

**STORAGE NAME:** h0759.jj.doc  
**DATE:** March 21, 2001

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
AS FURTHER REVISED BY THE COMMITTEE ON  
JUVENILE JUSTICE  
ANALYSIS**

**BILL #:** HB 759  
**RELATING TO:** Character Evidence  
**SPONSOR(S):** Committee on Crime Prevention, Corrections & Safety and Representative Bilirakis

**TIED BILL(S):**

**ORIGINATING COMMITTEE(S)/COMMITTEE(S)/COUNCIL(S) OF REFERENCE:**

- (1) CRIME PREVENTION, CORRECTIONS & SAFETY YEAS 8 NAYS 0
  - (2) JUDICIAL OVERSIGHT (SGC) YEAS 10 NAYS 0
  - (3) JUVENILE JUSTICE (SGC)
  - (4) COUNCIL FOR HEALTHY COMMUNITIES
  - (5)
- 

**I. SUMMARY:**

Section 90.404(2)(a), F.S., governs the admissibility of evidence of "other crimes, wrongs, or acts" in criminal trials. The section permits the admission of "similar fact" evidence of other crimes, wrongs, or acts when such evidence is relevant to prove a material fact at issue. When relevant, collateral evidence is admissible for the purpose of proving motive, opportunity, intent, preparation, plan, knowledge, identity, or absence of mistake or accident. Similar fact evidence is inadmissible when the evidence is relevant solely to prove bad character or propensity.

The bill adds a specific provision to s. 90.404(2), F.S., to allow the admission of collateral crime evidence of the defendant's other acts of "child molestation" in cases where the defendant is presently charged with an act of "child molestation." The bill also provides a definition of "child molestation" for purposes of the section. The bill deletes the term "similar fact" from s. 90.404(2)(a), F.S., in order to clarify that the standard for admissibility of evidence under the section is relevancy. The bill revises the statutory notification requirement to allow the state to provide notice of its intent to the defendant or the defendant's counsel.

The bill appears to have no or minimal fiscal impact to the State.

The act takes effect on July 1, 2001.

The Committee on Judicial Oversight adopted an amendment to clarify that the state is not limited to presenting evidence of criminal offenses when it offers evidence under s. 90.404, F.S. The amendment is traveling with the bill.

II. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS:

A. DOES THE BILL SUPPORT THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES:

- |                                   |                              |                             |   |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. <u>Less Government</u>         | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. <u>Lower Taxes</u>             | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. <u>Individual Freedom</u>      | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. <u>Personal Responsibility</u> | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. <u>Family Empowerment</u>      | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

For any principle that received a "no" above, please explain:

B. PRESENT SITUATION:

**Prosecution of Cases of Child Sexual Abuse**

Many cases of child sexual abuse are very difficult for prosecutors to prove when the crime allegedly consists of lewd fondling, digital penetration, or the child being forced to perform sex acts upon the assailant, and there is no physical evidence left by the commission of the crime. Frequently, these are crimes of opportunity, which take place when the child is alone with the assailant. In such cases, the child's testimony is the only evidence of the crime and the child's credibility becomes the pivotal factor in the case.

In cases such as these, evidence that the defendant has also sexually abused children at other times can be a powerful tool to assist juries in weighing the credibility of child victims. The knowledge that a defendant has sexually assaulted other children can be the deciding factor in the mind of a juror as to whether to believe or disbelieve the testimony of a child victim.

**Similar Fact/Collateral Crime Evidence**

Section 90.404(2)(a), F.S, currently provides:

(2) OTHER CRIMES, WRONGS, OR ACTS.--

(a) Similar fact evidence of other crimes, wrongs, or acts is admissible when relevant to prove a material fact in issue, such as proof of motive, opportunity, intent, preparation, plan, knowledge, identity, or absence of mistake or accident, but it is inadmissible when the evidence is relevant **solely** to prove bad character or propensity. (Emphasis added.)

