

**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 Governmental Oversight and Accountability

---

**BILL:** CS/SB 838

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

**SUBJECT:** Public Records/Mental Health Treatment and Services

**DATE:** April 1, 2019                      **REVISED:** \_\_\_\_\_

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	<u>Delia</u>	<u>Hendon</u>	<u>CF</u>	<b>Fav/CS</b>
2.	<u>Ponder</u>	<u>McVaney</u>	<u>GO</u>	<b>Favorable</b>
3.	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	<u>RC</u>	<u>                    </u>

---

**Please see Section IX. for Additional Information:**  
COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE - Technical Changes

---

**I. Summary:**

CS/SB 838 creates new exemptions from the public records inspection and access requirements of Art. 1, s. 24(a) of the State Constitution and s. 119.07(1), F.S. This bill makes confidential and exempt pleadings, orders, and personal identifying information on a docket relating to Baker Act proceedings. The information may be disclosed upon request to certain persons involved in the proceedings, certain agencies, or when directed by the court.

The bill provides that the exemptions are subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act, and stand repealed on October 2, 2024, unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature. The bill also provides a statement of public necessity as required by the State Constitution.

Because the bill creates a public records exemption, the State Constitution requires passage by a two-thirds vote in each house of the Legislature.

The bill takes effect on July 1, 2019.

## II. Present Situation:

### Public Records Law

The Florida Constitution provides the public 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 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. The Public Records Act states:

[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.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Public Records Act, a public record includes virtually any document or recording, regardless of its physical form or the method of transmission.<sup>5</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>6</sup> A violation of the Public Records Act may result in civil or criminal liability.<sup>7</sup>

Only the Legislature may create an exemption to public records requirements.<sup>8</sup> An exemption must pass by a two-thirds vote of the House and the Senate.<sup>9</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>10</sup> A statutory

---

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

<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> Section 119.01(1), F.S.

<sup>5</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 “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>6</sup> *Shevin v. Byron, Harless, Schaffer, Reid and Assoc. Inc.*, 379 So. 2d 633, 640 (Fla. 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Section 119.10, F.S. Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes, as are the penalties for violating those laws.

<sup>8</sup> FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(c).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

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

exemption that does not meet these criteria may be unconstitutional and may not be judicially saved.<sup>11</sup>

When creating or expanding a public records exemption, the Legislature may provide that a record is “confidential and exempt” or “exempt.”<sup>12</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>13</sup>

### **The Baker Act**

The Legislature adopted the Florida Mental Health Act, also known as The Baker Act, in 1971.<sup>14</sup> It is designed to help people receive treatment who are suffering with mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders. Baker Act proceedings provide people with emergency services, sometimes through temporary detention, to obtain a mental health evaluation and treatment. The treatment may be voluntary or involuntary. The Baker Act requires that programs offer comprehensive services to people who need intensive short-term treatment and continued treatment to aid in their recovery. The Baker Act also provides protections and rights for people examined or treated for mental illness. Legal procedures are established for mental health examination and treatment, including voluntary admission, involuntary admission, involuntary inpatient treatment, and involuntary outpatient treatment.

### **Confidentiality of Records under the Baker Act**

The concern has been expressed that while “clinical records”<sup>15</sup> under the Baker Act are designated and maintained as confidential by the clerk of the court, it is not clear whether other Baker Act records are open to the public for review.<sup>16</sup> There appears to be a difference of opinion among various clerks of court as to what is and what is not exempt from disclosure. If the petitions, orders, and identifying information in this bill were all classified as confidential and

---

<sup>11</sup> *Halifax Hosp. Medical Center v. New-Journal Corp.*, 724 So.2d 567 (Fla. 1999). In *Halifax Hospital*, the Florida Supreme Court found that a public meetings exemption was unconstitutional because the statement of public necessity did not define important terms and did not justify the breadth of the exemption. *Id.* at 570. The Florida Supreme Court also declined to narrow the exemption in order to save it. *Id.* In *Baker County Press, Inc. v. Baker County Medical Services, Inc.*, 870 So. 2d 189 (Fla. 1st DCA 2004), the court found that the intent of a statute was to create a public records exemption. The *Baker County Press* court found that since the law did not contain a public necessity statement, it was unconstitutional. *Id.* at 196.

<sup>12</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>13</sup> *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So. 2d 683 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991).

<sup>14</sup> Chapter 71-131, s. 1, Laws of Fla. The Baker Act is contained in Part I of chapter 394, Florida Statutes.

<sup>15</sup> Section 394.4615, F.S., states that “[a] clinical record is confidential and exempt from the provisions of s. 119.07(1).” The Judicial Administration Rules also provide for the confidentiality of clinical records under the Baker Act. Fla. R. Jud. Admin. 2.420(d)(1)(B)(viii).

