

FINAL BILL REPORT

HB 1226

C 223 L 03

Synopsis as Enacted

Brief Description: Authorizing service of summons for persons not found in this state.

Sponsors: By Representatives Moeller, Campbell, Lantz and Carrell.

House Committee on Judiciary

Senate Committee on Judiciary

Background:

In order to properly institute a lawsuit, a plaintiff must notify the defendant of the commencement of the suit by serving a summons on the defendant. This is called service of process. Generally, a defendant must be personally served with the summons. Individuals may be personally served either by delivering a copy of the summons to the defendant personally or by leaving a copy at the defendant's home with a person of suitable age and discretion.

Substitute service of process is allowed under certain circumstances if a plaintiff is unable to personally serve the defendant. In motor vehicle actions, the Secretary of State may receive substitute service of process for a non-resident motorist involved in an accident or for a resident who within three years of the accident "departs from this state." For substitute service upon the Secretary of State to be valid, the plaintiff must also send notice of such service and a copy of the summons to the defendant's last known address by registered mail with return receipt requested.

The Washington Supreme Court, in a case construing the absent motorist statute, held that a person who cannot be found in the state is not the equivalent of the statute's requirement that the resident "departs from this state." Instead, the Court found that a plaintiff may only serve substitute process upon the Secretary of State if: (1) the defendant has in fact departed the state; or (2) the plaintiff has a good faith belief that the defendant has departed and has attempted, with due diligence, to find and serve the defendant.

The due diligence standard requires a plaintiff to make honest and reasonable efforts to locate the defendant. Not all conceivable means must be employed, but at the least any accident report made must be examined and its information investigated with reasonable effort. In addition, if the plaintiff has information pertaining to the defendant's whereabouts other than that contained in the accident report, he or she must make reasonable efforts to investigate based on that information.

Summary:

A state resident involved in a motor vehicle accident while operating a motor vehicle on a state public highway may be served by substitute service of process on the Secretary of State if the resident cannot be found in Washington, after a due and diligent search, at any time within the three years following the event.

Votes on Final Passage:

House 95 0

Senate 49 0

Effective: July 27, 2003