

Fiscal Impact Statement for Initiative 1639

FISCAL IMPACT SUMMARY

Initiative 1639 changes state laws regarding firearms. It allows the state to collect a fee up to \$25 for certain rifle sales and transfers; however, the number of these rifle sales and transfers isn't available. The initiative creates new criminal offenses for unsafe storage of a firearm. The state and local costs related to these criminal offenses cannot be determined as there is no data to estimate the number of cases filed or persons convicted each year. The cost for the annual verification cannot be determined as the process has not been developed. Therefore, the fiscal impacts cannot be determined.

General Assumptions

- The effective date of the initiative is July 1, 2019, except Section 13, which takes effect Jan. 1, 2019.
- The provisions of the initiative apply prospectively, not retroactively.
- No data is available on the number of semiautomatic rifles bought or transferred each year in Washington. Federal law prohibits the tracking of gun purchases (U.S.C. Title 18, Part 1, Chapter 44, Sec. 926).
- Fiscal estimates use the state's fiscal year of July 1 through June 30. Fiscal year 2019 is July 1, 2018, to June 30, 2019.

REVENUE

State Revenue

The Department of Licensing (DOL) would be authorized to charge a fee of up to \$25 for each semiautomatic assault rifle (SAR) sale or transfer. (The initiative includes a new definition for SAR.) The fee would be adjusted for inflation. The initiative specifies the distribution of this revenue to state agencies and local law enforcement agencies for record keeping and other related costs they incur. Because data is not available to provide an estimate on the number of SARs purchased, no estimate of state revenue is available. However, the state does have data on the number of background checks conducted for concealed pistol licenses (CPLs) and sales of handguns and long guns (which would include SARs and other long guns). An average of 560,000 such background checks were conducted each year between 2013 and 2017.

Washington state law also requires mental health background checks for all CPLs and handgun sales, but not long gun sales. An average of 300,000 mental health background checks were conducted each year between 2013 and 2017.

Subtracting the number of mental health background checks for CPLs and handguns from the number of criminal checks for CPLs, hand guns and long guns yields an average estimate of 260,000 long gun criminal checks per year. The state does not have data to determine what percentage of the total long gun checks would meet the definition of SAR under the initiative.

EXPENDITURES

State Government Expenditures

Annual verification of eligibility to possess a firearm

The initiative would allow, but would not require, DOL, Washington State Patrol and other state and local law enforcement agencies to form a temporary group to advise on how to set up an efficient, cost-effective process for annual verification of eligibility to possess a firearm. Whether such a group is formed, and what expenses it may incur, are unknown and indeterminate. However, DOL has conducted similar work group activities that cost \$15,000.

The initiative does not define the verification process, and DOL has not yet identified a likely option or set of options for annual verifications. Therefore potential costs to state and local governments are indeterminate.

Mental health background checks

The initiative would require mental health background checks for someone to purchase a SAR. Although data is not available to estimate the number of additional mental health background checks that would need to be performed, more work is likely for the Health Care Authority. One or more additional background check specialists could be hired at an annual cost of \$83,000 each.

Unsafe storage of a firearm crime

The initiative would create a new class C felony of Community Endangerment Due to Unsafe Storage of a Firearm in the First Degree. It would be punishable by 0–12 months in county jail (see local expenditure impacts). The number of potential prosecutions and convictions of this new crime is unknown.

If an aggravated exceptional sentence were imposed, a sentence exceeding 12 months would result and be served at a state prison. The average cost of a state prison bed is \$101 per day.

There would be an indeterminate fiscal impact due to additional filings or trial court proceedings to the Administrative Office of the Courts as a result of any new misdemeanor and/or felony charges.

Dealers registered with DOL would be required to post warning signs and provide a written warning to a purchaser about secure gun storage. DOL would incur minimal costs to print and mail the warning signs to dealers.

Record keeping

The initiative would require the Department of Licensing to keep records of CPL and SAR applications and transfers. The department already tracks CPL applications and transfers. The addition of SARs to record keeping, as required by the initiative, would increase the data input workload to its firearms database. (While online submission is available, DOL receives 60 percent of applications by mail, in paper form, from dealers and private gun sales.) The department would also incur costs to update forms and upgrade computer systems to add SAR records to its firearms database. DOL would experience rule-making, information services and administrative costs to implement this initiative. One-time costs would be at least \$1.1 million and \$500,000 annually

thereafter. Additional staffing costs could be incurred, depending on the number of SAR records the agency processes.

Local Government Expenditures

Annual verification of eligibility to possess a firearm

If a person is found ineligible to possess a pistol or SAR, the Department of Licensing is required to notify a chief of police or sheriff, who then takes steps to ensure that the person does not illegally possess one. Associated costs are indeterminate.

Unsafe storage of a firearm crime

The initiative would create a new class C felony (Community Endangerment Due to Unsafe Storage of a Firearm in the First Degree). As an unranked Class C felony offense, it is punishable by a standard range term of confinement of 0–12 months in jail.

It also would create a new gross misdemeanor (Community Endangerment Due to Unsafe Storage of a Firearm in the Second Degree). As a gross misdemeanor offense, it is punishable by a standard range term of confinement of 0–364 days in jail.

Average costs to prosecute and defend a comparable felony are \$2,260 and, for a comparable misdemeanor, approximately \$1,700.

Sentences of less than one year in length are typically served in county jails. The average cost of a county jail bed is \$106 per day.

According to local governments, it is unknown how many people may be charged, tried or convicted. Costs are indeterminate for city and county law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, indigent defense attorneys and county jails.