

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2015 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE

Senate Bill 319

(Senator Muse, *et al.*)

Judicial Proceedings

Award of Attorney's Fees and Expenses - Violation of Maryland Constitutional
Right

This bill authorizes a court to award reasonable attorney's fees and expenses to a prevailing plaintiff for any claim for relief against the State, any political subdivision of the State, or any employee or agent of the State or any political subdivision of the State, if the claim for relief seeks to remedy a violation of a right that is secured by the Maryland Constitution or the Maryland Declaration of Rights. A court may award reasonable attorney's fees and expenses to a prevailing defendant only on a finding that the relevant claim for relief brought by the plaintiff was maintained in bad faith or without substantial justification. A court must determine whether to award attorney's fees and expenses by considering the factors listed in Maryland Rule 2-703(f)(3).

The bill also establishes that the liability limits and limits on attorney's fees under the Maryland Tort Claims Act (MTCA) do not include an award for attorney's fees and expenses under the bill.

The bill applies prospectively to cases filed on or after the bill's October 1, 2015 effective date.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: Potential significant increase in special fund expenditures if the bill results in higher payments from the State Insurance Trust Fund (SITF) for claims filed under MTCA. General fund expenditures increase for State agencies subject to higher SITF assessments if SITF incurs losses from MTCA payments as a result of the bill and for payments of attorney's fees in non-MTCA claims against the State. Potential increase in general fund expenditures for additional staff for the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) if the bill increases the volume and duration of OAG litigation.

Local Effect: Local expenditures increase for (1) payments for claims filed under the Local Government Tort Claims Act (LGTCAs) and other eligible claims and (2) higher assessments for local governments if the Local Government Insurance Trust (LGIT) incurs losses from payments authorized by the bill.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Current Law: In general, a party to a lawsuit is responsible for his/her legal fees, regardless of the outcome of the case. However, there are more than 80 exceptions to this general rule in State law, including wage and hour cases, worker's compensation cases, and consumer protection cases. The conditions under which an individual is eligible for an award of attorney's fees and the extent of these awards is inconsistent among the cases eligible for attorney's fees awards under State law. Most of the applicable statutes do not provide guidance on the calculation of attorney's fees. In the absence of a statute, Maryland Rule 2-703 (discussed below) lists the factors that a circuit court must consider when determining the amount of an award of attorney's fees. There are no provisions granting attorney's fees for a claim filed under the Maryland Constitution or the Maryland Declaration of Rights.

Maryland Tort Claims Act: Under MTCA, State personnel are immune from liability for acts or omissions performed in the course of their official duties, so long as the acts or omissions are made without malice or gross negligence. Under MTCA, the State essentially waives its own common law immunity. However, MTCA limits State liability to \$200,000 to a single claimant for injuries arising from a single incident. MTCA covers a multitude of personnel, including some local officials and nonprofit organizations. In actions involving malice or gross negligence or actions outside of the scope of the public duties of the State employee, the State employee is not shielded by the State's color of authority or sovereign immunity and may be held personally liable.

Attorney's fees are included in the liability cap under MTCA. Under MTCA, attorneys may not charge or receive a fee that exceeds 20% of a settlement or 25% of a judgment.

Local Government Tort Claims Act: LGTCAs defines local government to include counties, municipal corporations, Baltimore City, and various agencies and authorities of local governments such as community colleges, county public libraries, special taxing districts, nonprofit community service corporations, sanitary districts, housing authorities, and commercial district management authorities.

LGTCGA limits the liability of a local government to \$200,000 per individual claim and \$500,000 per total claims that arise from the same occurrence for damages from tortious acts or omissions (including intentional and constitutional torts). It further establishes that the local government is liable for the tortious acts or omissions of its employees acting within the scope of employment. Thus, LGTCGA prevents local governments from asserting a common law claim of governmental immunity from liability for such acts or omissions of its employees.

Maryland Rule 2-703: Rule 2-703 applies to claims for attorneys' fees allowable by law to a party in an action in a circuit court. Under the rule, a court must consider the following factors when determining the amount of an award of attorney's fees:

- the time and labor required;
- the novelty and difficulty of the questions;
- the skill required to perform the legal service properly;
- whether acceptance of the case precluded other employment by the attorney;
- the customary fee for similar legal services;
- whether the fee is fixed or contingent;
- any time limitations imposed by the client or the circumstances;
- the amount involved and the results obtained;
- the experience, reputation, and ability of the attorneys;
- the undesirability of the case;
- the nature and length of the professional relationship with the client; and
- awards in similar cases.

Background: The Maryland Access to Justice Commission was established in 2008 as a formal partnership between the Maryland Judiciary, members of the General Assembly, the Governor's Office, legal service providers, State and local bar associations, and other stakeholders. The commission seeks to develop, coordinate, and implement policies to

expand access to the State's civil justice system. In its *Interim Report and Recommendations* (fall 2009), the commission endorsed the principle of "...a general fee-shifting provision as a means to promote access to justice through an award of attorney's fees for individuals successfully enforcing their rights under Maryland law or the Maryland Constitution."

Commonly cited reasons for a fee-shifting statute include:

- providing access to the court system for low-income plaintiffs in these cases;
- giving prevailing plaintiffs an opportunity to recoup these expenses in cases filed under the Maryland Constitution, as that opportunity is already available under the federal Civil Rights Attorney's Fees Award Act of 1976 (42 U.S.C. §1988);
- encouraging State plaintiffs to bring State constitutional claims in State courts instead of having to resort to federal courts in the hopes of recouping their legal expenses;
- allowing plaintiffs in these cases to be fully compensated ("be made whole") for their harm instead of having to pay for attorney's fees out of awarded damages;
- encouraging private attorneys to accept cases that may not generate large monetary awards but are in the public interest; and
- promoting compliance and enforcement of the law through private causes of action that would otherwise be financially infeasible.

