

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 2717

As Reported By House Committee On:
Criminal Justice & Corrections

Title: An act relating to certification of peace officers.

Brief Description: Modifying provisions pertaining to the certification of peace officers.

Sponsors: Representatives Ballasiotes, O'Brien, Kagi, Regala, Schoesler, Lovick, Koster, Delvin, Cairnes and Hurst; by request of Criminal Justice Training Commission.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Criminal Justice & Corrections: 2/1/00, 2/2/00 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires all Washington peace officers, as a condition of continuing employment, to timely obtain and retain basic certification as peace officers.
- Establishes a five-member hearings board to both hear the cases and make the final administrative decisions regarding a law enforcement officer's certification.
- Requires that all contents of personnel action reports, files, and other information obtained by the commission, relating to an officer's certification or decertification, remain confidential and exempt from public disclosure.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE & CORRECTIONS

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives Ballasiotes, Republican Co-Chair; O'Brien, Democratic Co-Chair; Lovick, Democratic Vice Chair; B. Chandler; Constantine; Kagi and Koster.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 1 member: Representative Cairnes, Republican Vice Chair.

Staff: Yvonne Walker (786-7841).

Background:

Law enforcement officers hired must commence basic training during the first six months of their employment unless his or her basic training requirement has been waived or extended by the CJTC. Successful completion of the basic training requirement is a requisite to the continuation of employment of new officers with a law enforcement agency.

Washington does not have a statewide certification process for peace officers. As a result, basic law enforcement certification or re-certification such as a probation or field training is not always required of new peace officers or even peace officers who have left full-time service and returned. In addition, a hiring agency is often not able to easily verify an applicant's personnel file, termination papers, criminal investigation files, and any other information that may be necessary in making a hiring decision of an officer that has applied for an employment position within their agency. This results in peace officers who were terminated from one agency to be able to be re-hired at a new agency within the state. County law enforcement agencies often act and operate independently from other county law enforcement agencies.

Summary of Bill:

As a condition of continuing employment as peace officers, all Washington peace officers must timely obtain and retain basic certification as peace officers.

As a prerequisite to certification, a peace officer must release to the CJTC all personnel files, termination papers, criminal investigation files, or any other files, papers, or information that are directly related to the certification or decertification of the officer.

Denial or Revocation of Certification. A peace officer's certification may be denied or revoked if the officer has:

- failed to timely meet all requirements for obtaining a certificate of basic law enforcement training, or an authorized exemption from the training (certification lapses when there is a break of more than 24 consecutive months in the officer's service as a full-time law enforcement officer);
- knowingly falsified or omitted information on a training application or certification to the commission;
- been convicted of a felony;
- been discharged for misconduct and the discharge was final;

- obtained a certificate which was previously issued by administrative error on the part of the commission; or
- interfered with an investigation or action for denial or revocation of a certificate by knowingly making a false statement to the commission or tampering with evidence or intimidating any witness.

Within 15 days of any termination or resignation of any peace officer, the agency of termination must notify the commission and upon the request of the commission, provide any additional personnel documentation.

Re-application for Certification. A person denied certification based upon dismissal or withdrawal from a basic law enforcement academy for any reason, except discharge for disqualifying misconduct, is eligible for readmission for certification. A person denied certification for disqualifying misconduct may, five years after the revocation or denial, petition the commission for reinstatement of the certificate. A person whose certification is denied or revoked due solely to a criminal conviction may petition the commission for reinstatement immediately upon a final judicial reversal of the conviction.

Procedures for Denying or Revoking Certification. Any law enforcement officer or duly authorized representative of a law enforcement agency may submit a written complaint to the commission charging that a peace officer's certificate should be denied or revoked, and specifying the grounds for the charge. The commission has sole discretion whether to investigate a complaint, and whether to investigate matters relating to certification, denial of certification, or revocation of certification without restriction as to the source or the existence of a complaint. A person who files a complaint in good faith is immune from suit or any civil action related to the filing or the contents of the complaint.

If the commission determines, upon investigation, that there is probable cause to believe that a peace officer's certification should be denied or revoked, the commission must prepare and serve upon the officer a statement of charges. Service on the officer must be by mail or by personal service on the officer. Notice of the charges must also be mailed to or otherwise served upon the officer's agency of termination and any current law enforcement agency employer.

