

RCW 19.16.250 Prohibited practices. No licensee or employee of a licensee shall:

(1) Directly or indirectly aid or abet any unlicensed person to engage in business as a collection agency in this state or receive compensation from such unlicensed person: PROVIDED, That nothing in this chapter shall prevent a licensee from accepting, as forwarder, claims for collection from a collection agency or attorney whose place of business is outside the state.

(2) Collect or attempt to collect a claim by the use of any means contrary to the postal laws and regulations of the United States postal department.

(3) Publish or post or cause to be published or posted, any list of debtors commonly known as "bad debt lists" or threaten to do so. For purposes of this chapter, a "bad debt list" means any list of natural persons alleged to fail to honor their lawful debts. However, nothing herein shall be construed to prohibit a licensee from communicating to its customers or clients by means of a coded list, the existence of a check dishonored because of insufficient funds, not sufficient funds or closed account by the financial institution servicing the debtor's checking account: PROVIDED, That the debtor's identity is not readily apparent: PROVIDED FURTHER, That the licensee complies with the requirements of subsection (10)(e) of this section.

(4) Have in his or her possession or make use of any badge, use a uniform of any law enforcement agency or any simulation thereof, or make any statements which might be construed as indicating an official connection with any federal, state, county, or city law enforcement agency, or any other governmental agency, while engaged in collection agency business.

(5) Perform any act or acts, either directly or indirectly, constituting the unauthorized practice of law.

(6) Advertise for sale or threaten to advertise for sale any claim as a means of endeavoring to enforce payment thereof or agreeing to do so for the purpose of soliciting claims, except where the licensee has acquired claims as an assignee for the benefit of creditors or where the licensee is acting under court order.

(7) Use any name while engaged in the making of a demand for any claim other than the name set forth on his or her or its current license issued hereunder.

(8) Give or send to any debtor or cause to be given or sent to any debtor, any notice, letter, message, or form, other than through proper legal action, process, or proceedings, which represents or implies that a claim exists unless it shall indicate in clear and legible type:

(a) The name of the licensee and the city, street, and number at which he or she is licensed to do business;

(b) The name of the original creditor to whom the debtor owed the claim if such name is known to the licensee or employee: PROVIDED, That upon written request of the debtor, the licensee shall provide this name to the debtor or cease efforts to collect on the debt until this information is provided;

(c) If the notice, letter, message, or form is the first notice to the debtor or if the licensee is attempting to collect a different amount than indicated in his or her or its first notice to the debtor, an itemization of the claim asserted must be made including:

(i) Amount owing on the original obligation at the time it was received by the licensee for collection or by assignment;

(ii) Interest or service charge, collection costs, or late payment charges, if any, added to the original obligation by the original creditor, customer or assignor before it was received by the licensee for collection, if such information is known by the licensee or employee: PROVIDED, That upon written request of the debtor, the licensee shall make a reasonable effort to obtain information on such items and provide this information to the debtor;

(iii) Interest or service charge, if any, added by the licensee or customer or assignor after the obligation was received by the licensee for collection;

(iv) Collection costs, if any, that the licensee is attempting to collect;

(v) Attorneys' fees, if any, that the licensee is attempting to collect on his or her or its behalf or on the behalf of a customer or assignor; and

(vi) Any other charge or fee that the licensee is attempting to collect on his or her or its own behalf or on the behalf of a customer or assignor;

(d) If the notice, letter, message, or form concerns a judgment obtained against the debtor, no itemization of the amounts contained in the judgment is required, except postjudgment interest, if claimed, and the current account balance;

(e) If the notice, letter, message, or form is the first notice to the debtor, an itemization of the claim asserted must be made including the following information:

(i) The original account number or redacted original account number assigned to the debt, if known to the licensee or employee: PROVIDED, That upon written request of the debtor, the licensee must make a reasonable effort to obtain this information or cease efforts to collect on the debt until this information is provided; and

(ii) The date of the last payment to the creditor on the subject debt by the debtor, if known to the licensee or employee: PROVIDED, That upon written request of the debtor, the licensee must make a reasonable effort to obtain this information or cease efforts to collect on the debt until this information is provided.

(9) Communicate in writing with a debtor concerning a claim through a proper legal action, process, or proceeding, where such communication is the first written communication with the debtor, without providing the information set forth in subsection (8)(c) of this section in the written communication.