Under this section, evidence of "other crimes, wrongs, or acts" (also known as "similar fact" or "collateral crime" evidence) is admissible when it is relevant to a matter that is at issue in a trial. Such evidence cannot be admitted if it is **only** relevant to show the defendant's propensity to commit such crimes or other wrongful acts. However, if the evidence shows a defendant's propensity to commit such crimes, **and** it is relevant to prove things such as the defendant's motive, plan, intention, or opportunity to commit the crime, the evidence is admissible under this section.

Section 90.404(2)(a), F.S., is the codification of the rule regarding the admissibility of collateral crime evidence as announced in the case of Williams v. State, 110 So.2d 654 (Fla. 1959). In Williams, the Florida Supreme Court upheld the admission of the similar fact evidence and expressed the rule both in terms of when such evidence is admissible, and when it is not:

Our view of the proper rule simply is that relevant evidence will not be excluded merely because it relates to similar facts which point to the commission of a separate crime. The test of admissibility is relevancy. The test of inadmissibility is a lack of relevancy [.]

Id. at 659-660.

Heuring v. State, 513 So.2d 122 (Fla. 1987), Rawls v. State, 649 So.2d 1350 (Fla. 1994), and Saffor v. State, 660 So.2d 668 (Fla. 1995), are the lead Florida cases on the admission of collateral crime evidence in child sexual abuse cases. These three cases have generated two standards for admitting collateral crime evidence in cases of child sexual abuse. A "strict similarity" standard is used in child sexual abuse cases when there is no familial relationship between the defendant and the victim. A "relaxed similarity" standard is used in cases when there is a familial relationship between the defendant and the victim. See Saffor v. State, 625 So.2d 31 (Fla. 1st DCA, 1993). However, a review of these cases does not readily reveal the basis for the court's rationale that the presence of a familial relationship warrants different standards.

In Saffor, the defendant was convicted of sexual battery of his girlfriend's ten-year-old son. Saffor was living in the same home as the victim at the time of the offense, and had fathered two other children with the victim's mother. Saffor and the victim were sleeping in the same bed when Saffor pulled down the victim's pants and sodomized him. At trial, similar fact evidence was introduced regarding Saffor's prior conviction of attempted lewd assault on his twelve-year-old niece, which had occurred four years earlier. The prior incident occurred while the niece was staying overnight in Saffor's home. Saffor entered the niece's room while she was sleeping, put his hand down her pajamas and started rubbing her vagina. Saffor withdrew his hand when his niece told him to leave. The First District Court of Appeal found that the evidence was sufficiently similar, and upheld the admission of the evidence.

When the case reached the Florida Supreme Court in Saffor v. State, 660 So.2d 668 (Fla. 1995), the court vacated Saffor's conviction on the ground that the crime charged and the collateral crime "bore little resemblance to each other." The Court found that the similarities between the two cases were not sufficient to admit the evidence even under the "relaxed similarity" standard. However, in both incidents the child victims were in a familial relationship with the defendant, both incidents took place while the victims were in bed sleeping, one victim was ten years old and the other twelve, and in each case Saffor was attracted only to each child's lower bodily orifices. Nonetheless, in making their ruling, the Florida Supreme Court attached great weight to facts such as one victim being male and the other female, the victims not being exactly the same age, and that the offenses occurred at different locations and "different times of the day."

In Paul v. State, 660 So.2d 752 (Fla. 1st DCA 1995), the defendant was convicted on four counts of lewd assault on a child. Two of the counts involved digital penetration of the victim's vagina, while the other counts involved lewd fondling. In addition to the details of the incidents themselves, evidence was introduced that the defendant first met the victim when she was in the third grade, that he paid attention to her at school, that he gave her roses and a card on Valentines Day, and that he bought her candy. The victim also testified that the defendant had touched her "in a way she didn't like," kissed her on the lips, and rubbed her stomach while she sat in his lap. Similar fact evidence was also admitted concerning the defendant's involvement with another young girl. The

similar fact witness testified that she met the defendant, who was a volunteer at her school, while she was in the fifth grade, and that the defendant showed her a lot of attention. In addition, she testified that he carried her books, hugged her "in front real tight," rubbed her back, patted her on the buttocks, sent her flowers three times with cards, and gave her \$10 every three weeks. She further testified that her mother complained to the school board after the defendant sent her roses on Valentines Day. On appeal, the First District Court of Appeal found that the similar facts were not relevant to show any alleged common plan, scheme, or even a similar modus operandi (method of operation). The case was reversed and remanded for a new trial.

