

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Olympia Washington

Bil Analysis

Bil No. SSB 5790
(See SHB 1995)

State employee whistleblower protection act
Brief title

Public Arg: 3/26/97

Comm. on Govt Op (Orig Sen. McCaslin/Fraser
Sponsor (State Auditor Req.)

Staff Contact Bill Lynch
Comm. on Govt. Admin.
Phone: 786-7092

BACKGROUND:

In 1982 the Legislature enacted a whistleblower protection program for state employees in order to encourage state employees to report improper governmental actions. Employees who provide information about improper governmental action in good faith are protected from retaliatory action. The state auditor/audit was given the responsibility under this legislation to investigate complaints of improper governmental action.

Improper governmental action is defined as any action by an employee undertaken in the performance of the employee's official duties which violates state law or rule, is an abuse of authority, or of substantial and specific danger to the public health or safety, or is a gross waste of public funds. A number of personnel actions are specifically excluded from the definition of improper governmental action. It has been suggested that these definitions need additional clarification.

There are no time limits in which an allegation of improper governmental activity must be made to the auditor in order to be investigated. The laws also do not give the auditor discretion to determine whether the allegations have sufficient merit to conduct an investigation or to determine whether the matter has already been sufficiently investigated by another authority or should be investigated as part of an audit.

The auditor must acknowledge a report of improper governmental action within five working days of receipt of the complaint. The auditor must conduct a preliminary investigation for a period not to exceed 30 days. It is suggested that these time limits should be extended. The report of the auditor's investigation and findings must be sent to the whistleblower within one year after the allegations were made. There is no requirement for the auditor to notify the subjects of the investigation of further investigations going to occur beyond this one-year time period. The statute does not expressly state that the whistleblower's confidentiality must be maintained if the matter is referred to another authority following the auditor's investigation.

If it appears that the allegations do not constitute improper governmental action, the auditor may forward a summary of the allegations to the appropriate agency for investigation. The auditor must keep the whistleblower's identity confidential. The agency must respond within 30 days after receipt of the allegations from the auditor. It is not clear that the procedural and confidentiality provisions apply when the information is sent to another entity.

When the auditor submits a report of alleged improper governmental action to an agency, the agency must report to the auditor within 30 days of receipt of any action taken regarding the activity and must report to the auditor monthly until final action is taken. The auditor must report to the Governor and the Legislature if the auditor determines that corrective action is not being taken within a reasonable amount of time, but there is no specific time limit in statute for when final corrective action must be taken.

The auditor is given the authority to administer the provisions of the state whistleblower law, but is not specifically authorized to contract out for any assistance that may be necessary. In addition, the law is silent on how the costs of administering the chapters should be funded.

SUMMARY:

Improper governmental action is redefined to include action which results in substantial abuse, misuse, destruction, waste, or loss of public funds or public resources, violates any federal or state law or rule or which is of substantial and specific danger to the public health or safety. Definitions are added to specify what constitutes abuse, misuse, and waste. Improper governmental action does not include personnel actions for which other remedies exist, including claims of discriminatory treatment.

An allegation of improper governmental action must be made to the auditor within one year after its occurrence in order to be investigated. The auditor has the discretion to review allegations received from whistleblowers to determine if they have sufficient merit and specificity to warrant investigation, whether they have already been sufficiently investigated by another authority, or whether they should be investigated as part of an audit.

Continued

The amount of time by which the auditor must send an acknowledgment to a person reporting improper governmental action is increased from five days to 15 days from the date of receipt. The amount of time for the auditor to conduct a preliminary investigation is increased from 30 to 60 days. The auditor must provide written notice to the subject of an investigation of the nature of the assertion if the investigation will extend beyond one year. If after the auditor's investigation the matter is referred to another authority, the receiving authority must maintain the whistleblower's confidentiality.

If an agency receives a summary of allegations from the auditor which do not constitute improper governmental activity, the amount of time for an agency to complete an investigation and report back to the auditor is increased from 30 to 60 days. All procedural and confidentiality provisions of the state whistleblower law apply to the investigations conducted by the agency.

When the auditor sends a report of alleged improper governmental activity to an agency, the agency must send its plan for corrective action to the auditor within 30 days of receipt. The auditor may require periodic reports of corrective action until all corrective actions are completed. Corrective action must be completed within six months after the date of the auditor's report. The agency must consider the recovery of the costs of investigation of improper governmental action in taking corrective action.

The auditor may contract for any assistance necessary to carry out the provisions of the state whistleblower law. The cost of administering the state whistleblower law is funded from the auditor's services revolving fund. Other technical changes are made.

FISCAL NOTE: Not requested.

EFFECTIVE DATE: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect immediately.