(10) Communicate or threaten to communicate, the existence of a claim to a person other than one who might be reasonably expected to be liable on the claim in any manner other than through proper legal action, process, or proceedings except under the following conditions:

(a) Except as provided in subsection (28)(c) of this section, a licensee or employee of a licensee may inform a credit reporting bureau of the existence of a claim. If the licensee or employee of a licensee reports a claim to a credit reporting bureau, the licensee shall, upon receipt of written notice from the debtor that any part of the claim is disputed, notify the credit reporting bureau of the dispute by written or electronic means and create a record of the fact of the notification and when the notification was provided;

(b) A licensee or employee in collecting or attempting to collect a claim may communicate the existence of a claim to a debtor's employer if the claim has been reduced to a judgment;

(c) A licensee or employee in collecting or attempting to collect a claim that has not been reduced to judgment, may communicate the existence of a claim to a debtor's employer if:

(i) The licensee or employee has notified or attempted to notify the debtor in writing at his or her last known address or place of employment concerning the claim and the debtor after a reasonable time has failed to pay the claim or has failed to agree to make payments on the claim in a manner acceptable to the licensee, and

(ii) The debtor has not in writing to the licensee disputed any part of the claim: PROVIDED, That the licensee or employee may only communicate the existence of a claim which has not been reduced to judgment to the debtor's employer once unless the debtor's employer has agreed to additional communications.

(d) A licensee may for the purpose of locating the debtor or locating assets of the debtor communicate the existence of a claim to any person who might reasonably be expected to have knowledge of the whereabouts of a debtor or the location of assets of the debtor if the claim is reduced to judgment, or if not reduced to judgment, when:

(i) The licensee or employee has notified or attempted to notify the debtor in writing at his or her last known address or last known place of employment concerning the claim and the debtor after a reasonable time has failed to pay the claim or has failed to agree to make payments on the claim in a manner acceptable to the licensee, and

(ii) The debtor has not in writing disputed any part of the claim.

(e) A licensee may communicate the existence of a claim to its customers or clients if the claim is reduced to judgment, or if not reduced to judgment, when:

(i) The licensee has notified or attempted to notify the debtor in writing at his or her last known address or last known place of employment concerning the claim and the debtor after a reasonable time has failed to pay the claim or has failed to agree to make payments on the claim in a manner acceptable to the licensee, and

(ii) The debtor has not in writing disputed any part of the claim.

(11) Threaten the debtor with impairment of his or her credit rating if a claim is not paid: PROVIDED, That advising a debtor that the licensee has reported or intends to report a claim to a credit reporting agency is not considered a threat if the licensee actually has reported or intends to report the claim to a credit reporting agency.

(12) Communicate with the debtor after notification in writing from an attorney representing such debtor that all further communications relative to a claim should be addressed to the attorney: PROVIDED, That if a licensee requests in writing information from an attorney regarding such claim and the attorney does not respond within a reasonable time, the licensee may communicate directly with the debtor until he or she or it again receives notification in writing that an attorney is representing the debtor.

(13) Communicate with a debtor or anyone else in such a manner as to harass, intimidate, threaten, or embarrass a debtor, including but not limited to communication at an unreasonable hour, with unreasonable frequency, by threats of force or violence, by threats of criminal prosecution, and by use of offensive language. A communication shall be presumed to have been made for the purposes of harassment if:

(a) It is made with a debtor or spouse in any form, manner, or place, more than three times in a single week, unless the licensee is responding to a communication from the debtor or spouse;

(b) It is made with a debtor at his or her place of employment more than one time in a single week, unless the licensee is responding to a communication from the debtor;

(c) It is made with the debtor or spouse at his or her place of residence between the hours of 9:00 p.m. and 7:30 a.m. A call to a telephone is presumed to be received in the local time zone to which the area code of the number called is assigned for landline numbers, unless the licensee reasonably believes the telephone is located in a different time zone. If the area code is not assigned to landlines in any specific geographic area, such as with toll-free telephone numbers, a call to a telephone is presumed to be received in the local time zone of the debtor's last known place of residence, unless the licensee reasonably believes the telephone is located in a different time zone.

