

**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 Commerce and Tourism

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BILL: SB 228

INTRODUCER: Senator Bradley

SUBJECT: Notaries Public

DATE: January 22, 2021

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

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Harmsen	McKay	CM	<b>Pre-meeting</b>
2.			JU	
3.			RC	

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**I. Summary:**

SB 228 provides updates to the recently created process for online notarizations in ch. 117, F.S. In part, the bill:

- Institutes a self-certification requirement for remote online notarization service providers to ensure their eligibility to assist with the provision of notary services;
- Transfers specific duties from online notaries public to their remote online notarization service providers;
- Requires the Department of State to publish information about active and inactive online notaries public and remote online notarization service providers;
- Permits online notaries to rely on a foreign passport of an individual who is currently outside of the borders of the United States to perform an online notarization;
- Implements privacy requirements for personally identifying information given during an online notarization; and
- Provides several clarifications and technical updates to the process of online notarizations provided for in ch. 117, F.S.

The bill takes effect on October 1, 2021.

**II. Present Situation:**

In 2019, the Legislature substantially amended ch. 117, F.S., to authorize notaries public, civil-law notaries, and commissioners of deeds to register as online notaries to provide online notary services through two-way, remote audio-visual communication technology, similar to skype and zoom.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2019-71, L.O.F. CS/CS/HB 409 (2019) was signed into law on June 7, 2019, and took effect on January 1, 2020.

Florida is one of 29 states that permits remote online notarization (RON).<sup>2</sup> Virginia was the first to enact a RON law in 2012,<sup>3</sup> and the proposed SECURE Act in Congress would permit all current notaries public appointed in the U.S. to perform RON in connection with interstate transactions.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, RON has been expanded through federal agency guidance, state emergency powers, and specific court's administrative orders to allow necessary business to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup> The Florida Supreme Court issued an administrative order that permits notaries and all other parties qualified to administer oaths in Florida to swear a witness remotely by audio-video communication technology from a location within the State of Florida.<sup>6</sup>

### Online Notaries Public in Florida

The Department of State (department) governs the registration of online notaries public (online notaries), and as a prerequisite, requires registrants to:<sup>7</sup>

- Be commissioned or appointed as a notary public pursuant to ch. 117, F.S., a civil-law notary under ch. 118, or a commissioner of deeds under part IV of ch. 721;
- Complete training that covers the duties, obligations, and technology requirements for serving as an online notary;
- Pay a \$10 notary public registration fee;
- Have a current contract with a RON service provider whose technologies and credentialing processes satisfy the statutory minimum requirements; and
- Maintain a \$25,000 bond and a current errors and omissions insurance policy.

As of January 2021, 6,278 online notaries had registered with the department.<sup>8</sup>

An online notary can administer oaths or affirmations, take acknowledgements, attest to photocopies, verify vehicle identification numbers, and certify the contents of a safe-deposit box.

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<sup>2</sup> M.H.K. Tank, D. Whitaker, E.S.M. Caires, A. Grant, *Coronavirus: Federal and State Governments Work Quickly to Enable Remote Online Notarization to Meet Global Crisis*, DLAPiper Publications (Jan. 4, 2021), [https://www.dlapiper.com/en/us/insights/publications/2020/03/coronavirus-federal-and-state-governments-work-quickly-to-enable-remote-online-notarization/#:~:text=Currently%2C%20there%20are%2028%20states,Dakota\\*%2C%20Tennessee%2C%20Texas%2C](https://www.dlapiper.com/en/us/insights/publications/2020/03/coronavirus-federal-and-state-governments-work-quickly-to-enable-remote-online-notarization/#:~:text=Currently%2C%20there%20are%2028%20states,Dakota*%2C%20Tennessee%2C%20Texas%2C) (last visited Jan. 22, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Lauren Silverman, *Notaries are Starting to Put Down the Stamp and Pick Up a Webcam*, National Public Radio, All Tech Considered (June 12, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2017/06/12/532586426/notaries-are-starting-to-put-down-the-stamp-and-pick-up-a-webcam> (last visited Jan. 22, 2021). See Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Notary Public Division, *A Handbook for Virginia Notary Publics*, <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/media/governorvirginiagov/secretary-of-administration/Virginia-Remote-Online-Notarization-Guidance.pdf> (last visited Jan. 22, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Tank, et al. *supra* note 2. Securing and Enabling Commerce Using Remote and Electronic Notarization Act of 2020, S.B. 3533, 116<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2020), available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3533/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%223533%22%5D%7D&r=4&s=2> (last visited Jan. 22, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Tank, et al. *supra* note 2.