The officer must, within 60 days of communication of the statement of charges, request a hearing before the hearings board. Failure of the officer to request a hearing within the 60 day period constitutes a default whereby the officer will lose the right to an adjudicative proceeding. The CJTC may proceed to resolve the case without further notice to the officer. If a hearing is requested, the date of the hearing must be scheduled no earlier than 90 days nor later than 180 days after communication of the charges to the officer. The 180 day period may be extended on mutual agreement of the parties or for good cause. The commission must give

written notice of the hearing at least 20 days prior to the hearing, specifying the date, time, and place of the hearing.

Hearings Panel. A five-member hearings board must both hear the case and make the commission's final administrative decision. When an appeal is filed in relation to decertification of a peace officer, who is not a peace officer of the Washington State Patrol, the hearings board must consist of the following persons: (1) a police chief, (2) a sheriff, (3) two police officers who are at or below the level of first line supervisor, who are from city or county law enforcement agencies and who have at least 10 years of experience, and (4) one person who is not currently a peace officer and who represents a community college or a four-year college or university.

When an appeal is filed in relation to decertification of a peace officer of the Washington State Patrol, the commission must appoint to the hearings panel: (1) either one police chief or one sheriff, (2) one administrator of the state patrol, (3) one peace officer who is at or below the level of first line supervisor, who is from a city or county law enforcement agency, and who has at least 10 years' experience as a peace officer, (4) one state patrol officer who is at or below the level of first line supervisor, and who has at least 10 years' experience as a peace officer, and (5) one person who is not currently a peace officer and who represents a community college or four-year college or university.

Persons appointed to a hearings panel by the commission must, in relation to any decertification matter on which they sit, have the powers, duties, and immunities, and are entitled to the emoluments, including travel expenses, of regular commission members. The commission, its boards, and individuals acting on behalf of the commission and its boards are immune from suit in any civil or criminal action performed in the course of their duties.

Disclosure of Records. The contents of personnel action reports, all files, papers, and other information obtained by the commission, and all investigative files relating to an officer's certification or decertification are confidential and exempt from public disclosure. Such records are not subject to public disclosure, subpoena, or discovery proceedings in any civil action.

Records which are confidential may be reviewed and copied by the following persons: (1) by the officer involved or the officer's counsel or authorized representative, who may review the officer's file and may submit any additional exculpatory or explanatory evidence, statements, or other information, any of which must be included in the file; (2) by a duly authorized representative of the agency of termination, or a current employing law enforcement agency, which may review and copy its employee officer's file; or (3) by a representative of or investigator for the commission.

Records which are otherwise confidential and exempt may also be inspected at the offices of the commission by a duly authorized representative of a law enforcement agency considering an application for employment by a person who is the subject of a record. A copy of records may later be obtained by an agency after it hires the applicant. Upon a determination that a complaint is without merit, that a personnel action report filed does not merit action by the commission, or that a matter otherwise investigated by the commission does not merit action, the commission shall purge the records.

The hearings, but not the deliberations, of the hearings board are open to the public. The transcripts, admitted evidence, and written decisions of the hearings board on behalf of the commission are not confidential or exempt from public disclosure, and are subject to subpoena and discovery proceedings in civil actions.

Every individual, legal entity, and agency of federal, state, or local government is immune from civil liability, for providing information to the commission in good faith.

Authority of the Criminal Justice Training Commission. The commission has the authority to:

- adopt, amend, or repeal rules as necessary;
- issue subpoenas and administer oaths in connection with investigations and hearings;
- take depositions and other procedures as needed in investigations and hearings;
- appoint members of a hearings board;
- grant, deny, or revoke certification of peace officers;
- designate individuals authorized to sign subpoenas and statements of charges; and
- hire investigative, administrative, and clerical staff or enter into contracts for professional services necessary to carry out its duties.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on February 1, 2000.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect on January 1, 2001.

Testimony For: Washington is one of the only states this side of the Mississippi that fails to have a certification process for its peace officers. Although many citizens trust law enforcement officers with their safety, their children, and even allow them in their homes, some bad officers are still able to slip through the cracks. We owe it to the citizens of this state to make sure that our peace officers, to whom we have bestowed a lot of authority and power, have certification or be decertified.

Currently, not all law enforcement agencies are authorized to share information regarding the personnel files of one of their officers due to liability issues. As a result, law enforcement officers that are terminated from one law enforcement agency are able to be rehired at another law enforcement agency in another county.

We owe it to the citizens of the state to demand high standards of our peace officers and if they are not certified then they should find another line of work.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: Dan LaRoche, Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs; Greg Lineberry, Washington Council of Police and Sheriffs; Michael Transue, Seattle King County Police Officers; and Michael Parsons, Criminal Justice Training Commission.