

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2018 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

House Bill 1239
Economic Matters

Labor and Employment - Sexual Harassment - Contractual Waivers

This bill establishes that a provision in an employment contract, policy, or agreement that waives any future substantive or procedural right or remedy to a claim of sexual harassment, discrimination, or retaliation is null and void as being against the public policy of the State. The bill applies to any employment contract, policy, or agreement that is executed, extended, or renewed on or after October 1, 2018.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: The Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation can implement and enforce the bill with existing resources. The Maryland Commission on Civil Rights (MCCR) can investigate any additional complaints of sex discrimination that stem from void agreements with existing resources. Revenues are not affected.

Local Effect: None.

Small Business Effect: Minimal.

Analysis

Current Law: Sexual harassment is a form of sex-based discrimination. State law generally prohibits an employer with at least 15 employees from discharging, failing or refusing to hire, or otherwise discriminating against any individual with respect to the individual's compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment because of race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, genetic information, or disability. For the purposes of this prohibition, the State and local governments are considered employers.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is responsible for enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person's race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability, or genetic information. It is also illegal to discriminate against a person because the person complained about discrimination, filed a charge of discrimination, or participated in an employment discrimination investigation or lawsuit. Most employers with at least 15 employees are covered by EEOC laws (20 employees in age discrimination cases). Most labor unions and employment agencies are also covered.

Antidiscrimination laws apply to all types of work situations, including hiring, firing, promotions, harassment, training, wages, and benefits. EEOC has the authority to investigate charges of discrimination against employers who are covered by the law. If EEOC finds that discrimination has occurred, it tries to settle the charge. If not successful, EEOC has the authority to file a lawsuit to protect the rights of individuals and the interests of the public but does not, however, file lawsuits in all cases in which there was a finding of discrimination.

An individual alleging employment discrimination may file a complaint with MCCR. When a charge is filed with MCCR, it is automatically "dual-filed" with EEOC if federal laws apply. If a complaint is filed with MCCR and an agreement to remedy and eliminate the discrimination cannot be reached, the matter may be heard before an administrative law judge. Remedies available on a finding that the respondent is engaging or has engaged in an unlawful employment practice include (1) enjoining the respondent from engaging in the discriminatory act; (2) ordering appropriate affirmative relief; (3) awarding compensatory damages for pecuniary and nonpecuniary losses; and (4) ordering any other equitable relief that the administrative law judge considers appropriate.

A complainant or a respondent may elect to have the claims asserted in a complaint alleging an unlawful employment practice determined in a civil action brought by MCCR on the complainant's behalf if (1) MCCR has found probable cause to believe the respondent has engaged or is engaging in an unlawful employment practice and (2) there is a failure to reach an agreement to remedy and eliminate the practice. MCCR may also elect to have the claims asserted within the complaint determined in a civil action brought on its own behalf under the same conditions. If an election for a civil action is made, MCCR must file, within 60 days after the election, a civil action in the circuit court for the county where the alleged discrimination occurred. On a finding that discrimination occurred, the court may provide the remedies specified above.

A complainant may file a private civil action against the respondent if (1) the complainant initially filed a timely administrative charge or a complaint under federal, State, or local law alleging discrimination; (2) at least 180 days have elapsed since the filing of this complaint or charge; and (3) the civil action is filed within two years after the alleged

discrimination occurred. In addition to the remedies specified above, the court may award punitive damages if (1) the respondent is not a governmental unit or political subdivision and (2) the court finds that the respondent has engaged or is engaging in discrimination with actual malice. The filing of a private cause of action automatically terminates any proceeding before MCCR based on the underlying administrative complaint and any amendment to the complaint. Any party may demand a jury trial if a complainant seeks compensatory or punitive damages. Pursuant to § 20-1015 of the State Government Article, a court may award the prevailing party in a civil action reasonable attorney's fees, expert witness fees, and costs.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: None.

Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts); Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation; Maryland Commission on Civil Rights; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; Department of Legislative Services

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