



LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

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Empowering inclusive elections

Washington Voting Rights Act enables cities, counties to fix unfair, undemocratic voting systems, avoid costly litigation

Last Wednesday, at the same time more than 1,000 union members -- mostly building and construction trades members -- were swarming the State Capitol campus during a Senate Republican hearing of a "Right-to-Work" bill, another important piece of legislation was being heard.

The Washington State Voting Rights Act (HB 1800), heard Wednesday in the House state government committee, is about making sure everyone in this state has the opportunity to have their voice heard in local democracy. In too many cities, school districts and local governments across Washington this right isn't being protected. And if these communities decide to change their election system to make it more fair and inclusive, under current law, the state blocks them from doing so. It's one of the reasons why people of color are underrepresented at every level of local government across the state. That representation gap has real impact — communities across our state lack access to local decision-makers who know and understand their interests and concerns.

HB 1800, sponsored by Rep. Mia Gregerson (D-SeaTac) and 42 of her House colleagues, empowers local governments to avoid costly litigation by creating a collaborative process to ensure every vote is protected and that every community is fairly represented. HB 1800 requires plaintiffs who believe an election system is unfair to provide notice before filing suit so local jurisdictions have the opportunity to review the data and make changes to their election system within a 180-day window. If the jurisdiction agrees that a problem exists and chooses to fix their election system in a way that addresses the problem, they avoid litigation and payment of attorney's fees.

"HB 1800 puts the decision-making back in the hands of the local jurisdiction and its community members," testified Eric González Alfaro, WSLC Legislative and Policy Director. "It is the only comprehensive solution for addressing local governments' concerns that their election systems discriminate against certain populations and may be in violation of the federal Voting Rights Act."

HB 1800 is scheduled for a committee vote on Friday, Feb.

17, which is the cutoff deadline for bills to advance from policy committees. The WSLC strongly urges its advancement.

WSLC backs Hanford workers' comp bill

HB 1723, sponsored by Rep. Larry Haler (R-Richland), would remove barriers that prevent seriously ill Hanford workers from getting workers' compensation benefits. Currently, Hanford workers have to prove that a medical condition was caused by a specific exposure, which is extremely difficult to do because the chemical cocktails they are exposed to are often unidentifiable. Under the bill, many conditions would be automatically assumed to be caused by working at the Hanford nuclear reservation.

Former Hanford workers living with debilitating illnesses gave heart-breaking testimony Thursday in the House Labor and Workplace Standards Committee about their diseases' impact on their lives and their families' struggle to survive without benefits.

A pattern of denials of Hanford workers' claims "has had the effect of destroying the health and lives of hundreds of workers and their families at Hanford," said WSLC President Jeff Johnson, testifying in support of HB 1723. "It is hard not to conclude that at play here is a casual indifference to the lives of these workers and a clear violation of the central tenant of our workers' compensation law, which is to provide sure and certain relief to injured workers."

Some important hearings

Most bills have been heard by now and committees are meeting this week to vote on legislation as Friday's cutoff looms. But...

MONDAY, Feb. 13 at 1:30 p.m. -- The House Labor & Workplace Standards Committee hears to labor-supported bills on concerning enforcement of electrical laws (HB 1952) and making sure state WISHA fines for work safety violations are in conformance with federal OSHA penalties (HB 1953).

TUESDAY, Feb. 14 at 8 a.m. -- SB 5720 (Hawkins, E. Wenatchee), a WSLC-opposed bill that would create a new "production-based safe harbor" for agricultural employers who have not properly paid their piece-rate workers for breaks and other non-piece-rate work performed, will be heard in Senate Agriculture, Water, Trade & Economic Development.

