

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1169

As Reported by House Committee On:
Civil Rights & Judiciary

Title: An act relating to legal financial obligations.

Brief Description: Concerning legal financial obligations.

Sponsors: Representatives Simmons, Taylor, Berry, Bateman, Goodman, Wylie, Santos and Ormsby.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Civil Rights & Judiciary: 1/18/23, 1/27/23 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Eliminates the crime victim penalty assessment and establishes alternative state funding for crime victim and witness programs.
- Eliminates the DNA database fee and establishes alternative state funding for the DNA database and DNA collection costs.
- Requires a court, upon motion of an offender, to waive a previously imposed crime victim penalty assessment or DNA database fee.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CIVIL RIGHTS & JUDICIARY

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 6 members: Representatives Hansen, Chair; Farivar, Vice Chair; Entenman, Goodman, Peterson and Walen.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 4 members: Representatives Walsh, Ranking Minority Member; Graham, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Cheney and Rude.

Staff: Edie Adams (786-7180).

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Background:

When a defendant is convicted of a crime, the court may impose legal financial obligations (LFOs) as part of the judgment and sentence. Legal financial obligations include: victim restitution, court costs, costs associated with the defendant's prosecution and sentence, criminal offense fines, and other fees, penalties, and assessments. Some types of LFOs are mandatory and must be imposed by the court, including the crime victim penalty assessment and the DNA database fee.

Crime Victim Penalty Assessment.

A crime victim penalty assessment must be imposed on any adult convicted of a criminal offense in superior court, with some exceptions for vehicle-related offenses. The penalty assessment is \$500 in the case of a felony or gross misdemeanor offense and \$250 in the case of a misdemeanor offense. A juvenile offender who is found to have committed a most serious offense must be assessed a penalty assessment in the amount of \$100. One hundred percent of the crime victim penalty assessment amounts received are transferred to the county treasurer and must be deposited into a fund for the support of comprehensive programs to encourage and facilitate testimony by the victims of crimes and witnesses to crimes.

DNA Database Fee.

A biological sample must be collected for purposes of DNA identification analysis from every person convicted of a felony or certain other offenses, and the court must impose a \$100 fee as part of the sentence for the offense. The court is not required to impose the DNA database fee if the state has previously collected the offender's DNA as a result of a prior conviction.

Eighty percent of the fee is deposited into the DNA Database Account, and 20 percent of the fee is transmitted to the local agency that collected the biological sample. Money in the DNA Database Account may be expended by the chief of the Washington State Patrol or the chief's designee only for the creation, operation, and maintenance of the DNA database.

Summary of Bill:

Crime Victim Penalty Assessment.

The crime victim penalty assessment is eliminated. Upon motion by the defendant, the court must waive any crime victim penalty assessment imposed prior to the effective date of the act. Provisions indicating the crime victim penalty assessment may not be reduced, waived, or converted to community restitution hours are removed. Any amounts received by the clerk of the superior court for crime victim penalty assessments imposed prior to the effective date of the act must continue to be transferred to the county treasurer for deposit into a fund for the support of comprehensive crime victim and witness programs.

A new Crime Victim and Witness Assistance Account is created in the State Treasury. The account must consist of funds appropriated by the Legislature for comprehensive crime victim and witness programs. Every quarter, the State Treasurer must distribute moneys in the account to counties on the basis of a distribution factor that is based on a combination of factors, including population, crime rate, and criminal filings. Counties may use the funds only for comprehensive crime victim and witness programs.

DNA Database Fee.

The DNA database fee is eliminated. Upon motion of the offender, the court must waive any DNA database fee imposed prior to the effective date of the act. Any amounts collected for DNA database fees imposed prior to the effective date of the act will continue to be distributed as follows: 80 percent into the DNA Database Account and 20 percent to the agency collecting the DNA sample.

The DNA Database Account must consist of funds appropriated by the Legislature for operation and maintenance of the DNA database and for distribution to agencies responsible for collection of the biological sample from the offender, as well as any receipts from previously imposed DNA database fees. The Washington State Patrol must expend 80 percent of these funds for maintenance and operation of the DNA database and 20 percent of the funds for distribution to the agency responsible for collection of the offender's biological sample.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Preliminary fiscal note available.

Effective Date: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect on July 1, 2023.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) The bill eliminates two of the last mandatory LFOs and replaces them with dedicated and stable state funding for victim and witness programs. Mandatory LFOs have a devastating impact on people living in poverty because they must be imposed regardless of a person's ability to pay and they cannot later be waived. These obligations have an impact on individuals long after they have served their sentences because they are unable to vacate a conviction until LFOs are paid.

Funding government, especially victim services, through financial obligations is extremely inefficient and ineffective. Just 5 percent of levied LFOs are actually collected in Washington. Eliminating the fees would stop the practice of spending dollars to collect dimes, and will free up clerks from having to enforce debts that cannot be collected so that they can use their resources to enforce restitution. Assessing and collecting from people who cannot pay saddles people and their families with economic insecurity.

The bill advances racial, economic, and legal justice and brings relief for those who are unable to pay so that they may begin rebuilding their lives. These fees are unethical because they disproportionately impact people of color as well as those who are on social security disability or already living in poverty. The inability to pay off LFOs can result in a life sentence of debt that keeps people in poverty by creating a barrier to work and stable housing.

These are the only mandatory fees remaining in juvenile court. Children under age 14 are unable to legally work, but they are being charged with these fees. Youth are suffering trauma from being sent back to detention because they cannot pay their fines. Court fines and fees are not an effective tool for accountability or rehabilitation. Research shows that monetary sanctions actually increase recidivism for youth.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) There is no objection to the policy of the bill, only concern regarding whether there will be adequate funding to replace the funds that have been available for crime victim and witness programs. The LFO legislation last year had language to manually adjust on an annual basis the funding that would be provided. The account needs to be properly set up and funded to maintain stable funding over the years.

The health impact review indicates the bill will likely reduce LFOs for some people, which will likely improve health outcomes, reduce reincarceration, and decrease collateral consequences.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Tarra Simmons, prime sponsor; Nick Jeffreys and Teirenney Fincher, Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle; Evan Walker, Washington State Budget and Policy Center; Alex Hur, Statewide Poverty Action Network; Liz Trautman, Stand for Children Washington and Debt Free Youth Justice Coalition; Hannah Woerner, Columbia Legal Services; Karen Peacey; Brooke Davies, Justice Action Network; and Kelly Olson, Civil Survival Project.

(Other) Miranda Calmjoy, Washington State Board of Health; and Russell Brown, Washington Association of Prosecuting Attorneys.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.