<sup>6</sup> Florida Supreme Court, *In Re: COVID-19 Emergency Procedures for the Administering of Oaths via Remote Audio-Video Communication Equipment*, Fla. Admin. Order No. AOSC20-16, (Mar. 18, 2020) available at <https://www.floridasupremecourt.org/content/download/632105/file/AOSC20-16.pdf> (last visited Jan. 22, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Section 117.225, F.S.; Fla. Admin. Code, R. 1N-7.001 (2020). See also, Department of State, *Remote Online Notary Public*, <https://dos.myflorida.com/sunbiz/other-services/notaries/remote-online-notary-public/> (last visited Jan. 22, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Email from Department of State staff (Jan. 13, 2021) (on file with the Senate Committee on Commerce and Tourism).

The online notary must perform the notarial service from Florida, but the individual who seeks the notarial service (principal) and any witnesses can login to the RON platform from anywhere in the world. An online notary may charge a fee of no more than \$25 for performing a notarial service.<sup>9</sup>

Online notaries differ from notaries public in that they may use audio-visual technology to notarize a document for a principal who is in a different physical location; a notary public must be physically present with the principal to notarize a document. Additionally, although notaries public can solemnize marriages, an online notary cannot.<sup>10</sup>

### **Remote Online Notarization (RON) Service Providers**

A RON service provider is a person that provides audio-video communication technology and related processes, services, software, data storage, or other services to online notaries to facilitate their performance of online notarizations.<sup>11</sup> More concretely, a RON service provider hosts a platform that provides the audiovisual technology that allows the notary and signer to see, hear and communicate with each other over the internet.<sup>12</sup>

### **Online Notarization**

To perform an online notarization service, an online notary must first determine whether the principal is located outside of Florida at the time of notarization. If so, the online notary must confirm that the principal understands that the notarization will occur according to Florida law.

Next, the online notary must confirm the principal's identity.<sup>13</sup> An online notary may do so by documenting that he or she personally knows the principal, or, if the notary does not know the principal, by documenting all of the following:

- The principal's remote presentation of a government-issued identification;<sup>14</sup>
- The notary's credential analysis<sup>15</sup> of the identification to ensure its validity; and
- The notary's identity proofing<sup>16</sup> of the principal, wherein a third-party provides knowledge-based authentication questions that must be correctly answered by the principal in a limited amount of time.

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<sup>9</sup> Section 117.275, F.S.

<sup>10</sup> Section 117.209(1), F.S.

<sup>11</sup> Section 117.201(14), F.S.

<sup>12</sup> David Thun, The National Notary Magazine, *The State of Remote Online Notarization* (Nov. 19, 2019), available at <https://www.nationalnotary.org/notary-bulletin/blog/2019/11/the-state-of-remote-online-notarization> (last visited Jan. 22, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Section 117.265(4), F.S.

<sup>14</sup> Section 117.05(5)(b)2 lists acceptable identification as: Florida identification card or driver license; a U.S. passport; a passport issued by a foreign government if it is stamped by the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services; a driver license or id card issued by a state other than Florida, or a territory in the U.S., Canada, or Mexico; an id card issued by the U.S. armed forces; a veteran health id card; an inmate id card issued by if the principal is still in the Florida Department of Correction's or U.S. Department of Justice's custody; an id card issued by the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services; or, where all of the inmate's identifications were confiscated upon his or her confinement—a sworn, written statement from a law enforcement officer that states that the inmate is the person whose signature is to be notarized.

<sup>15</sup> Section 117.201(3), F.S. *See also*, s. 117.295(3)(b), F.S.

<sup>16</sup> Section 117.201(7), F.S. *See also*, s. 117.295(3)(a), F.S.

If the notary cannot document these steps, then he or she is not permitted to perform the online notarization.

Should the online notarization also require a witness, the online notary must confirm the witness' identity.<sup>17</sup> If the witness is physically present with the principal, he or she can confirm his or her identity by stating his or her name and current address on the recording. If the witness is connected via audio-visual communication technology (outside of the principal's presence), the online notary must confirm the witness' identity by presentation of government-issued identification and performance of a credential analysis and identity proofing, as required for the principal.

