

HB 567/SB 1094 Relating to Assault and Battery/ Social Workers

What is the purpose of HB 567/SB 1094?

HB 567/SB 1094 provides additional safety measures to protect social workers and other professionals who work with at-risk populations.

The bill would enhance penalties for violence against social workers, psychologists, marriage and family therapists, and mental health counselors. These enhanced penalties would be equal to what is currently protecting police officers, fire fighters, and other rescue workers.

Why is HB 567/SB 1094 needed in Florida?

The bill is necessary to protect Florida's citizens who risk their lives every day to help others.

It is well known that the professions listed above—social workers, psychologists, and other psychotherapists—work daily in delicate situations with people in crisis. Less well known is the danger that these professionals face on a daily basis.

Two surveys conducted by the National Association of Social Workers in the last few years have found that job-related violence and the threat of such violence are common. In a 2002 survey, among 800 social workers, 19% had been victims of violence, and 63% had been threatened. In a 2006 national study of the licensed social work labor force, 44 % of 5,000 respondents said that they face personal safety issues in their primary employment practice.

In some specialty practice areas, the risk is increased. A study by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees found that 70% of front-line social workers in child welfare had been victims of violence or threats on duty. A review of the 585 exit interviews found that 90% of former child welfare social workers experienced verbal threats, 30% experienced physical attacks, and 13% had been threatened with weapons.

What is the danger of not protecting these professions?

Nationally, a disturbing trend of violence against human service professionals has been noted.

Terri Zenner, a social work case manager, was brutally killed during a routine in-home visit with one of her mental health clients in Johnson County, Kansas, in 2004. In March 2006, The New York Times reported that Sally Blackwell, a social worker, was found dead in a field just outside of Austin, Texas. Throughout the investigation, her family said that threats were a daily part of Sally's life as a social worker investigating accusations of child abuse and neglect with the power to remove children from their homes. Locally, a woman in Tallahassee was held at gunpoint in 2008. Several states, including West Virginia and Tennessee, have passed safety legislation in response to tragedies. Florida should not have to wait for a headline-grabbing case to act to protect its workers.

What would be the impact of HB 567/SB 1094?

HB 567/SB 1094 is consistent with Florida law protecting police officers and other professions.

This bill would give prosecutors additional tools, while maintaining their ability to consider the details of the case when bringing charges. The bill would also bring the issue of safety to the public attention, providing a springboard to encourage training and the use of protective measures. By promoting safety, this bill would ultimately save lives.