

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 6473

As Reported by House Committee On: Local Government

Title: An act relating to preventing fires in rental dwelling units.

Brief Description: Preventing fires in rental dwelling units.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Financial Institutions & Insurance (originally sponsored by Senators Liias and Wagoner).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Local Government: 2/20/18, 2/21/18 [DPA].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill (As Amended by Committee)

- Directs the Director of Fire Protection (Director) to investigate ways to prevent fire deaths in rental dwellings.
- Requires the Director to convene a task force of various stakeholders, allow for public comment at task force meetings, and provide a report on the task force's findings and recommendations to the Governor and Legislature.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Majority Report: Do pass as amended. Signed by 6 members: Representatives Appleton, Chair; McBride, Vice Chair; Griffey, Ranking Minority Member; Gregerson, Peterson and Taylor.

Staff: Yvonne Walker (786-7841).

Background:

The Office of the State Fire Marshal (Office) is a bureau within the Washington State Patrol (WSP). The Office provides various services to fire districts, government agencies, and the public including, but not limited to: coordination of the state fire service resources for mobilization during large-scale fires and disasters; fire incident reporting and data collection;

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fire code review and adoption; and construction plan reviews for fire sprinkler and alarm systems. In addition, the Office provides instructional programs and high-risk fire training to fire departments and fire protection districts, hazardous materials training, and fire prevention education.

The Chief of the WSP is responsible for appointing the Director of Fire Protection (Director). The Director is required to promulgate rules and regulations regarding the design, manufacture, and installation of smoke detection devices in dwelling units. The Director is also authorized to enter premises and buildings for the purpose of inspecting and determining whether a fire hazard exists and requiring conformance with minimum standards for fire prevention.

The Residential Landlord-Tenant Act governs the relationship between landlords and tenants of residential dwelling units, establishes the duties and liabilities of the parties, and provides procedures for each side to enforce its rights. A tenant's duties include, for example, the duty to pay rent, keep the premises clean, not intentionally destroy property, maintain smoke detector devices, and not engage in certain activity that is dangerous to others.

Summary of Amended Bill:

The Director must:

- investigate ways to prevent fire deaths in rental dwellings;
- educate landlords and tenants regarding their responsibilities;
- evaluate insurance certification requirements or changes to the building code; and
- review other possible programs or funding that would improve installation and maintenance of smoke detectors in rental apartments and single-family homes.

The Director must form a task force. The stakeholders of the task force must include, but are not limited to, landlords of residential units, tenants, local governments, firefighters, representatives from home builders and construction trades, the insurance industry, and a nonprofit that provides free smoke detectors and installation.

The Director must convene the initial task force meeting. The task force must choose its chair from among its membership and must allow public comments at its meetings. The task force must update the appropriate committees of the Legislature by December 1, 2018, and report its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the appropriate committees of the Legislature by December 1, 2019.

Amended Bill Compared to Substitute Bill:

The amended bill eliminates the provision that requires the Washington Director of Fire Protection to develop possible criminal penalties as part of its study on ways to prevent fire deaths.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Amended 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) Many people have lost their lives due to house fires over the years. As of today, the data has shown that approximately seven people have died this year alone in house fires in Washington. In the Puget Sound area where housing is so unaffordable, people are renting older homes that do not have many smoke detectors and are not designed for multiple people.

There was a 36-year-old man who lost his life due to a fire in a house he was renting. There were no escape routes or smoke alarms in his rental house. The fire was due to faulty wiring. There is a law that requires rental houses to have smoke alarms; however, there are many landlords who do not comply. Since that incident, the young man's family has created a nonprofit organization called Gibby Home Fire Prevention, which works with the Red Cross, to install free smoke alarms in houses.

This bill will bring the appropriate parties to the table to come up with better solutions to keep people safe.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) The Washington State Patrol (WSP) is in support of this bill. There were concerns regarding the timing of when the task force reports were due, especially if the legislative session was somehow extended to the middle of summer. However, those issues have been addressed since the final report from the task force is not due until December 2019. The WSP wants to make sure they have enough time to get the work done properly. They want to do good work in a timely fashion so that in five years they are not still talking about the issue.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Senator Liias, prime sponsor; and Gerry Gibson and Bonnie Gibson, Gibby Home Fire Protection.

(Other) Monica Alexander, Washington State Patrol.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.