Connecticut and Massachusetts have statutes authorizing the awarding of attorney's fees to prevailing plaintiffs in claims filed under the constitutions or civil rights acts of those states. California has a broader statute that authorizes the awarding of attorney's fees in any action resulting in the enforcement of an important right affecting the public interest if (1) the action confers a significant benefit on the general public or a large class of persons; (2) the cost of private enforcement renders the award appropriate; and (3) it is not in the interest of justice that the fees be paid out of the recovery.

State Expenditures: Special fund expenditures increase, perhaps significantly, if the bill results in higher payments from SITF for claims filed under MTCA. General fund expenditures increase for State agencies subject to higher SITF premiums/assessments if SITF incurs losses from MTCA payments as a result of the bill. General fund expenditures increase significantly for additional staff for OAG if the bill increases the volume and duration of OAG litigation. General fund expenditures may decrease somewhat if the bill increases private enforcement of constitutional or other rights that would otherwise be conducted by the State, but any such impact is unclear.

State Insurance Trust Fund: Claims under MTCA are paid out of SITF, which is administered by the Treasurer's Office. The Treasurer's Insurance Division handled

approximately 5,100 MTCA claims during fiscal 2014. Between fiscal 2012 and 2014, SITF paid an average of \$3.7 million per year for tort claims under MTCA. The Treasurer's Office projects that SITF will pay approximately \$4.0 million in claims during fiscal 2015. The Governor's proposed fiscal 2016 budget includes a \$7.31 million appropriation for tort claims (including motor vehicle torts) under MTCA. The funds are to be transferred to SITF.

Agencies pay premiums to SITF that are comprised of an assessment for each employee covered and SITF payments for torts committed by the agency's employees. The portion of the assessment attributable to losses is allocated over five years. The costs associated with the awards for attorney's fees under the bill were not anticipated as a component in the Treasurer's actuarial calculation of the recommended SITF balance. The Treasurer is charged with setting premiums "so as to produce funds that approximate the payments from the fund." (See Md. State Fin. & Proc. Code Ann. § 9-106(b).) The actuary assesses SITF's reserves and each agency's loss experience for the various risk categories, which include tort claims and constitutional claims. An agency's loss history, consisting of settlements and judgments incurred since the last budget cycle, comprises part of the agency's annual premium. That amount is electronically transferred to SITF from the appropriations in an agency's budget.

Because the bill excludes awards for attorney's fees from the liability limits and limits on attorney's fees under MTCA, any such award in an MTCA case increases special fund expenditures for SITF through an increase in premiums should the award of attorney's fees be factored into the cost of the settlements or judgments in MTCA cases. Special fund expenditures for SITF also increase to the extent that the bill increases the number of MTCA claims. General fund expenditures for the affected agencies may increase in future years if SITF incurs losses from awards in MTCA cases resulting from the bill.

The Treasurer's Office advises that there are several cases of pending litigation where MTCA plaintiffs have alleged that their constitutional rights have been violated by State personnel. Many of these cases involve the actions of law enforcement officers – although such violations are not limited to law enforcement agencies.

The Treasurer's Office analyzed four cases that contain allegations of constitutional rights violations. The cases are in various stages of development – one is scheduled for settlement approval by the Board of Public Works at their next meeting, one is undergoing settlement discussions, and some are in the appellate and post-trial phase. The Treasurer's Office estimates that the potential attorney's fees in these four cases alone could total \$425,000.

Office of the Attorney General: **Despite repeated requests for information, OAG did not provide a fiscal estimate for this bill.** However, with respect to similar legislation

introduced in prior years, OAG has historically advised that awarding attorney's fees and exempting attorney's fees from liability limits may result in a significant increase in expenditures for OAG to hire additional attorneys and support staff to handle cases brought by plaintiffs who, absent the bill, would not bring these claims. According to OAG, the availability of attorney's fees in federal constitutional and civil rights claims has subjected State agencies and officers to protracted litigation over eligibility for attorney's fees, resulting in increased litigation expenditures. OAG has historically advised that lawsuits against State agencies and State officers typically outnumber similar cases based on federal law.

Local Expenditures: Several local governments covered by LGTCA are insured by LGIT, a self-insurer that operates similarly to SITF. Thus, future year expenditures increase for local agencies affected by the bill if (1) awards for attorney's fees increase overall awards in LGTCA cases and (2) LGIT incurs losses from payments of attorney's fees in LGTCA cases.

Washington County advises that an award of plaintiff's attorney's fees in a case involving the county could have a significant impact on county expenses. After conferring with LGIT, Kent County advises that the bill's impact is substantial but not determinable.

Worcester County advises that the county has never been sued for a violation of the Maryland Constitution. However, the county may incur additional expenditures should a plaintiff in an applicable future case be awarded attorney's fees as a result of the bill. The county is unable to reliably quantify the magnitude of this increase at this time.

The Town of Leonardtown advises that it may incur increased expenses from fees awarded in these cases and from legal expenses if the bill's provisions increase the number of cases filed against the town.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: HB 568 of 2014, a similar bill, received an unfavorable report from the House Judiciary Committee. HB 130 of 2013, a similar bill, received an unfavorable report from the House Judiciary Committee. Its cross file, SB 263, was referred to the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee but was subsequently withdrawn.

Cross File: HB 283 (Delegate Carter, *et al.*) - Judiciary.

Information Source(s): Kent, Washington, and Worcester counties; Town of Leonardtown; Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts); Maryland State Treasurer's Office; Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - February 16, 2015
min/kdm

Analysis by: Amy A. Devadas

Direct Inquiries to:
(410) 946-5510
(301) 970-5510