<sup>16</sup> Section 394.455(3), F.S. Clinical records are defined as being all parts of the record required to be maintained, including medical records, progress notes, charts, admission and discharge data, and other information recorded by the facility that pertains to the patient’s hospitalization or treatment. In lay terms, this is often characterized as records requiring a medical signature.

exempt, then there would be uniformity among the clerks of the court in administering these provisions statewide.

### III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

**Section 1** creates s. 394.464, F.S., to provide that all petitions for voluntary and involuntary admission for mental health treatment, court orders, and related records filed with or by a court under Part I of Section 397, F.S., are confidential and exempt from s. 119.071(1), F.S., and s. 24(a), Art. I of the State Constitution. The pleadings and other documents may be disclosed by the clerk of court, upon request, to certain persons or agencies, such as the petitioner, the respondent and their legal representatives, as well as the Department of Corrections and Department of Children and Families. The bill provides that records made confidential and exempt from public disclosure can be submitted by the clerk of the court to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement as required by s. 790.065, F.S.<sup>17</sup>

The bill provides that the newly created public records exemption is subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act in accordance with s. 119.15, F.S., and shall stand repealed on October 2, 2024, unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature.

The bill provides for retroactive application of the public records exemption.

**Section 2** provides a statement of public necessity as required by the State Constitution.<sup>18</sup> The bill provides that making petitions and court records filed under the Baker Act confidential and exempt from s. 119.07(1), F.S. and s. 24(a), Art. I of the State Constitution protects a person's personal health information and sensitive personal information which, if released, could cause unwarranted damage to the person's reputation. Additionally, the knowledge that such information could be disclosed could have a chilling effect on the willingness of individuals to seek treatment.

**Section 3** provides that the bill takes effect July 1, 2019.

### IV. Constitutional Issues:

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

The county/municipality mandates provision of Art. VII, section 18, of the State Constitution may apply because clerks of the court may incur additional costs relating to redacting information made confidential and exempt under this bill. However, an exemption may apply based on the limited fiscal impact that is anticipated to be incurred.

---

<sup>17</sup> Section 790.065, F.S., concerns the sale and delivery of firearms. Clerks of the court are required to transfer the records of certain impaired people to FDLE.

<sup>18</sup> FLA. CONST. art. I, s. 24(c).

**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 exemptions to the public records and public meetings requirements. Because the bill creates a public records exemption, the State Constitution requires passage by a two-thirds vote in each house of the Legislature.

***Public Necessity Statement***

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires a bill creating or expanding exemptions to the public records and public meetings requirements to state with specificity the public necessity justifying the exemption. Section 2 of the bill contains a statement of public necessity

***Breadth of Exemption***

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires an exemption to the public meetings requirements to be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law. The stated purpose of the law is to protect from dissemination to the public the contents of a person's mental health records filed with or by a court or placed on a docket and the personal identifying information, as mental health is an intensely private matter and the public stigma associated with a mental health condition may cause some persons to in need to avoid seeking treatment, and such information could damage the reputation of the person and their family. The bill makes confidential and exempt the petitions for voluntary and involuntary admission for mental health treatment and related court orders and records filed with or by a court under part 1 of ch. 394, F.S. The exemption does not appear to be broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law.

**C. Trust Funds Restrictions:**

None.

**D. State Tax or Fee Increases:**

None.

**E. Other Constitutional Issues:*****Separation of Powers***

The judicial branch is not subject to the Public Records Act. Florida Rule of Judicial Administration 2.420(c)(7), however, provides that records made confidential by Florida law shall be confidential, with the burden of having such documents treated as confidential within a court file upon the filing party. Additionally, the judicial branch may adopt the public records exemptions passed by the Legislature.

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

None.

**B. Private Sector Impact:**

The private sector will be subject to the cost associated with an agency making redactions in response to public records requests.

**C. Government Sector Impact:**

Clerks of court may incur additional costs associated with training court personnel and performing more redactions of personal identifying information from dockets. It is anticipated that these costs will be absorbed within the existing resources of the offices of the clerks of court.

**VI. Technical Deficiencies:**

The bill, on line 27, incorrectly references s. 119.071(1), F.S., instead of s. 119.07(1), F.S., which relates to the inspection and copying of public records.

The Office of the State Attorney is not included in the listing of individuals and entities to whom the clerk of court may disclose the confidential and exempt information. The Legislature may want to consider adding the Office of the State Attorney to this list as the state attorney for the circuit in which the patient is located represents the state as the “real party of interest” in a Baker Act proceeding.<sup>19</sup>

**VII. Related Issues:**

None.

**VIII. Statutes Affected:**

This bill creates section 394.464 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.)

**CS by Children, Families, and Elder Affairs on March 11, 2019:**

The CS provides an effective date of July 1, 2019.

---

<sup>19</sup> Section. 364.467, F.S.

B. Amendments:

None.

---

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

---