Should the notary succeed in confirming the pertinent identities, then the notary may witness the principal electronically sign the document. Then the notary adds his or her unique electronic signature and digital notary seal using tamper-evident technology that would document any subsequent change to the document.<sup>18</sup>

For all online notarizations, an online notary must:

- Make and maintain a recording of the audio-visual component (video) of the notarization, including the credential analysis and identity proofing he or she performed, if any;<sup>19</sup> and
- Create an entry in his or her electronic journal of notarizations that notes specific information about the notarization, including types of identification used and the names and addresses of all parties involved.<sup>20</sup>

The online notary must maintain both the electronic journal and the recordings for at least 10 years after the notarization. An online notary, his or her estate, or guardian may transfer these documents to a secure repository should he or she become incapable of maintaining them before the 10 years have elapsed.<sup>21</sup>

### III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Section 117.021, F.S., currently grants a notary public the right to perform notarial acts, with respect to an electronic record, with whatever form of technology he or she chooses. **Section 1** amends s. 117.021, F.S., to accommodate an employer's requirement that a notary public who performs notarial acts as a part of his or her job use technology and providers chosen by the employer within the scope of employment. This allows a business to standardize its services and contracts. The notary public's right to use his or her preferred technology outside of the scope of employment is not changed by this amendment.

**Section 2** amends s. 117.05, F.S., to clarify that a notary public may not charge a fee in excess of \$10 per each signature per document, rather than for each "notarial act."

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<sup>17</sup> Section 117.285, F.S.

<sup>18</sup> Section 117.255, F.S. *See also*, Silverman *supra* note 3.

<sup>19</sup> Section 117.245(2), F.S.

<sup>20</sup> Section 117.245(1), F.S.

<sup>21</sup> Section 117.245(4), F.S.

**Section 3** amends s. 117.201, F.S., to permit an online notary to use a passport issued by a foreign government that *does not* include an immigration stamp from the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration services to validate a principal's identity. This accommodates online notarizations where the principal has not entered the United States, and appears via audio-visual technology for the notarization.

**Section 4** amends s. 117.215, F.S., to make non-substantive changes to clarify that a notary must verify the identification of a witness who is not in the principal's physical presence at the time of the notarization in the same manner an online notary verifies the principal's identity. It is unclear how this amendment will affect witnesses who are in the principal's physical presence at the time of notarization, as s. 117.285(2), F.S., allows a physically-present witness' identity to be confirmed by the witness' statement of his or her name and current address on the audio-video recording.

**Section 5** amends s. 117.225(1), F.S., to change the requirement that online notary registrants submit a copy of their commission or appointment as a notary public, civil-law notary, or commissioner of deeds, to accommodate instances in which the original copy of the appointment or commission is lost. The amendment now requires *proof of* a commission or appointment as a notary public, civil-law notary, or commissioner of deeds.

This section also amends s. 117.225(5), F.S., to permit online notary registrants to identify one or more RON service providers with whom they have contracted to provide online notarizations.

**Sections 6 and 7** amend ss. 117.245 and 117.255, F.S., to transfer the duty to maintain a recording of the audio-video communication in which an online notarization was performed from the online notary to the RON service provider used for the services. The RON service provider must keep a copy of the recording at least 10 years, but it does not have a duty to transfer its maintained recordings to a repository should it be unable to meet the repository requirement.

The bill also extends the duty to provide access to the RON service provider's stored recordings, or a copy thereof, to specific parties upon their request. The bill permits the RON service provider to charge a fee of no more than \$20 for producing a copy of the recording, and requires disclosure of the fee in a timely manner.

Section 6 is also reorganized to clarify an online notary's duty to note in his or her electronic journal that a principal's government-issued identification satisfied the credential analysis only when the online notary relied on a principal's identification to prove his or her identity, not in cases where the online notary personally knew the principal.

**Section 8** amends s. 117.265, F.S., to offer an accommodation to employers of online notaries to allow them to specify the RON service provider the online notary may use in his or her capacity as an employee, similar to the change made for notary public employers in section 1 of the bill. This amendment also reiterates that an online notary public may choose to use any RON service provider outside of his or her employment relationship.