Cases of child sexual abuse are the only cases that have been subjected to the heightened standards of admissibility of Saffor, Rawls, and Heuring. In other criminal cases, the courts apply s. 90.404(2)(a), F.S. Generally, evidence is admissible when it is relevant to a matter that is at issue in a trial. Similarity of detail or uniqueness is not required for the admission of similar fact evidence of other crimes, wrongs, or acts.<sup>1</sup> Professor Charles Ehrhardt, a noted expert on evidentiary matters, points out that the term "similar fact" evidence is something of a misnomer:

Thus it can be misleading to refer to this evidence as 'similar fact' evidence because similarity of the facts involved in the collateral act or crime does not insure relevance for admissibility. Similarly, evidence of collateral crimes may be relevant and admissible even if it is not similar.<sup>2</sup>

The First District Court of Appeal made the following comment regarding the current court standard:

The standard that has been crafted is unfortunately extremely unwieldy to apply. Our trial judges are being called upon on a case by case basis to determine whether certain alleged sex acts performed by an adult upon one child are sufficiently similar to other sex acts allegedly performed upon another child to meet the standard of admissibility. Hardly an enviable task.<sup>3</sup>

#### C. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

The bill adds a specific provision to s. 90.404(2), F.S., to admit collateral crime evidence of the defendant's other acts of "child molestation" in cases where the defendant is charged with an act of "child molestation."

The term "child molestation" is defined as conduct proscribed by s. 794.011, F.S., and s. 800.04, F.S., when the act is committed against a victim 16 years of age or younger. The conduct proscribed under these sections is as follows:

1. Sexual Battery, as defined in s. 794.011, F.S.,
2. Lewd or Lascivious Battery, as defined in s. 800.04(4), F.S.,
3. Lewd or Lascivious Molestation, as defined in s. 800.04(5), F.S.,
4. Lewd or Lascivious Conduct, as defined in s. 800.04(6), F.S., or
5. Lewd or Lascivious Exhibition, as defined in s. 800.04(7), F.S.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Williams v. State, 621 So.2d 413, 414 (Fla. 1993); Bryan v. State, 533 So.2d 744, 746 (Fla. 1988), *cert. denied*, 490 U.S. 1028, 104 L.Ed.2d 200, 109 S.Ct. 1765 (1989).

<sup>2</sup> C. Ehrhardt, Florida Evidence, Section 404.09, at 181-182 (2000 Edition).

<sup>3</sup> Rowland v. State, 680 So.2d 502, 504 (Fla. 1st DCA 1996).

Evidence admitted under the bill's newly created section could be considered "for its bearing on any matter to which it is relevant." This change to existing law would bring Florida's law with respect to the admission of collateral crime evidence in these cases in conformity with the Federal Rules of Evidence.<sup>4</sup>

Currently, all forms of relevant evidence are also scrutinized under s. 90.403, F.S., which precludes the admission of relevant evidence "if its probative value is substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice" (also known as a "403 balancing test"). Under the bill, evidence of collateral acts of child molestation would still be required to pass the test provided in s. 90.403, F.S., before it could be admitted.

In clarifying that the standard for the admissibility of evidence of "other crimes, wrongs, or acts" pursuant to s. 90.404(2) is **relevancy**, the bill deletes the term "similar fact" from s. 90.404(2)(a), F.S. In addition, the bill allows notice of the state's intention to use such evidence to be provided to the defendant or the defendant's counsel to satisfy the statutory notification requirement.

D. SECTION-BY-SECTION ANALYSIS:

Please refer to the "Present Situation" and "Effects of Proposed Changes" sections above.

III. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT:

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

There is expected to be no or minimal fiscal impact to the state associated with this bill.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

None.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.

---

<sup>4</sup> Federal Rule 414, *Evidence of Similar Crimes in Child Molestation Cases*.

