

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 Governmental Oversight and Accountability Committee

BILL: SB 2080

INTRODUCER: Governmental Oversight and Accountability Committee

SUBJECT: OGSR/Lifeline Assistance Plan Participants

DATE: February 2, 2012

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Seay	Roberts	GO	Favorable
2.			CU	
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				

I. Summary:

This bill is the result of the Governmental Oversight and Accountability Committee’s Open Government Sunset Review of the public records exemption for personal identifying information of Lifeline Assistance Plan participants. This public records exemption will expire October 2, 2012, unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature. This bill reenacts this public records exemption. In addition, the bill creates a penalty for the unauthorized intentional disclosure of the protected information by an officer or employee of the Public Service Commission.

Section 364.107, F.S. currently provides that personal identifying information of a participant in a telecommunication carrier’s Lifeline Assistance Plan held by the Public Service Commission is confidential and exempt from disclosure under the public records requirements of s. 119.07(1), F.S., and Article 1, Section 24(a) of the Florida Constitution.

This bill substantially amends section 364.107 of the Florida Statutes.

II. Present Situation:

Public Records Law

The State of Florida has a long history of providing public access to governmental records and meetings. The Florida Legislature enacted the first public records law in 1892.¹ One-hundred years later, Floridians adopted an amendment to the State Constitution that raised the statutory

¹ Section 1390, 1391 F.S. (Rev. 1892).

right of access to public records to a constitutional level.² Article I, s. 24, of the State Constitution, provides that:

(a) Every person has the right to inspect or copy any public record made or received in connection with the official business of any public body, officer, or employee of the state, or persons acting on their behalf, except with respect to records exempted pursuant to this section or specifically made confidential by this Constitution. This section specifically includes the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government and each agency or department created thereunder; counties, municipalities, and districts; and each constitutional officer, board, and commission, or entity created pursuant to law or this Constitution.

In addition to the State Constitution, the Public Records Act,³ which pre-dates the State Constitution's public records provisions, specifies conditions under which public access must be provided to records of an agency.⁴ Section 119.07(1)(a), F.S., states:

Every person who has custody of a public record shall permit the record to be inspected and copied by any person desiring to do so, at any reasonable time, under reasonable conditions, and under supervision by the custodian of the public records.

Unless specifically exempted, all agency records are available for public inspection. The term "public record" is broadly defined 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.⁵

The Florida Supreme Court has interpreted this definition to encompass all materials made or received by an agency in connection with official business which are used to perpetuate, communicate, or formalize knowledge.⁶ All such materials, regardless of whether they are in final form, are open for public inspection unless made exempt.⁷

² FLA. CONST. art. I, s. 24.

³ Chapter 119, F.S.

⁴ The word "agency" is defined in s. 119.011(2), F.S., 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." The Florida Constitution also establishes a right of access to any public record made or received in connection with the official business of any public body, officer, or employee of the state, or persons acting on their behalf, except those records exempted by law or the State Constitution. *See supra* note 3.

⁵ Section 119.011(12), F.S.

⁶ *Shevin v. Byron, Harless, Schaffer, Reid and Associates, Inc.*, 379 So. 2d 633, 640 (Fla. 1980).

⁷ *Wait v. Florida Power & Light Co.*, 372 So. 2d 420 (Fla. 1979).

There is a difference between records that the Legislature has made exempt from public inspection and those that are *confidential* and exempt. If the Legislature makes a record confidential and exempt, such information may not be released by an agency to anyone other than to the persons or entities designated in the statute.⁸ If a record is simply made exempt from disclosure requirements, an agency is not prohibited from disclosing the record in all circumstances.⁹

Only the Legislature is authorized to create exemptions to open government requirements.¹⁰ Exemptions must be created by general law, and such law must specifically state the public necessity justifying the exemption. Further, the exemption must be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law.¹¹ A bill enacting an exemption¹² may not contain other substantive provisions, although it may contain multiple exemptions that relate to one subject.¹³

Open Government Sunset Review Act

The Open Government Sunset Review Act (Act)¹⁴ provides for the systematic review, through a 5-year cycle ending October 2 of the fifth year following enactment, of an exemption from the Public Records Act or the Public Meetings Law.

The Act states that an exemption may be created, revised, or expanded only if it serves an identifiable public purpose and if the exemption is no broader than necessary to meet the public purpose it serves.¹⁵ An identifiable public purpose is served if the exemption meets one of three specified criteria and if the Legislature finds that the purpose is sufficiently compelling to override the strong public policy of open government and cannot be accomplished without the exemption. An exemption meets the three statutory criteria if it:

- Allows the state or its political subdivisions to effectively and efficiently administer a governmental program, which administration would be significantly impaired without the exemption;
- Protects information of a sensitive personal nature concerning individuals, the release of which would be defamatory or cause unwarranted damage to the good name or reputation of such individuals, or would jeopardize their safety; or
- Protects information of a confidential nature concerning entities, including, but not limited to, a formula, pattern, device, combination of devices, or compilation of information that is used to protect or further a business advantage over those who do not know or use it, the disclosure of which would injure the affected entity in the marketplace.¹⁶

The Act also requires the Legislature to consider the following:

⁸ Florida Attorney General Opinion 85-62.

