

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF FINAL BILL ANALYSIS

BILL #: CS/CS/HB 23 Pub. Rec./Dozier School for Boys and Okeechobee School Victim Compensation Program

SPONSOR(S): State Affairs Committee and Judiciary Committee, Salzman and others

TIED BILLS: CS/HB 21 **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** CS/CS/SB 26

FINAL HOUSE FLOOR ACTION: 117 Y's 0 N's **GOVERNOR'S ACTION:** Approved

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

CS/CS/HB 23 passed the House on February 29, 2024, and subsequently passed the Senate on March 4, 2024.

The Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys ("Dozier School") opened in Marianna, Florida on January 1, 1900, as the Florida State Reform School. The Dozier School housed children as young as five committed for criminal and other offenses ranging from theft and murder to "incurability" and truancy; the school also housed orphaned and abandoned children when other placements were unavailable. In 1955, the Florida School for Boys at Okeechobee ("Okeechobee School") opened to address overcrowding at the Dozier School, and some of the Dozier School's staff transferred to the Okeechobee School.

In recent years, more than 400 men sent to the Dozier School or the Okeechobee School in the 1950s and 1960s have come forward to recount their experiences. Calling themselves the "White House Boys" after a white structure on Dozier School property where many beatings reportedly occurred, these men recount brutal whippings, sexual abuse, disappearances, deaths, and other tortures they either witnessed or suffered personally. In recognition of their suffering, the Legislature passed 2024 CS/HB 21 to create the Dozier School for Boys and Okeechobee School Victim Compensation Program ("Program") within the Department of Legal Affairs ("DLA") to compensate living persons who were confined to the Dozier School or the Okeechobee School at any time between 1940 and 1975 and who were subjected to mental, physical, or sexual abuse perpetrated by school personnel.

The bill creates a public record exemption to protect personal identifying information in an application submitted to DLA by a person seeking compensation through the Program. Under the bill, such information would be confidential and exempt from public inspection, with one exception. In accordance with the Open Government Sunset Review Act, the bill specifies that the exemption shall stand repealed on October 2, 2029, unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment. The bill also provides a statement of public necessity as required by the Florida Constitution.

The bill does not appear to have a fiscal impact on state or local governments.

The Governor approved the bill on June 21, 2024, ch. 2024-255, L.O.F., and it takes effect on the same date that CS/HB 21 or similar legislation takes effect.

I. SUBSTANTIVE INFORMATION

A. EFFECT OF CHANGES:

Background

Florida Reform School History

The Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys opened in Marianna, Florida on January 1, 1900, as the Florida State Reform School, and in 1959, an overflow campus opened in Okeechobee, Florida, as the Florida School for Boys at Okeechobee (“Okeechobee School”); for the purposes of this analysis, both campuses are referred to collectively as the “Dozier School.”¹ The Dozier School housed children as young as five committed for criminal and other offenses ranging from theft and murder to “incorrigibility” and truancy; the school also housed orphaned and abandoned children when other placements were unavailable.²

Allegations of abuse at the Dozier School began as early as 1903, with reports of children being chained to walls in irons, whippings, and peonage.³ Reports of inadequate medical care, sexual abuse, beatings, torture, and mysterious deaths at the Dozier School continued in the subsequent decades, and a succession of reports and commissions called for reforms at the schools with little success.⁴ However, the U.S. Department of Justice reported in 2011 that it had found “harmful practices” that put the reform school’s residents at “serious risk of avoidable harm.”⁵ The state closed the Dozier School in 2011, citing budget constraints, and the Okeechobee School in 2020.⁶

In recent years, more than 400 men confined to the Dozier School in the 1950s and 1960s have come forward to recount their experiences. Calling themselves the White House Boys Survivors Organization (“White House Boys”) after a white structure on Dozier School property where many abuses reportedly occurred, these men recount brutal whippings, sexual batteries, disappearances, deaths, and other tortures they either witnessed or suffered personally while confined to the Dozier School.

2024 CS/HB 21

The Legislature passed CS/HB 21 on March 4, 2024, to create the Dozier School for Boys and Okeechobee School Victim Compensation Program (“Program”) within the Department of Legal Affairs (“DLA”) to compensate living persons who were confined to the Dozier School or the Okeechobee School at any time between 1940 and 1975 and who were subjected to mental, physical, or sexual abuse perpetrated by school personnel while they were so confined. To accomplish this, 2024 CS/HB

¹ The Dozier School originally housed both boys and girls but became The Florida School for Boys in 1913 with the opening of a separate school for girls.

