AN ACT Relating to prohibiting nondisclosure and nondisparagement provisions from employers regarding illegal acts of discrimination, harassment, retaliation, wage and hour violations, and sexual assault; adding a new section to chapter 49.44 RCW; creating new sections; repealing RCW 49.44.210; and prescribing penalties.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. Sec. 1. The legislature recognizes that there exists a strong public policy in favor of the disclosure of illegal discrimination, illegal harassment, illegal retaliation, wage and hour violations, and sexual assault, that is recognized as illegal under Washington state, federal, or common law, or that is recognized as against a clear mandate of public policy, that occurs at the workplace, at work-related events coordinated by or through the employer, between employees, or between an employer and an employee, whether on or off the employment premises. Nondisclosure and nondisparagement provisions in agreements between employers and current, former, prospective employees, and independent contractors have become routine and perpetuate illegal conduct by silencing those who are victims or who have knowledge of illegal discrimination, illegal harassment, illegal retaliation, wage and hour violations, or sexual assault. It is the intent of the legislature to prohibit
nondisclosure and nondisparagement provisions in agreements, which defeat the strong public policy in favor of disclosure.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 2. A new section is added to chapter 49.44 RCW to read as follows:

(1) A provision in an agreement by an employer and an employee not to disclose or discuss conduct, or the existence of a settlement involving conduct, that the employee reasonably believed under Washington state, federal, or common law to be illegal discrimination, illegal harassment, illegal retaliation, a wage and hour violation, or sexual assault, or that is recognized as against a clear mandate of public policy, is void and unenforceable. Prohibited nondisclosure and nondisparagement provisions in agreements concern conduct that occurs at the workplace, at work-related events coordinated by or through the employer, between employees, or between an employer and an employee, whether on or off the employment premises. Prohibited nondisclosure and nondisparagement provisions include those contained in employment agreements, independent contractor agreements, agreements to pay compensation in exchange for the release of a legal claim, or any other agreement between an employer and an employee.

(2) This section does not prohibit the enforcement of a provision in any agreement that prohibits the disclosure of the amount paid in settlement of a claim.

(3) It is a violation of this section for an employer to discharge or otherwise discriminate or retaliate against an employee for disclosing or discussing conduct that the employee reasonably believed to be illegal harassment, illegal discrimination, illegal retaliation, wage and hour violations, or sexual assault, that is recognized as illegal under state, federal, or common law, or that is recognized as against a clear mandate of public policy, occurring in the workplace, at work-related events coordinated by or through the employer, between employees, or between an employer and an employee, whether on or off the employment premises.

(4) It is a violation of this section for an employer to request or require that an employee enter into any agreement provision that is prohibited by this section.

(5) It is a violation of this section for an employer to attempt to enforce a provision of an agreement prohibited by this section, whether through a lawsuit, a threat to enforce, or any other attempt
to influence a party to comply with a provision in any agreement that is prohibited by this section.

(6) This section does not prohibit an employer and an employee from protecting trade secrets, proprietary information, or confidential information that does not involve illegal acts.

(7) An employer who violates this section after the effective date of this section is liable in a civil cause of action for actual or statutory damages of $10,000, whichever is more, as well as reasonable attorneys' fees and costs.

(8) For the purposes of this section, "employee" means a current, former, or prospective employee or independent contractor.

(9) A nondisclosure or nondisparagement provision in any agreement signed by an employee who is a Washington resident is governed by Washington law.

(10) The provisions of this section are to be liberally construed to fulfill its remedial purpose.

(11) As an exercise of the state's police powers and for remedial purposes, this section is retroactive from the effective date of this section only to invalidate nondisclosure or nondisparagement provisions in agreements created before the effective date of this section. This subsection does not apply to nondisclosure or nondisparagement provisions contained in an agreement to pay compensation in exchange for the release of a legal claim.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 3. The repeal in section 4 of this act does not affect any existing right acquired or liability or obligation incurred under the statute repealed in this act or under any rule or order adopted under that statute, nor does it affect any proceeding instituted under that statute.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 4. RCW 49.44.210 (Nondisclosure agreements that prevent disclosure of sexual assault or sexual harassment prohibited—Settlement agreement exception) and 2018 c 117 s 1 are each repealed.

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