

SENATE BILL REPORT

SHB 3144

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
Consumer Protection & Housing, February 26, 2008

Title: An act relating to improving outreach to consumers through creation of a consumer protection web site and information line.

Brief Description: Creating a consumer protection web site.

Sponsors: House Committee on Technology, Energy & Communications (originally sponsored by Representatives Liias, Loomis, Hunt, Miloscia, Rolfes, Upthegrove, Linville, Green, VanDeWege, Morrell, Conway, Kelley, Nelson, Santos and Ormsby).

Brief History: Passed House: 2/04/08, 94-0.

Committee Activity: Consumer Protection & Housing: 2/22/08, 2/26/08 [DPA].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON CONSUMER PROTECTION & HOUSING

Majority Report: Do pass as amended.

Signed by Senators Weinstein, Chair; Kauffman, Vice Chair; Honeyford, Ranking Minority Member; Delvin, Haugen, Jacobsen, Kilmer, McCaslin and Tom.

Staff: Vanessa Firnhaber-Baker (786-7471)

Background: Office of Regulatory Assistance. The Washington Office of Regulatory Assistance (ORA) was created in the Office of Financial Management in 2003 as an expansion of the Office of Permit Assistance. The ORA helps answer permitting questions and provides access to information about state regulations. In addition, the ORA assists with coordinating between the layers of state, local, and federal permit review.

The ORA has two primary ways it delivers its services: a regulatory help desk assisting approximately 2,000 callers per year; and case managers located in regional offices who facilitate, coordinate, and help resolve disputes that can arise in permitting. The ORA acts as an informal coordinating agency for the permitting processes at the Department of Ecology, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Department of Natural Resources, and the Department of Health. The ORA also maintains an extensive website, which includes permitting information and a link to the Business Portal: <http://www.ora.wa.gov/>.

Business Portal. In January 2006 several state agencies, and a representative for local jurisdictions, signed a Project Charter, which created a process to develop and implement a one-stop business portal for Washington citizens and businesses called the Business Portal. In February 2006, the Governor in Executive Order 06-02 directed all regulatory, taxing, and

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permitting agencies to improve and simplify service to Washington citizens. Part of that directive was to develop the Business Portal as a single, secure online portal to make licensing, permitting, regulatory approvals or filings, and tax collections easier for businesses.

Approximately 22 state and local government agencies were involved in the development of the Business Portal. The final product was released on June 21, 2007: <http://www.business.wa.gov/>.

Attorney General's Office. The Attorney General's Office (AGO) is responsible for enforcing many of the state's consumer protection laws. The Consumer Protection Division of the AGO performs several consumer protection related functions, including educating the public on issues such as identity theft; mediating complaints between consumers and businesses; and administering the state's lemon law for new motor vehicle warranty enforcement.

The AGO's website maintains some consumer protection related information on its website. In addition, many state agencies provide consumer protection related information on their individual websites

Summary of Bill (Recommended Amendments): The Department of Information Services (DIS) must coordinate among state agencies to develop a consumer protection website, which will serve as a one-stop website for consumer information. At a minimum, the website must provide information or links to information on:

- insurance information provided by the Office of the Insurance Commissioner;
- child care information provided by the Department of Early Learning;
- financial information provided by the Department of Financial Institutions;
- health care information provided by the Department of Health;
- home care information provided by the Home Care Quality Authority;
- licensing information provided by the Department of Licensing; and
- other information available on existing state agency websites that may be helpful to consumers.

By July 1, 2008, state agencies must report to the DIS on whether they maintain resources for consumers that could be made available through the consumer protection website.

The DIS must make the consumer protection website available to the public by September 1, 2008.

By December 1, 2008, the DIS, in coordination with other state agencies, must develop a plan on how to build upon the consumer protection website to create a consumer protection portal. This plan must also include an examination of the feasibility of developing a toll-free information line to support the consumer protection portal.

The AGO must conduct a study to: (1) determine the portion of consumer complaints alleging consumer protection act (CPA) violations that are resolved to the consumer's satisfaction; and (2) develop sanctions that the AGO may use if CPA complaint has merit and the business fails to respond adequately to the complaint. This study must be conducted using the AGO's existing funds and must report its findings to the legislature by December 1, 2008.

EFFECT OF CHANGES MADE BY CONSUMER PROTECTION & HOUSING COMMITTEE (Recommended Amendments): A section is added that directs the AGO to

conduct a study on the resolution of consumer complaints alleging CPA violations and the development of new sanctions to use if a business fails to respond adequately to a consumer complaint.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Substitute Bill: PRO: Washington has a lot of identity theft and consumer protection complaints. The state provides a lot of resources on consumer protection, but these resources are located in many different websites. This can make it difficult for consumers to navigate these resources. This will create a central location for consumers to access all the information.

This is a good first step and we can build on the website and add a toll-free number if needed. Washington needs more consumer protections; the Attorney General's consumer complaint process has no teeth. This bill is a step in the right direction.

OTHER: DIS will be creating this website from the Access Washington webpage. DIS will not maintain the content with this bill; it will just provide links to other sites. The study will then determine how to create a comprehensive portal.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Representative Marko Liias, prime sponsor; Walter Delano, citizen.

OTHER: Tamara Jones, DIS.