(14) Communicate with the debtor through use of forms or instruments that simulate the form or appearance of judicial process, the form or appearance of government documents, or the simulation of a form or appearance of a telegraphic or emergency message.

(15) Communicate with the debtor and represent or imply that the existing obligation of the debtor may be or has been increased by the addition of attorney fees, investigation fees, service fees, or any other fees or charges when in fact such fees or charges may not legally be added to the existing obligation of such debtor.

(16) Threaten to take any action against the debtor which the licensee cannot legally take at the time the threat is made.

(17) Send any telegram or make any telephone calls to a debtor or concerning a debt or for the purpose of demanding payment of a claim or seeking information about a debtor, for which the charges are payable by the addressee or by the person to whom the call is made: PROVIDED, That:

(a) This subsection does not prohibit a licensee from attempting to communicate by way of a cellular telephone or other wireless device: PROVIDED, That a licensee cannot cause charges to be incurred to the recipient of the attempted communication more than three times in any calendar week when the licensee knows or reasonably should know that the number belongs to a cellular telephone or other wireless device, unless the licensee is responding to a communication from the debtor or the person to whom the call is made.

(b) The licensee is not in violation of (a) of this subsection if the licensee at least monthly updates its records with information provided by a commercial provider of cellular telephone lists that the licensee in good faith believes provides reasonably current and comprehensive data identifying cellular telephone numbers, calls a number not appearing in the most recent list provided by the commercial provider, and does not otherwise know or reasonably should know that the number belongs to a cellular telephone.

(c) This subsection may not be construed to increase the number of communications permitted pursuant to subsection (13)(a) of this section.

(18) Call, or send a text message or other electronic communication to, a cellular telephone or other wireless device more than twice in any day when the licensee knows or reasonably should know that the number belongs to a cellular telephone or other wireless device, unless the licensee is responding to a communication from the

debtor or the person to whom the call, text message, or other electronic communication is made. The licensee is not in violation of this subsection if the licensee at least monthly updates its records with information provided by a commercial provider of cellular telephone lists that the licensee in good faith believes provides reasonably current and comprehensive data identifying cellular telephone numbers, calls a number not appearing in the most recent list provided by the commercial provider, and does not otherwise know or reasonably should know that the number belongs to a cellular telephone. Nothing in this subsection may be construed to increase the number of communications permitted pursuant to subsection (13)(a) of this section.

(19) Intentionally block its telephone number from displaying on a debtor's telephone.

(20) In any manner convey the impression that the licensee is vouched for, bonded to or by, or is an instrumentality of the state of Washington or any agency or department thereof.

(21) Collect or attempt to collect in addition to the principal amount of a claim any sum other than allowable interest, collection costs or handling fees expressly authorized by statute, and, in the case of suit, attorney's fees and taxable court costs. A licensee may collect or attempt to collect collection costs and fees, including contingent collection fees, as authorized by a written agreement or contract, between the licensee's client and the debtor, in the collection of a commercial claim. The amount charged to the debtor for collection services shall not exceed thirty-five percent of the commercial claim.

(22) Procure from a debtor or collect or attempt to collect on any written note, contract, stipulation, promise or acknowledgment under which a debtor may be required to pay any sum other than principal, allowable interest, except as noted in subsection (21) of this section, and, in the case of suit, attorney's fees and taxable court costs.

(23) Bring an action or initiate an arbitration proceeding on a claim when the licensee knows, or reasonably should know, that such suit or arbitration is barred by the applicable statute of limitations.

(24) Upon notification by a debtor that the debtor disputes all debts arising from a series of dishonored checks, automated clearinghouse transactions on a demand deposit account, or other preprinted written instruments, initiate oral contact with a debtor more than one time in an attempt to collect from the debtor debts arising from the identified series of dishonored checks, automated clearinghouse transactions on a demand deposit account, or other preprinted written instruments when: (a) Within the previous one hundred eighty days, in response to the licensee's attempt to collect the initial debt assigned to the licensee and arising from the identified series of dishonored checks, automated clearinghouse transactions on a demand deposit account, or other preprinted written instruments, the debtor in writing notified the licensee that the debtor's checkbook or other series of preprinted written instruments was stolen or fraudulently created; (b) the licensee has received from the debtor a certified copy of a police report referencing the theft or fraudulent creation of the checkbook, automated clearinghouse transactions on a demand deposit account, or series of preprinted written instruments; (c) in the written notification to the licensee or in the police report, the debtor identified the financial

