

**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 Rules

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BILL: CS/CS/SB 1640

INTRODUCER: Rules Committee; Governmental Oversight and Accountability Committee and Senator Grall

SUBJECT: Public Records/Lethality Assessment Forms

DATE: April 8, 2025

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

|    | ANALYST | STAFF DIRECTOR | REFERENCE | ACTION           |
|----|---------|----------------|-----------|------------------|
| 1. | Wyant   | Stokes         | CJ        | <b>Favorable</b> |
| 2. | McVaney | McVaney        | GO        | <b>Fav/CS</b>    |
| 3. | Wyant   | Yeatman        | RC        | <b>Fav/CS</b>    |

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

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE - Substantial Changes

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**I. Summary:**

CS/CS/SB 1640 makes confidential and exempt from public records copying and inspection requirements a lethality assessment form which contains a victim's information and responses to a lethality assessment. Lethality assessments are used to determine a victim's risk of serious bodily injury or death at the hands of an aggressor and are administered by law enforcement for any call relating to intimate partner violence. The information may be shared with domestic violence centers and to the state attorney's office. The state attorney is authorized to release the confidential information in furtherance of its official duties and responsibilities, and to the parties in a pending criminal prosecution as required by law. The exemption applies to forms completed before, on, and after the date the exemption takes effect.

This exemption is subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act and will be repealed on October 2, 2030, unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature.

The bill provides a statement of public necessity as required by the State Constitution, and, because it creates a new public records exemption, it requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting in each house of the Legislature for final passage.

The bill may increase costs minimally for state and local government agencies.

The bill takes effect upon becoming a law.

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 adopted in the rules of each house of the legislature.<sup>3</sup> Florida Rule of Judicial Administration 2.420 governs public access to judicial branch records.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, ch. 119, F.S., known as the Public Records Act, provides requirements for public records held by executive branch and local government agencies.

### Executive Agency Records – The Public Records Act

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.<sup>5</sup>

Section 119.011(12), F.S., defines “public records” to include:

[a]ll 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.

The Florida Supreme Court has interpreted this definition to encompass all materials made or received by an agency in connection with official business that are used to “perpetuate, communicate, or formalize knowledge of some type.”<sup>6</sup>

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

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

<sup>3</sup> See Rule 1.48, *Rules and Manual of the Florida Senate*, (2022-2024) and Rule 14.1, *Rules of the Florida House of Representatives*, Edition 1, (2022-2024).

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

<sup>5</sup> 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.”

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

The Florida Statutes specify conditions under which public access to governmental 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 custodian of the public record.<sup>7</sup> A violation of the Public Records Act may result in civil or criminal liability.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

General exemptions from the public records requirements are contained in the Public Records Act.<sup>11</sup> Specific exemptions often are placed in the substantive statutes relating to a particular agency or program.<sup>12</sup>

When creating a public records exemption, the Legislature may provide that a record is "exempt" or "confidential and exempt." There is a difference between records the Legislature has determined to be exempt from the Public Records Act and those which the Legislature has determined to be exempt from the Public Records Act *and confidential*.<sup>13</sup> Records designated as "confidential and exempt" are not subject to inspection by the public and may only be released under the circumstances defined by statute.<sup>14</sup> Records designated as "exempt" may be released at the discretion of the records custodian under certain circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

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

The provisions of s. 119.15, F.S., known as the Open Government Sunset Review Act<sup>16</sup> (the act), prescribe a legislative review process for newly created or substantially amended<sup>17</sup> public records or open meetings exemptions, with specified exceptions.<sup>18</sup> The act requires the repeal of such exemption on October 2nd of the fifth year after creation or substantial amendment; in

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<sup>7</sup> Section 119.07(1)(a), F.S.

<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. 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).

<sup>11</sup> *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).

<sup>12</sup> *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).

<sup>13</sup> *WFTV, Inc. v. The Sch. Bd. of Seminole County*, 874 So. 2d 48, 53 (Fla. 5<sup>th</sup> DCA 2004).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So. 2d 683 (Fla. 5<sup>th</sup> DCA 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Section 119.15, F.S.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

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

order to save an exemption from repeal, the Legislature must reenact the exemption or repeal the sunset date.<sup>19</sup> In practice, many exemptions are continued by repealing the sunset date, rather than reenacting the exemption.

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.<sup>20</sup> An exemption serves an identifiable purpose if the Legislature finds that the purpose of the exemption outweighs open government policy and cannot be accomplished without the exemption and it meets one of the following purposes:

- It allows the state or its political subdivisions to effectively and efficiently administer a program, and administration would be significantly impaired without the exemption;<sup>21</sup>
- 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;<sup>22</sup> or
- It protects information of a confidential nature concerning entities, such as trade or business secrets.<sup>23</sup>

The Act also requires specified questions to be considered during the review process.<sup>24</sup> In examining an exemption, the Act directs the Legislature to 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 again required.<sup>25</sup> 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 expire, the previously exempt records will remain exempt unless otherwise provided by law.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Section 119.15(3), F.S.