IV. CONSEQUENCES OF ARTICLE VII, SECTION 18 OF THE FLORIDA CONSTITUTION:

A. APPLICABILITY OF THE MANDATES PROVISION:

This bill does not require counties or municipalities to spend funds or to take action requiring the expenditure of funds. Additionally, this bill is a criminal law and is exempt from the mandates provision of Article VII, Section 18 of the Florida Constitution.

B. REDUCTION OF REVENUE RAISING AUTHORITY:

This bill does not reduce the authority that municipalities or counties have to raise revenues in the aggregate.

C. REDUCTION OF STATE TAX SHARED WITH COUNTIES AND MUNICIPALITIES:

This bill does not reduce the percentage of a state tax shared with counties or municipalities.

V. COMMENTS:

A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

This bill expands the admissibility of evidence of collateral crimes in cases of child sexual abuse to consideration "on any matter to which it is relevant." This expansion tracks the federal rule. Opponents of such an expansion could argue that the admissibility of similar fact evidence in this manner would violate the "fundamental fairness" component of the due process clause of the constitution. The argument is essentially that the admission of such evidence would permit a jury to convict the defendant as punishment for his other bad acts, rather than for his charged crime. Such arguments, however, have generally been rejected in federal court (where there is a presumption in favor of admission) in challenges made to the federal rules.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, similar arguments have been raised in opposition to a comparable California provision, and have been defeated.<sup>6</sup> In the federal cases and in the California cases, the courts found that a defendant's due process rights were protected because the trial court was still required to determine whether the probative value of the evidence outweighed any unfair prejudice.<sup>7</sup>

Even under the provisions of the bill, evidence of collateral crimes is nonetheless subject to the 403 balancing test of whether the probative value of the evidence outweighs its prejudicial nature. Thus, a defendant's right to a fair trial is ultimately protected.

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

N/A

---

<sup>5</sup> See U.S. v. Enjady, 134 F.3d 1427, 1431-1433 (10th Cir. 1996)(holding that a presumption in favor of admission of evidence of prior sexual assaults does not violate due process); U.S. v. LeCompte, 131 F.3d 767, 770 (8th Cir. 1997)(reversing a trial court order excluding collateral crime evidence and noting that Federal Rule 414 is intended to overrule cases holding that collateral crime evidence in child sex cases is unfairly prejudicial).

<sup>6</sup> People v. Fitch, 63 Cal.Rptr.2d 753, 760 (3rd DCA 1997) "Since Evidence Code section 1108 does not implicate any of the guarantees of the Bill of Rights and it does not offend a fundamental principle of justice rooted in traditions and conscience of our people, we find that Evidence Code section 1108 on its face does not violate the Due Process Clause" (Dowling v. United States, 493 U.S. 342, 352-353, 110 S.Ct. 668, 674-675, 107 L.Ed.2d 708, 720).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Enjady; LeCompte; United States v. Castillo, 140 F.3d 874, 883 (10th Cir. 1998)(noting that courts are still required to perform a 403 balancing test and holding that "Rule 414 on its face does not violate the constitutional guarantee of due process.").

**STORAGE NAME:** h0759.jj.doc

**DATE:** March 21, 2001

**PAGE:** 7

C. OTHER COMMENTS:

N/A

VI. AMENDMENTS OR COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE CHANGES:

The Committee on Judicial Oversight considered the bill on March 20, 2001. The Committee adopted an amendment to clarify that the state is not limited to presenting evidence of a criminal offense when it offers evidence under s. 90.404, F.S. The amendment is traveling with the bill.

VII. SIGNATURES:

COMMITTEE ON JUDICIAL OVERSIGHT:

Prepared by:

Staff Director:

David De La Paz

David De La Paz

AS REVISED BY THE COMMITTEE ON JUDICIAL OVERSIGHT:

Prepared by:

Staff Director:

L. Michael Billmeier

Lynne Overton

AS FURTHER REVISED BY THE COMMITTEE ON JUVENILE JUSTICE:

Prepared by:

Staff Director:

Lori Ager

Lori Ager