institution where the account was maintained, the account number, the magnetic ink character recognition number, the full bank routing and transit number, and the check numbers of the stolen checks, automated clearinghouse transactions on a demand deposit account, or other preprinted written instruments, which check numbers included the number of the check that is the subject of the licensee's collection efforts; (d) the debtor provides, or within the previous one hundred eighty days provided, to the licensee a legible copy of a government-issued photo identification, which contains the debtor's signature and which was issued prior to the date of the theft or fraud identified in the police report; and (e) the debtor advised the licensee that the subject debt is disputed because the identified check, automated clearinghouse transaction on a demand deposit account, or other preprinted written instrument underlying the debt is a stolen or fraudulently created check or instrument.

The licensee is not in violation of this subsection if the licensee initiates oral contact with the debtor more than one time in an attempt to collect debts arising from the identified series of dishonored checks, automated clearinghouse transactions on a demand deposit account, or other preprinted written instruments when: (i) The licensee acted in good faith and relied on their established practices and procedures for batching, recording, or packeting debtor accounts, and the licensee inadvertently initiates oral contact with the debtor in an attempt to collect debts in the identified series subsequent to the initial debt assigned to the licensee; (ii) the licensee is following up on collection of a debt assigned to the licensee, and the debtor has previously requested more information from the licensee regarding the subject debt; (iii) the debtor has notified the licensee that the debtor disputes only some, but not all the debts arising from the identified series of dishonored checks, automated clearinghouse transactions on a demand deposit account, or other preprinted written instruments, in which case the licensee shall be allowed to initiate oral contact with the debtor one time for each debt arising from the series of identified checks, automated clearinghouse transactions on a demand deposit account, or written instruments and initiate additional oral contact for those debts that the debtor acknowledges do not arise from stolen or fraudulently created checks or written instruments; (iv) the oral contact is in the context of a judicial, administrative, arbitration, mediation, or similar proceeding; or (v) the oral contact is made for the purpose of investigating, confirming, or authenticating the information received from the debtor, to provide additional information to the debtor, or to request additional information from the debtor needed by the licensee to accurately record the debtor's information in the licensee's records.

(25) Bring an action or initiate an arbitration proceeding on a claim for any amounts related to a transfer of sale of a vehicle when:

(a) The licensee has been informed or reasonably should know that the department of licensing transfer of sale form was filed in accordance with RCW 46.12.650 (1) through (3);

(b) The licensee has been informed or reasonably should know that the transfer of the vehicle either (i) was not made pursuant to a legal transfer or (ii) was not voluntarily accepted by the person designated as the purchaser/transferee; and

(c) Prior to the commencement of the action or arbitration, the licensee has received from the putative transferee a copy of a police report referencing that the transfer of sale of the vehicle either (i)

was not made pursuant to a legal transfer or (ii) was not voluntarily accepted by the person designated as the purchaser/transferee.

(26) Submit an affidavit or other request pursuant to chapter 6.32 RCW asking a superior or district court to transfer a bond posted by a debtor subject to a money judgment to the licensee, when the debtor has appeared as required.

(27) Serve a debtor with a summons and complaint unless the summons and complaint have been filed with the court and bear the case number assigned by the court.

(28) If the claim involves medical debt:

(a) Fail to include, with the first written notice to the debtor, a statement that informs the debtor of the debtor's right to request the original account number or redacted original account number assigned to the debt, the date of the last payment, and an itemized statement as provided in (b) of this subsection (28);

(b) (i) Fail to provide to the debtor, upon written or oral request by the debtor for more information than is contained in a general balance due letter, an itemized statement free of charge. Unless and until the licensee provides the itemized statement, the licensee must cease all collection efforts. The itemized statement must include:

(A) The name and address of the medical creditor;

(B) The date, dates, or date range of service;

(C) The health care services provided to the patient as indicated by the health care provider in a statement provided to the licensee;

(D) The amount of principal for any medical debt or debts incurred;

(E) Any adjustment to the bill, such as negotiated insurance rates or other discounts;

(F) The amount of any payments received, whether from the patient or any other party;

(G) Any interest or fees; and

(H) Whether the patient was found eligible for charity care or other reductions and, if so, the amount due after all charity care and other reductions have been applied to the itemized statement;

(ii) In the event the debtor has entered into a voluntary payment agreement, the debtor shall give notice if he or she wants the payment plan discontinued. If no notice is given, the payment arrangement may continue.

