

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 Criminal Justice

BILL: SB 762

INTRODUCER: Senator Baxley

SUBJECT: Public Records/Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel Offices

DATE: March 22, 2021

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Cellon	Jones	CJ	Pre-meeting
2.			GO	
3.			RC	

I. Summary:

SB 762 authorizes the Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel (CCCRC) to register a vehicle or vessel under a fictitious name with the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (DHSMV) and receive a license plate or decal based on such fictitious name as the state public defender's offices currently do.

The bill provides that all records relating to the application of a confidential registration certificate and registration license plate or decal submitted to the DHSMV by an office of the CCCRC, and any other records necessary to carry out the purpose of s. 320.025, F.S., be made exempt from s. 119.07(1), F.S., and s 24(a), Article I of the State Constitution.

The bill provides a statement of public necessity. The bill appears to be no more broad than necessary to accomplish its purpose.

The bill is subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act and stands repealed on October 2, 2026, unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature. The bill requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting for final passage.

The bill has no associated Fiscal Impact.

The bill is effective July 1, 2021.

II. Present Situation:

Access to Public Records - Generally

The Florida Constitution provides that the public has the right to inspect or copy records made or received in connection with official governmental business.¹ The right to inspect or copy 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.²

Additional requirements and exemptions related to public records are found in various statutes and rules, depending on the branch of government involved. For instance, s. 11.0431, F.S., provides public access requirements for legislative records. Relevant exemptions are codified in s. 11.0431(2)-(3), F.S., and the statutory provisions are adopted in the rules of each house of the legislature.³ Florida Rule of Judicial Administration 2.420 governs public access to judicial branch records.⁴ Lastly, ch. 119, F.S., provides requirements for public records held by executive agencies.

Executive Agency Records – The Public Records Act

Chapter 119, F.S., known as the Public Records Act, provides that all state, county, and municipal records are open for personal inspection and copying by any person, and that providing access to public records is a duty of each agency.⁵

A public record includes virtually any document or recording, regardless of its physical form or how it may be transmitted.⁶ The Florida Supreme Court has interpreted the statutory definition of “public record” to include “material prepared in connection with official agency business which is intended to perpetuate, communicate, or formalize knowledge of some type.”⁷

The Florida Statutes specify conditions under which public access to public records must be provided. The Public Records Act guarantees every person’s right to inspect and copy any public record at any reasonable time, under reasonable conditions, and under supervision by the

¹ Fla. Const. art. I, s. 24(a).

² *Id.*

³ See Rule 1.48, *Rules and Manual of the Florida Senate*, (2018-2020) and Rule 14.1, *Rules of the Florida House of Representatives*, Edition 2, (2018-2020).

⁴ *State v. Wooten*, 260 So. 3d 1060 (Fla. 4th DCA 2018).

⁵ Section 119.01(1), F.S. Section 119.011(2), F.S., defines “agency” 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.”

⁶ 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.”

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

custodian of the public record.⁸ A violation of the Public Records Act may result in civil or criminal liability.⁹

The Legislature may exempt public records from public access requirements by passing a general law by a two-thirds vote of both the House and the Senate.¹⁰ The exemption must state with specificity the public necessity justifying the exemption and must be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the exemption.¹¹

General exemptions from the public records requirements are contained in the Public Records Act.¹² Specific exemptions often are placed in the substantive statutes relating to a particular agency or program.¹³

When creating a public records exemption, the Legislature may provide that a record is “exempt” or “confidential and exempt.” Custodians of records designated as “exempt” are not prohibited from disclosing the record; rather, the exemption means that the custodian cannot be compelled to disclose the record.¹⁴ Custodians of records designated as “confidential and exempt” may not disclose the record except under circumstances specifically defined by the Legislature.¹⁵

Open Government Sunset Review Act

The Open Government Sunset Review Act¹⁶ (the Act) prescribes a legislative review process for newly created or substantially amended¹⁷ public records or open meetings exemptions, with specified exceptions.¹⁸ It requires the automatic repeal of such exemption on October 2nd of the fifth year after creation or substantial amendment, unless the Legislature reenacts the exemption.¹⁹

The Act 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.²⁰

⁸ Section 119.07(1)(a), F.S.

⁹ Section 119.10, F.S. Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes, as are the penalties for violating those laws.

¹⁰ FLA. CONST. art. I, s. 24(c).

¹¹ *Id. See, e.g., Halifax Hosp. Medical Center v. News-Journal Corp.*, 724 So. 2d 567 (Fla. 1999) (holding 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); *Baker County Press, Inc. v. Baker County Medical Services, Inc.*, 870 So. 2d 189 (Fla. 1st DCA 2004) (holding that a statutory provision written to bring another party within an existing public records exemption is unconstitutional without a public necessity statement).

¹² *See, e.g., s. 119.071(1)(a), F.S.* (exempting from public disclosure examination questions and answer sheets of examinations administered by a governmental agency for the purpose of licensure).

¹³ *See, e.g., s. 213.053(2)(a), F.S.* (exempting from public disclosure information contained in tax returns received by the Department of Revenue).

¹⁴ *See Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So. 2d 683, 687 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991).

¹⁵ *WFTV, Inc. v. The School Board of Seminole*, 874 So. 2d 48 (Fla. 5th DCA 2004).

¹⁶ Section 119.15, F.S.

