

FULL ANALYSIS

I. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

A. HOUSE PRINCIPLES ANALYSIS:
HB 649 w/CS does not implicate any House Principles.

B. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

Current Situation

Section 316.066(3)(a), F.S., requires law enforcement officers to file written reports of motor vehicle crashes. Those reports are public record.

However, s. 316.066(3)(c), F.S., provides that crash reports revealing the identity, the home or employment telephone number, the home or employment address, or other personal information concerning parties involved in a crash, received or prepared by any agency that regularly receives or prepares information concerning the parties to motor vehicle crashes is confidential and exempt from public disclosure. This information is to remain confidential and exempt for 60 days after the date the report is filed.

Section 316.066(3)(c), F.S., also provides exceptions to the public records exemption. The crash reports may be made available to the:

- Parties involved in the crash;
- Legal representatives of parties involved in the crash;
- Licensed insurance agents of parties involved in the crash;
- Insurers or insurers to which parties involved in the crash have applied for coverage;
- Persons under contract with insurers to provide claims or underwriting information;
- Prosecutorial authorities;
- Radio and television stations licensed by the Federal Communications Commission;
- Newspapers qualified to publish legal notices; and
- Free newspapers of general circulation.

Additionally, any local, state, or federal agency authorized to have access to crash reports under a separate provision of law is granted access in the furtherance of that agency's duties.

The primary policy reason for closing access to these crash reports for 60 days to persons or entities not specifically listed appears to be protection for crash victims and their families from illegal solicitation by attorneys. In its 2000 report on insurance fraud relating to personal injury protection coverage, the Fifteenth Statewide Grand Jury found that individuals called "runners" would pick up copies of crash reports filed with law enforcement agencies. The reports would then be used to solicit people involved in motor vehicle accidents. The Grand Jury found a strong correlation between illegal solicitations and the commission of a variety of frauds, including insurance fraud.

"[T]he wholesale availability of these reports is a major contributing factor to this illegal activity and likely the single biggest factor contributing to the high level of illegal solicitation."¹

The Grand Jury also found access to crash reports provides the ability to contact large numbers of potential clients in violation of Florida's prohibition of crash report use for commercial solicitation purposes. According to the Grand Jury, "virtually anyone involved in a car accident in the state is fair game to the intrusive and harassing tactics of solicitors."

¹ Second Interim Report of the Fifteenth Statewide Grand Jury, No. 95,746 (Fla. 2000).

In recent years, a number of community-based groups, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, have formed to offer services to the victims of traffic crashes, and to their families. These groups supplement the victims services offered by the Attorney General's Office, some State Attorney's offices and judicial circuits, and by several county and local law-enforcement agencies. These community-based groups can provide counseling or emotional support, assistance with contacting agencies for assistance or information, or even short-term financial assistance, such as paying for a hotel room or air fare for a crash victim's out-of-town family.

The Office of Attorney General maintains a database of hundreds of victims services/victims advocacy groups, some of which have completed that agency's tuition-free victims services professional development program offered several times a year. But there is no requirement for community-based victims services programs to be listed in the database, or to receive the training.

Effect of Proposed Changes

HB 649 w/CS adds "victims services programs" to the groups that can receive immediate access to vehicle crash reports, without having to wait 60 days.

Supporters of HB 689 w/CS say adding "victims services programs" to those entities with immediate access to crash reports will provide much-needed early assistance to crash victims and to their families, who can't always get the type of help they need quickly from governmental programs. This assistance may be emotional, technical, or even financial.

The also defines victims services programs as:

"Any community-based organization whose primary purpose is to act as an advocate for the victims and survivors of traffic crashes and for their families. The victims services offered by these programs may include grief and crisis counseling, assistance with preparing victims compensation claims excluding third-party legal action, connecting persons with other service providers, and providing emergency financial assistance."

C. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1: Amends s. 316.003, F.S., to define "victims services program" for the purposes of chapter 316, F.S.

Section 2: Amends s. 316.066, F.S., to add victims services programs to the list of persons or entities that have immediate access to traffic crash reports.

Section 3: Specifies this act shall take effect upon becoming a law.

II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

None.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.

III. COMMENTS

A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

1. Applicability of Municipality/County Mandates Provision:

This mandates provision is not applicable to HB 649 w/CS because the legislation does not require counties or municipalities to expend local funds or to raise local funds, nor does it reduce their state revenue-sharing.

2. Other:

None.

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

Not applicable.

C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

The bill's sponsor intends to offer an amendment at the Transportation Committee to define the phrase "victims services programs."

IV. AMENDMENTS/COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE & COMBINED BILL CHANGES

At its March 24, 2005, meeting, the House Transportation Committee adopted without objection an amendment to define "victims services program." It then voted 13-0 to report the bill as favorable with a committee substitute.