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

<sup>21</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b)1., F.S.

<sup>22</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b)2., F.S.

<sup>23</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b)3., F.S.

<sup>24</sup> 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?

<sup>25</sup> See generally s. 119.15, F.S.

<sup>26</sup> Section 119.15(7), F.S.

## **Lethality Assessments**

Florida is the second state to pass legislation mandating law enforcement to administer a lethality assessment when speaking with suspected domestic violence victims. The bill, also known as the Gabby Petito Act, was passed in 2024.<sup>27</sup>

To administer a lethality assessment, a law enforcement officer must ask a series of questions which, in part, include:<sup>28</sup>

- Did the aggressor ever use a weapon against you or threaten you with a weapon?
- Did the aggressor ever threaten to kill you or your children?
- Has the aggressor ever choked you or attempted to choke you?

All law enforcement officers are required to receive instruction on the policies and procedures for administering a lethality assessment as part of basic recruit training or as part of the required instruction continued for employment. A law enforcement officer may not administer a lethality assessment to a victim if the officer has not received training. Each law enforcement agency must ensure that all its sworn personnel have completed the training by October 1, 2026.<sup>29</sup>

A law enforcement officer must advise the victim of the results of the lethality assessment and refer the victim to the nearest locally certified domestic violence center if certain criteria are met.<sup>30</sup> A law enforcement officer may not include in a probable cause statement, written police report, or incident report the domestic violence center to which a victim was referred.<sup>31</sup>

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

The bill amends s. 741.29, F.S., to make confidential and exempt from public records disclosure requirements a lethality assessment form that contains a victim's information and responses to a lethality assessment. The information may be shared with domestic violence centers.

Additionally, a lethality assessment may be shared with the state attorney's office. The state attorney is authorized to release the confidential information in furtherance of its official duties and responsibilities, and to the parties in a pending criminal prosecution as required by law. The exemption applies to forms completed before, on, and after the date the exemption takes effect.

The exemption is subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act will expire on October 2, 2030, unless reviewed and saved from repeal by the Legislature.

Additionally, the bill provides a statement of public necessity as required by the State Constitution. The public necessity statement provides that the release of information included on a lethality assessment form could subject victims of domestic violence to an increased risk of

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<sup>27</sup> Herald-Tribune, *Law enforcement discusses Gabby Petito Act*, (March 7, 2025), <https://www.heraldtribune.com/story/news/courts/2025/03/07/sarasota-county-law-enforcement-talks-gabby-petito-act-family-feuds/80532980007/> (last visited March 28, 2025).

<sup>28</sup> Section 741.29(2)(e), F.S.

<sup>29</sup> Section 741.29(2)(b), F.S.

<sup>30</sup> Section 741.29(2)(f), F.S.

<sup>31</sup> Section 741.29(2)(h), F.S.

abuse. The Legislature further finds that such victims are more likely to participate in a lethality assessment if such form is protected from disclosure.

The bill takes effect upon becoming law.

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

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

Not applicable. The bill does not require counties or municipalities to take an action requiring the expenditure of funds, reduce the authority that counties or municipalities have to raise revenue in the aggregate, nor reduce the percentage of state tax shared with counties or municipalities.

##### **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 enacts a new exemption for records pertaining to a lethality assessment form that contains a victim's information and responses; therefore, the bill requires a two-thirds vote of each chamber for enactment.

###### **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 victims of domestic violence, and the bill exempts only records pertaining to lethality assessments from the public records requirements. The exemption does not appear to be broader than necessary to accomplish the purpose of the law.

##### **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:

This bill may cause a minimal increase in workload on agencies holding records that contain victim information and responses to a lethality assessment. However, the workload will likely be absorbed within current resources.

**VI. Technical Deficiencies:**

None.

**VII. Related Issues:**

None.

**VIII. Statutes Affected:**

This bill substantially amends section 741.29 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/CS by Rules on April 8, 2025:**

The committee substitute allows for the disclosure of the lethality assessment form to the state attorney's office. The state attorney is authorized to share confidential information in furtherance of official duties and responsibilities, and to the parties in a pending criminal prosecution.

**CS by Governmental Oversight and Accountability on April 1, 2025:**

The committee substitute changes the effective date to "upon becoming a law," applies the exemption retroactively, allows the confidential and exempt information to be shared with domestic violence centers, and prohibits sharing the information with the state attorney's office.

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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