¹⁷ An exemption is considered to be substantially amended if it is expanded to include more records or information or to include meetings as well as records. Section 119.15(4)(b), F.S.

¹⁸ Section 119.15(2)(a) and (b), F.S., provide that exemptions that are required by federal law or are applicable solely to the Legislature or the State Court System are not subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act.

¹⁹ Section 119.15(3), F.S.

²⁰ Section 119.15(6)(b), F.S.

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 subdivisions to effectively and efficiently administer a governmental program, and administration would be significantly impaired without the exemption;²¹
- It protects sensitive, personal information, the release of which would be defamatory, cause unwarranted damage to the good name or reputation of the individual, or would jeopardize the individual's safety. If this public purpose is cited as the basis of an exemption, however, only personal identifying information is exempt;²² or
- It protects information of a confidential nature concerning entities, such as trade or business secrets.²³

The Act also requires specified questions to be considered during the review process.²⁴ In examining an exemption, the Act directs the Legislature to carefully question the purpose and necessity of reenacting the exemption.

If the exemption is continued and expanded, then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are required.²⁵ If the exemption is continued without substantive changes or if the exemption is continued and 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.²⁶

Confidential Motor Vehicle Registration

Section 320.025, F.S., authorizes the DHSMV to issue a confidential registration certificate and registration license plate or decal under a fictitious name for a motor vehicle or vessel owned or operated by:

- A law enforcement agency of state, county, municipal, or federal government;
- The Attorney General's Medicaid Fraud Control Unit; or
- Any state public defender's office.²⁷

To register a motor vehicle or vessel under a fictitious name, the law enforcement agency, Fraud Control Unit, or public defender's office must file a written application with the DHSMV

²¹ Section 119.15(6)(b)1., F.S.

²² Section 119.15(6)(b)2., F.S.

²³ Section 119.15(6)(b)3., F.S.

²⁴ Section 119.15(6)(a), F.S. The specified questions are:

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

²⁵ See generally s. 119.15, F.S.

²⁶ Section 119.15(7), F.S.

²⁷ Section 320.025(1), F.S.

affirming the license plate or decal will be used for activities that require concealment of the true owner of the vehicle and listing individuals who are authorized to use the vehicle.²⁸ All records relating to the registration application are exempt from disclosure under the public records provisions in s. 119.07(1), F.S., and s. 24(a), Article I of the State Constitution.²⁹

Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel

The CCCRC was created by the Legislature in 2007 to provide legal representation to indigent persons that are constitutionally entitled to court-appointed counsel.³⁰ The CCCRC primarily provides representation in three types of cases:

- Criminal cases in which the public defender must withdraw due to a conflict of interest;³¹
- Dependency cases;³² and
- Involuntary civil commitment cases involving a mentally ill person, sexually violent predator, or a person with developmental disabilities.³³

In representing a defendant in a criminal case, the CCCRC performs similar functions to that of a traditional public defender. To effectively represent a client in a criminal proceeding, both the public defender and the CCCRC employ investigators to investigate cases and conduct interviews with defendants and witnesses.³⁴ Currently, the CCCRC employs 20 investigators.³⁵

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill authorizes the CCCRC to register a vehicle or vessel under a fictitious name with the DHSMV and receive a license plate or decal based on such fictitious name. The bill provides that all records relating to the application of a confidential registration certificate and registration license plate or decal submitted to the DHSMV by an office of the CCCRC, and any other records necessary to carry out the purpose of s. 320.025, F.S., be made exempt from s. 119.07(1), F.S., and s 24(a), Article I of the State Constitution.

The bill provides that the public records exemption is a public necessity because investigations by the CCCRC may be jeopardized if a vehicle is registered in the name of the CCCRC or in the name of an investigator or a person under investigation may use registration information to retaliate against a CCCRC office or its investigators. The bill provides the CCCRC with the same protections and confidentiality enjoyed by a public defender's office, which performs a virtually identical function.

This bill is subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act and stands repealed on October 2, 2026, unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature. The bill requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting for final passage.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Section 320.025(3), F.S.

³⁰ Chapter 2007-62, L.O.F.

³¹ Section 27.511(5), F.S.

³² Section 27.511(6), F.S.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ Section 27.53, F.S.

³⁵ E-mail correspondence with Legislative Affairs, CCCRC, (February 2, 8, and 9, 2021), on file with the Senate Criminal Justice Committee.

The bill is effective July 1, 2021.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

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 an exemption to the public records requirements. This bill creates an exemption for the office of the CCCRC to register a vehicle or vessel under a fictitious name with the DHSMV and receive a license plate or decal based on such fictitious name in s. 320.025, F.S., thus, the bill requires a two-thirds vote to be enacted.

Public Necessity Statement

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

Breadth of Exemption

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires an exemption to the public records requirements to be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law. The purpose of the law is to protect the safety of the CCCRC investigators by disguising their vehicles' tag and registration. The exemption does not appear to be broader than necessary to accomplish the purpose of the exemption.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None identified.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

None.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

Because the office of the CCCRC is not a law enforcement agency, but is more akin to the office of the public defender which currently enjoys the confidentiality provided by s. 320.025, F.S., it is suggested that line 77 of the bill be amended to read: decals in the same manner as any state public defender's office for accuracy.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill substantially amends section 320.025 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.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None.