(iii) Properly executed postjudgment writs, including writs of garnishment and execution, are not required to be ceased and second or subsequent requests for information already provided do not require the cessation of collection efforts;

(c) Report adverse information to consumer credit reporting agencies or credit bureaus until at least one hundred eighty days after the original obligation was received by the licensee for collection or by assignment.

(29) If the claim involves hospital debt:

(a) Fail to include, with the first written notice to the debtor, a notice that the debtor may be eligible for charity care from the hospital, together with the contact information for the hospital;

(b) Collect or attempt to collect a claim related to hospital debt during the pendency of an application for charity care sponsorship or an appeal from a final determination of charity care sponsorship status. However, this prohibition is only applicable if the licensee has received notice of the pendency of the application or appeal. [2019 c 227 § 4; 2019 c 201 § 2; 2016 c 86 § 4; 2013 c 148 §

2; 2011 1st sp.s. c 29 § 2. Prior: 2011 c 162 § 1; 2011 c 57 § 1; prior: 2001 c 217 § 5; 2001 c 47 § 2; (2001 c 217 § 4 expired April 1, 2004); 1983 c 107 § 1; 1981 c 254 § 5; 1971 ex.s. c 253 § 16.]

Reviser's note: This section was amended by 2019 c 201 § 2 and by 2019 c 227 § 4, each without reference to the other. Both amendments are incorporated in the publication of this section under RCW 1.12.025(2). For rule of construction, see RCW 1.12.025(1).

Findings—Intent—2019 c 201: "(1) The legislature finds and declares that:

(a) Due process requires that all defendants in court proceedings be provided with adequate notice and a reasonable opportunity to be heard;

(b) Washington superior court civil rule 3 generally allows a plaintiff to serve a defendant with an unfiled summons and complaint. This superior court practice, known as "pocket service," is not allowed in Washington's courts of limited jurisdiction, including the district courts. Pocket service need not interfere with a defendant's due process rights if the defendant is represented by counsel or otherwise familiar with local legal procedural rules;

(c) In the debt collection context, however, many defendants are unfamiliar with the legal process, and most are unrepresented. When served with an unfiled, unnumbered summons and complaint, these defendants do not always realize that they must respond to the unfiled case, or know how to do so, to avoid a default judgment;

(d) In the debt collection context, many unrepresented defendants reasonably conclude that the unnumbered summons and complaint are not valid, particularly when they call the court and are told that no case has been filed. They then intentionally fail to answer and unwittingly give up their only opportunity to contest the debt;

(e) For these reasons, among others, a majority of defendants in debt collection cases filed in Washington superior courts fail to respond to the summons and complaint and, as a result, have default judgments entered against them.

(2) Therefore, the legislature intends to require that debt collection complaints be filed prior to service of the summons and complaint on defendants to ensure that defendants understand that it is an existing court case, are informed of the case number, and receive adequate notice and a reasonable opportunity to respond and be heard to avoid default judgment." [2019 c 201 § 1.]

Finding—Intent—2011 1st sp.s. c 29: "The legislature finds that a drafting error occurred in Substitute Senate Bill No. 5574 (2011 regular session) and section 1, chapter 57, Laws of 2011, resulting in the unintended deletion of a phrase in RCW 19.16.250. The intent of this legislation is to remedy that error, and retroactively apply this legislation to the effective date of section 1, chapter 57, Laws of 2011." [2011 1st sp.s. c 29 § 1.]

Effective date—2011 1st sp.s. c 29: "This act is necessary for the immediate preservation of the public peace, health, or safety, or support of the state government and its existing public institutions, and takes effect July 22, 2011." [2011 1st sp.s. c 29 § 3.]

Effective date—2001 c 217 § 5: "Section 5 of this act takes effect April 1, 2004." [2001 c 217 § 16.]

Expiration date—2001 c 217 § 4: "Section 4 of this act expires April 1, 2004." [2001 c 217 § 15.]

Captions not law—2001 c 217: See note following RCW 9.35.005.