<sup>19</sup> or
- It protects trade or business secrets.<sup>20</sup>

The OGSR also requires specified questions to be considered during the review process.<sup>21</sup> In examining an exemption, the OGSR asks the Legislature to carefully question the purpose and necessity of reenacting the exemption.

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<sup>13</sup> 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 School Board of Seminole*, 874 So. 2d 48 (Fla. 5th DCA 2004).

<sup>14</sup> *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So. 2d 687 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991).

<sup>15</sup> 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 information or to include meetings. The OGSR does not apply to an exemption that is required by federal law or that applies solely to the Legislature or the State Court System pursuant to section 119.15(2), F.S.

<sup>16</sup> Section 119.15(3), F.S.

<sup>17</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b), F.S.

<sup>18</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b)1., F.S.

<sup>19</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b)2., F.S.

<sup>20</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b)3., F.S.

<sup>21</sup> Section 119.15(6)(a), F.S. The specified questions are:

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

If, in reenacting an exemption, the exemption is expanded, then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are required.<sup>22</sup> If the exemption is reenacted 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.<sup>23</sup>

### **Sexual Harassment**

It is unlawful to harass a person (an applicant or employee) because of that person's sex. Harassment can include "sexual harassment" or unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature.<sup>24</sup>

Harassment does not have to be of a sexual nature, however, it can include offensive remarks about a person's sex. For example, it is illegal to harass a woman by making offensive comments about women in general.<sup>25</sup> Both victim and the harasser can be either a woman or a man, and the victim and harasser can be the same sex.

Although Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 does not "prohibit simple teasing, offhand comments, or isolated incidents that are not very serious, harassment is illegal when it is so frequent or severe that it creates a hostile or offensive work environment or when it results in an adverse employment decision (such as the victim being fired or demoted)."<sup>26</sup> The harasser can be the victim's supervisor, a supervisor in another area, a co-worker, or someone who is not an employee of the employer, such as a client or customer.

Florida law states that sexual harassment is a form of discrimination.<sup>27</sup> The Department of Management Services, the state's personnel agency, has adopted rules on sexual harassment applicable to all executive agencies.<sup>28</sup> Rule 60L-40.001, F.A.C., provides that,

Sexual harassment means unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature from any person directed towards or in the presence of an employee or applicant when:

- (a) Submission to such conduct is either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment;
- (b) Submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual; or
- (c) Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment.

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<sup>22</sup> FLA. CONST. art. I, s. 24(c).

<sup>23</sup> Section 119.15(7), F.S.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission website [https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/sexual\\_harassment.cfm](https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/sexual_harassment.cfm). (Last visited March 15, 2017.)

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

[https://www1.eeoc.gov/laws/types/sexual\\_harassment.cfm?renderforprint=1](https://www1.eeoc.gov/laws/types/sexual_harassment.cfm?renderforprint=1) (Last visited March 30, 2017.)

<sup>27</sup> Section 110.1221, F.S.

<sup>28</sup> Rule 60L-40.001, F.A.C.

### **Public Records Exemptions Related to Discrimination and Employee Misconduct**

Records related to discrimination on the basis of sex, race, color, religion, national origin, age, handicap, or marital status, which are held by any government agency are exempt from public disclosure until:

- A finding is made relating to probable cause;
- The investigation of the complaint becomes inactive; or
- The complaint or other record becomes part of the official record of any hearing or court proceeding.<sup>29</sup>

These records may be released to a state or federal agency in furtherance of that agency's duties.<sup>30</sup> If an alleged victim chooses not to file a complaint, and requests that the records of the complaint remain confidential, all records relating to the allegation are considered confidential and exempt.<sup>31</sup>

Complaints of misconduct filed with an agency against an employee is confidential and exempt from public disclosure until one of the following events occurs:

- The investigation ceases to be active; or
- The agency has concluded its investigation and provides written notice to the employee who is the subject of the complaint.<sup>32</sup>

The written notice will inform the employee whether the agency will or will not proceed with disciplinary action and file charges.<sup>33</sup>

Universities have an additional public records exemption. Personnel records at a university limit access to sexual harassment "records which identify the complainant, a witness, or information which could reasonably lead to the identification of the complainant or a witness are limited-access."<sup>34</sup>

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

The bill amends s. 119.071, F.S., to provide that personal identifying information of the alleged victim in an allegation of sexual harassment is confidential and exempt from public record requirements.

The bill provides a public necessity statement as required by the State Constitution, specifying that it is a public necessity to protect personal identifying information of alleged victims because disclosure of the information could place them at risk of further harassment and retaliation. In addition, the potential for disclosure of identifying information could discourage alleged victims from reporting instances of alleged harassment.

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<sup>29</sup> Section 119.071(2)(g)1., F.S.

<sup>30</sup> Section 119.017(2)(g)1.b., F.S.

<sup>31</sup> Section 119.017(2)(g)2., F.S.

<sup>32</sup> Section 119.071(2)(k)1., F.S.

<sup>33</sup> Section 119.071(2)(k)1., F.S.

<sup>34</sup> Section 1012.91(2), F.S.

The bill provides for repeal of the exemption on October 2, 2022, unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature.

This bill becomes effective upon becoming law.

#### **IV. Constitutional Issues:**

##### **A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:**

None.

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

###### **Voting Requirement**

Article I, Section 24(c) of the Florida Constitution requires a two-thirds vote of each chamber for public records exemptions to pass.

###### **Breadth of Exemption**

Article I, Section 24(c) of the Florida Constitution requires a newly created public records exemption to be no broader than necessary to accomplish the state purpose of the law. The bill exempts certain identifying information contained in state agency investigations of sexual harassment indefinitely. This bill appears to be no broader than necessary to accomplish the public necessity for this public records exemption.

##### **C. Trust Funds Restrictions:**

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:**

The bill does not provide any means of releasing the identity of the alleged victim of the sexual harassment to anyone. This may be problematic because, it could be interpreted in a manner that prohibits the subject of the alleged sexual harassment's to confront their accuser and defend him or herself.

This public records exemption will have broad application to all state and local government entities, as well as private companies that act on behalf of an agency.<sup>35</sup> Each of these entities may have different human resources policies for investigating and disciplining employees. While the bill clearly exempts outside access to identifying information, it is unclear what effect this public records exemption will have on the investigatory and disciplinary policies in these entities.

**VIII. Statutes Affected:**

This bill substantially amends section 119.071 of the Florida Statutes.

**IX. Additional Information:**

- A. **Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:**  
(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

**CS by Children, Families, and Elder Affairs on March 21, 2017:**

The committee substitute removes examples of personal identifying information that would be exempt from the public records law.

- 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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<sup>35</sup> See footnote 20.