

FINAL BILL REPORT

EHB 3074

C 80 L 06

Synopsis as Enacted

Brief Description: Concerning default judgments against service members.

Sponsors: By Representatives Serben, Lantz, Haler, McCoy, Chase, Dunn, Green and Morrell.

House Committee on Judiciary

Senate Committee on Judiciary

Background:

In 2005 the Legislature enacted the Washington Service Members' Civil Relief Act (Act) to provide certain rights and protections in civil proceedings to service members during their military service or within 180 days after termination of their military service. The Act was modeled on the federal Servicemembers' Civil Relief Act and provides similar rights to those provided under the federal law.

The Act contains numerous protections for service members, and their dependents, whose financial and legal obligations may be adversely impacted by active military duty. The Act applies to a Washington resident who is a member of the National Guard or a military reserve component and is under a call to service for a period of more than 30 consecutive days.

One of the provisions of the Act protects a service member or dependent from default judgments. In a civil action or proceeding where a defendant does not make an appearance, the plaintiff must file an affidavit, before a judgment is rendered, that states whether the defendant is in military service or is a dependent of a service member in military service, or states that the plaintiff is unable to determine whether the defendant is in military service or is a dependent of a service member in military service.

The court may not enter a judgment against an absent defendant who is in military service, or who is a dependent of a service member in military service, until after the court appoints an attorney to represent the defendant. The actions of the attorney are not binding on the service member or dependent if the attorney is unable to locate the service member or dependent.

If a service member or dependent is a defendant and does not make an appearance, the court must grant a stay of proceedings until 180 days after termination of or release from military service if the court finds there may be a defense to the action that cannot be raised without the defendant's presence, or counsel has been unable to contact the defendant to determine whether there is a valid defense.

Summary:

The Washington Service Members' Civil Relief Act (Act) is amended to create a process for determining whether a defendant who does not make an appearance in a civil action or proceeding is a dependant of a service member in military service. In such an action, the plaintiff may serve on or mail via first-class mail to the defendant a written notice. The contents of the notice must be substantially the same as the notice set forth in the Act and must include provisions notifying the defendant of the rights available to a dependent of a service member in military service and the consequences of failing to notify the plaintiff of his or her status as a dependant of a service member in military service.

For the purposes of entering a default judgment, a court or administrative tribunal may presume that an absent defendant is not a dependant of a service member in military service if the defendant fails to timely respond to a notice that is either served on the defendant at least 20 days, or mailed to the defendant at least 23 days, before an application for a default judgment.

The stay of proceedings provision of the Act is amended to provide that the failure of a defendant who is protected under the Act to communicate or cooperate with counsel after having been contacted is not grounds to find that counsel has been unable to contact the defendant to determine whether there is a valid defense.

Votes on Final Passage:

House	98	0
Senate	45	0

Effective: June 7, 2006