² Note that until 1968, the Dozier School was segregated into two campuses, one for white students and one for African-American and other “non-white” students. University of South Florida, *Florida’s Industrial Reform School System: Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys 1900-Present*, <https://guides.lib.usf.edu/dozier> (last visited June 24, 2024).

³ The earliest report, from 1903, described the Dozier School not as a reform school but as a “prison for children,” with some children chained to the wall in irons, and others beaten, like “common criminals.” Ben Montgomery and Waveny Ann Moore, *They Went to Dozier School for Boys Damaged. They Came Out Destroyed*, Tampa Bay Times, Aug. 18, 2019, <https://www.tampabay.com/investigations/2019/08/18/they-went-to-the-dozier-school-for-boys-damaged-they-came-out-destroyed/#:~:text=In%20March%201958%2C%20a%20Miami,Eugene%20Byrd%20testified.> (last visited June 24, 2024).

⁴ In its first two decades, investigators discovered that Dozier School administrators hired out the children to work with state convicts and brutally beat children with a leather strap attached to a wooden handle. In 1914, at least six children, and possibly as many as ten, died in a fire at the Dozier School while trapped on the top floor of their locked and burning dormitory; investigators learned that the superintendent and most staff were in town for a “pleasure bent” when the fire began, and differing reports meant that the actual number of children lost could not be determined. *Id.*

⁵ U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Investigation of the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys and the Jackson Juvenile Offender Center, Marianna, Florida*, Dec. 1, 2011, https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2011/12/02/dozier_findltr_12-1-11.pdf (last visited June 24, 2024).

⁶ The Okeechobee School was privatized in 1982 amid allegations of abuse and deplorable living conditions and finally closed in December of 2020 when the State declined to renew its service contract. *Id.*

21 creates a process whereby a victim of the Dozier School or the Okeechobee School can apply for compensation through the Program on a DLA-approved form.

Public Records

The Florida Constitution sets forth the state's public policy regarding access to government records, guaranteeing every person a right to inspect or copy any public record of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.⁷ The Legislature, however, may provide by general law an exemption⁸ from public record requirements, provided that the exemption passes by a two-thirds vote of each chamber, states with specificity the public necessity justifying the exemption, and is no broader than necessary to meet its public purpose.⁹

Current law also addresses the public policy regarding access to government records, guaranteeing every person a right to inspect and copy any state, county, or municipal record, unless the record is exempt.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Open Government Sunset Review Act¹¹ provides that a public record exemption may be created, revised, or maintained only if it serves an identifiable public purpose and the "Legislature finds that the purpose is sufficiently compelling to override the strong public policy of open government and cannot be accomplished without the exemption."¹² An identifiable public purpose is served if the exemption:

- Allows the state or its political subdivisions to effectively and efficiently administer a governmental program, which administration would be significantly impaired without the exemption;
- Protects sensitive personal information that, if released, would be defamatory or would jeopardize an individual's safety; however, only the identity of an individual may be exempted under this provision; or
- Protects trade or business secrets.¹³

Pursuant to the Open Government Sunset Review Act, a new public record exemption or substantial amendment of an existing public record exemption is repealed on October 2nd of the fifth year following enactment, unless the Legislature reenacts the exemption.¹⁴

Effect of the Bill

The bill creates a public record exemption for the names, dates of birth, driver license numbers, home and mailing addresses, telephone numbers, or electronic mail addresses in an application submitted to the DLA by a person seeking compensation through the Program. Under the bill, such information would be confidential and exempt.

The bill also:

- Authorizes the release of the protected information to the Department of Education to facilitate the award of standard high school diplomas to persons compensated through the Program.
- Specifies that, in accordance with the Open Government Sunset Review Act, the exemption shall stand repealed on October 2, 2029, unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment.
- Provides a statement of public necessity as required by the Florida Constitution.

⁷ Art. I, s. 24(a), Fla. Const.

⁸ A public record exemption means a provision of general law which provides that a specified record, or portion thereof, is not subject to the access requirements of s. 119.07(1), F.S., or s. 24, Art. I of the Florida Constitution. See s. 119.011(8), F.S.

⁹ Art. I, s. 24(c), Fla. Const.

¹⁰ See s. 119.01, F.S.

¹¹ S. 119.15, F.S.

¹² S. 119.15(6)(b), F.S.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ S. 119.15(3), F.S.

The Governor approved the bill on June 21, 2024, ch. 2024-255, L.O.F., and it takes effect on the same date that CS/HB 21 or similar legislation takes effect.

II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

The bill may have a positive economic impact on the private sector to the extent that it induces victims of the Dozier School or the Okeechobee School to apply for compensation through the Program and protects them from fraud or other financial harm.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.