

# HOUSE BILL REPORT

## HB 3024

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**As Reported by House Committee On:**  
Commerce & Labor

**Title:** An act relating to meal and rest breaks for employees of hospitals.

**Brief Description:** Providing uninterrupted meal and rest breaks for hospital employees.

**Sponsors:** Representatives Conway, Morrell, Van De Wege, Williams, Sullivan, Seaquist, Green, Campbell, Simpson, Wood and Nelson.

**Brief History:**

**Committee Activity:**

Commerce & Labor: 1/26/10, 1/29/10 [DPS].

**Brief Summary of Substitute Bill**

- Requires hospitals to provide employees with uninterrupted meal and rest breaks.

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### HOUSE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE & LABOR

**Majority Report:** The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 6 members: Representatives Conway, Chair; Wood, Vice Chair; Crouse, Green, Moeller and Williams.

**Minority Report:** Do not pass. Signed by 2 members: Representatives Condotta, Ranking Minority Member; Chandler.

**Staff:** Alison Hellberg (786-7152).

**Background:**

Under the Industrial Welfare Act, it is unlawful for an employer to employ workers under conditions of labor that are detrimental to their health. The Department of Labor and Industries (Department) is authorized to conduct investigations into employment conditions and to adopt rules establishing employment standards.

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

The rules governing rest and meal periods require a meal period of at least 30 minutes. Employees are also allowed a paid rest period of at least 10 minutes for each four hours worked. By administrative policy, the Department requires that the rest period be scheduled as near as possible to the midpoint of the four hours of working time. Where the nature of the work allows, employees may also take intermittent rest periods equivalent to 10 minutes for each four hours worked.

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**Summary of Substitute Bill:**

Hospitals must provide employees uninterrupted 30-minute meal breaks and rest breaks of at least 10 minutes for every four hours worked, or as otherwise agreed to be provided by the employer, whichever is longer. This requirement does not apply if there is:

- an unforeseeable emergent circumstance; or
- a clinical circumstance that may lead to patient harm without the specific skill or expertise of the employee on break.

An "unforeseeable emergent circumstance" is defined as any unforeseen declared national, state, or municipal emergency; when a health care facility disaster plan is activated; or any unforeseen disaster or other catastrophic event which substantially affects or increases the need for health care services.

Rest breaks may be taken at any point during each four-hour work period during which the employee is required to receive the rest break. Reporting a missed break is not grounds for discrimination, dismissal, discharge, or any other penalty, threat of reports for discipline, or employment decision adverse to the employee.

**Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:**

Another exception is added to the meal and rest break requirement for clinical circumstances that may lead to patient harm without the specific skill or expertise of the employee on break.

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**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Available.

**Effective Date of Substitute Bill:** The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

**Staff Summary of Public Testimony:**

(In support) Sufficient meal and rest breaks are essential for patient safety and nurse retention issues. Nurses and other hospitals are getting very limited breaks or no breaks at all. These jobs are very demanding and the hospitals are not staffed appropriately to provide adequate

breaks. This bill is a very reasonable and not too prescriptive approach. It would not disrupt hospital activities.

There were many hours of good conversation with hospitals about this issue. There is not agreement, but this bill has some important changes from bills in the past based on that dialogue. For example, under current administrative policy of the Department, a break must be taken as close to the midpoint of the four-hour period as possible. To ensure flexibility, this bill allows the rest break at any time during the four-hour period. The bill also contains an exception for unforeseen emergent circumstances, and an amendment developed to address times when an employee's particular skill or expertise is necessary.

Meal and rest breaks have been an issue in many hospitals for years. It has been addressed in collective bargaining and nurse staffing committees, but never resolved. This bill would require that employees get breaks. Collection bargaining and nurse staffing committees could address the operational aspects of breaks, not whether employees get them or not.

(Opposed) While there were positive and productive discussions over the interim, there was no resolution. This bill does not reflect those discussions. The discussions were limited to nurses, not all employees. This bill also does not include agreed upon language about when a break could be interrupted. This bill gives flexibility, but also means no fiscal note.

While it is very important for employees to have adequate meal and rest breaks, there are a couple of points of concern with this bill. First, the definition of "employee" is very broad and would expand it to everyone working at a hospital, including doctors and management. Also, the direction of when a missed break needs to be reported does not address circumstances where there is a performance issue. The emergency exception is far too narrow and the bill does not give guidance on when a meal break is triggered. The language also does not allow for patient emergencies.

This bill will be very difficult to implement. It is rigid and inappropriate for an unpredictable environment. Rural facilities in particular will be negatively affected by this bill. Breaks are very important, but patient safety should not be compromised. Staff nurses are not uniformly supportive of this bill. These issues should be dealt with in collective bargaining and nurse staffing committees.

**Persons Testifying:** (In support) Sally Watkins and Anne Tan Piazza, Washington State Nurses Association; Eric Webster, Tacoma General Hospital; Sarah Cherin and Deb Kiesig, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 21; and Mary McNaughton and Chris Bartan, Service Employees International Union.

(Opposed) Lisa Thatcher, Washington State Hospital Association; Kristen Fox, Kadlec Medical Center; Meredith Gould, Seattle Children's Hospital; and Judy Ulrich and Cindy Peterson, Othello Community Hospital.

**Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying:** None.