**Section 9** amends s. 117.275, F.S., to specify that an online notary may not charge a fee in excess of \$25 per signature per document, rather than for each online notarization. It further

clarifies that this fee ceiling does not govern fees charged by a RON service provider, and states that online notarization services are not considered closing services, as defined in s. 627.7711, F.S.

**Section 10** amends s. 117.295, F.S., to create a process whereby RON service providers must certify with the department that they are eligible, pursuant to statute and rule, to provide audio-visual communication and related processes for assistance in the provision of online notarization services. The bill requires a certified RON service provider to update its certification within 60 days of the effective date of any amendment to ch. 117, F.S., or to any of the rules adopted pursuant thereto.

While these eligibility requirements exist in current statute, the duty to confirm the RON service provider's eligibility rests with the online notary at the time of his or her registration. **Section 5** deletes the online notary's duty to confirm a RON service provider's eligibility in s. 117.225(5), F.S., thereby completing the transfer of RON service provider eligibility certification from online notary to RON service provider.

Section 10 further amends s. 117.295, F.S., to require that the department publish on its website both a list of each online notary public, his or her past and present RON service providers, and the effective dates during which the online notary used the RON service provider; and a list of all RON service providers who have an active self-certification with the department.

The bill deletes an obsolete date from the department's rulemaking authority, but maintains the department's broad grant of authority to adopt forms, processes, and interim or emergency rules necessary to register online notaries.

Lastly, section 10 implements privacy standards that prohibit a RON service provider from using, selling, or offering to sell or transfer for use or sale any personally identifying information that it obtained under part II of ch. 117, F.S., from a principal, witness, or person named in a record that was presented for notarization, except in cases where provision of the information is necessary to:

- Facilitate the notarial act;
- Effect, administer, enforce, service, or process a record provided by or on behalf of a principal or the transaction for which the record was provided;
- Comply with federal, state, or local law, or to comply with a lawful subpoena or court order; or
- Engage in the sale, merger, transfer, or exchange of all or a portion of the RON service provider's business—if the transferee agrees to comply with the statutory privacy restrictions in s. 117.295(8), F.S.

**Section 11** provides that the bill takes effect on October 1, 2021.

**IV. Constitutional Issues:****A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:**

Not applicable. The bill does not require counties and municipalities to spend funds, reduce counties' or municipalities' ability to raise revenue, or reduce the percentage of state tax shared with counties and municipalities.

**B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:**

None.

**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:**

Notaries public and online notaries may change their fee structure pursuant to the amendments to ss. 117.05 and 117.275, F.S., which apply the fee ceilings to each signature per document, rather than "any one notarial act" or "for performing an online notarization." This could result in higher costs to individuals who seek the services of a notary public or online notary.

RON service providers may have to update terms and processes to implement the privacy restrictions in this bill.

**C. Government Sector Impact:**

The department will be required to implement processes to publish and maintain lists of RON service providers and online notaries. Additionally, the department may have to adopt forms or rules to implement the certification of RON service providers.

**VI. Technical Deficiencies:**

None.

**VII. Related Issues:**

It is unclear what will occur to the recordings made and retained by RON service providers should the RON service provider become unable to retain the recording for 10 years. Previously, online notaries were required to transfer their recordings to a secure repository should they become incapable of meeting the retention requirement, but the bill has no such requirement for RON service providers.

Section 117.215, F.S., addresses witnesses, both those who appear on a RON platform in the physical presence of the principal and those who link up remotely from the principal. Section 4 of the bill amends s. 117.215, F.S., to address only witnesses who are not in the principal's physical presence. It is unclear how this will affect identification procedures for witnesses who are in the physical presence of the principal.

Section 10 of the bill requires RON service providers to update their certification within 60 days of any amendment to ch. 117, F.S., or to rules adopted pursuant to the chapter. This may be burdensome on the RON service providers, who might be required to update even when changes that do not apply to them are made to ch. 117, F.S. (part I addresses traditional notaries public).

Section 10 provides the department with broad emergency rulemaking authority with no end date. It is unclear whether emergency rulemaking authority is necessary to adopt rules to implement the bill. This section also refers to "interim rulemaking," which is not a process that exists in Florida law.

**VIII. Statutes Affected:**

This bill substantially amends the following sections of the Florida Statutes: 117.021, 117.05, 117.201, 117.215, 117.225, 117.245, 117.255, 117.265, 117.275, 117.295.

**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.