⁹ *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So. 2d 683, 687 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991), *review denied*, 589 So. 2d 289 (Fla. 1991).

¹⁰ *Supra* note 1.

¹¹ *Memorial Hospital-West Volusia v. News-Journal Corporation*, 784 So. 2d 438 (Fla. 2001); *Halifax Hospital Medical Center v. News-Journal Corp.*, 724 So. 2d 567, 569 (Fla. 1999).

¹² Under s. 119.15, F.S., an existing exemption may be considered a new exemption if the exemption is expanded to cover additional records.

¹³ *Supra* note 1.

¹⁴ Section 119.15, F.S.

¹⁵ Section 119.15(6)(b), F.S.

¹⁶ *Id.*

- 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?

While the standards in the Open Government Sunset Review Act may appear to limit the Legislature in the exemption review process, those aspects of the act that are only statutory, as opposed to constitutional, do not limit the Legislature because one session of the Legislature cannot bind another.¹⁷ The Legislature is only limited in its review process by constitutional requirements.

Further, s. 119.15(8), F.S., makes explicit that:

notwithstanding s. 768.28 or any other law, neither the state or its political subdivisions nor any other public body shall be made party to any suit in any court or incur any liability for the repeal or revival and reenactment of an exemption under this section. The failure of the Legislature to comply strictly with this section does not invalidate an otherwise valid reenactment.

Lifeline Assistance Plan

The Lifeline Assistance Plan is part of a federal program designed to enable low-income households to afford basic local telephone service. Plan participants are eligible for a monthly credit. In Florida, the plan is administered by the Public Service Commission (PSC).¹⁸ In order to enroll in the plan, a telecommunications customer must submit an application with the Public Service Commission that requires certain personal identifying information. Prospective participants must submit his or her name, address, telephone number, service provider, and the last four digits of his or her social security number.¹⁹ In addition, any state agency that determines a person is eligible for Lifeline Assistance Plan service is required to immediately forward that person's information to the PSC to ensure that the person is automatically enrolled in the Lifeline program.²⁰

Public Records Exemption for Lifeline Assistance Plan participants

Section 364.107, F.S., provides that personal identifying information of a participant in a telecommunication carrier's Lifeline Assistance Plan held by the Public Service Commission is

¹⁷ *Straughn v. Camp*, 293 So. 2d 689, 694 (Fla. 1974).

¹⁸ Section 364.10, F.S.

¹⁹ Florida Public Service Commission, *Application for Link-Up Florida and Lifeline Assistance*, available at <http://www.psc.state.fl.us/utilities/telecomm/lifeline/LifelinePDFs/ApplicationEnglish.pdf>.

²⁰ Section 364.10(2)(g)(2), F.S.

confidential and exempt from disclosure under the public records requirements of s. 119.07(1), F.S., and Article I, Section 24(a) of the Florida Constitution.

This public records exemption specifies that the protected information may be released to the applicable telecommunications carrier for purposes directly connected with eligibility for, verification related to, or auditing of a Lifeline Assistance Plan.²¹ The exemption also authorizes an officer or employee of a telecommunications carrier to intentionally disclose the information only as:

- Authorized by the customer;
- Necessary for billing purposes;
- Required by subpoena, court order, or other process of court;
- Necessary to disclose to an agency as defined in s. 119.011 or a governmental entity for purposes directly connected with implementing service for, or verifying eligibility of, a participant in a Lifeline Assistance Plan or auditing a Lifeline Assistance Plan; or
- Otherwise authorized by law.

The exemption provides that any officer or employee of a telecommunications carrier who otherwise intentionally discloses the protected information commits a misdemeanor of the second degree, punishable as provided in s. 775.082 or s. 775.083, F.S.

Open Government Sunset Review of Section 364.107, F.S.

Based on an Open Government Sunset Review of this exemption, Senate professional staff of the Governmental Oversight and Accountability Committee recommended that the Legislature retain the public records exemption found in s. 364.107, F.S., which makes personal identifying information of Lifeline Assistance Plan participants held by the Public Service Commission confidential and exempt from disclosure.

The Open Government Sunset Review of this exemption concluded that there is a public necessity to continue to protect information of a sensitive personal nature concerning the participant and that without the exemption, the effective and efficient administration of this program would be impaired. The Sunset Review also recommended amending the current statute to provide that an officer or employee of the Public Service Commission who intentionally discloses the protected information in violation of the exemption's provisions is subject to the provided penalty, in addition to the officers and employees of a telecommunications carrier who are already subject to the penalty.

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Section 1 amends s. 364.107, F.S., reenacts and saves from repeal the public records exemption for personal identifying information for Lifeline Assistance Plan participants; and provides that an officer or employee of the Public Service Commission who intentionally discloses the exempt information commits a misdemeanor of the second degree.

²¹ Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules currently require at least twice-yearly verification that a participant still qualifies for the plan.

Section 2 provides an effective date of October 1, 2012.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

Because this bill does not expand the existing public records exemption, passage is not subject to the two-thirds vote requirement by both houses of the Legislature. The bill complies with the requirement of Article I, section 24 of the State Constitution that public records and meetings exemptions may only be addressed in legislation separate from substantive changes in law.

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:

None.

VIII. Additional Information:

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None.

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