



## Employment Law Note

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### The New Year Brings Greater Benefits and Protections to Washington Workers



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The new year brings significant updates to Washington State's workplace laws, expanding protections and benefits for employees. Minimum wages are rising, the Domestic Violence Leave Act now includes protections for victims of hate crimes, and certain industries must implement additional safeguards for workers who perform jobs in isolation.

#### Washington State's Minimum Wage Floor Rises

As of January 1, 2026, Washington State's minimum wage is \$17.13 per hour, which is a 2.8% increase from 2025's minimum wage of \$16.66 per hour. This increase crowns Washington as the state with the highest minimum wage. Minor employees (ages fourteen and fifteen) must be paid at least \$14.56 per hour.

When the minimum wage rises, so does the minimum salary for exempt employees. In 2026, employers must now pay all employees exempt from overtime a salary of at least \$1,541.70 per week (\$80,168.40 per year). Exempt computer professionals who are paid hourly must earn a minimum of \$59.96 per hour.

Additionally, as a result of the State's minimum wage increase, the following local jurisdictions followed suit, raising their minimum wage rates effective January 1, 2026:

- Bellingham: \$19.17 per hour, with no distinction based on size.
- Burien: \$21.63 per hour for employers with 500+ full-time employees and \$20.63 per hour for employers with 21-499 full-time employees.
- Everett: \$20.77 per hour for employers with 500+ employees, regardless of where employees are located, all franchisees associated with a franchisor or a network of franchises with franchisees that employ 500+ employees in aggregate; \$18.77 per hour for employers

with 15-499 employees or a gross revenue of over \$2 million in Everett (this will increase to \$19.77 per hour in July 2026).

- Renton: \$21.57 per hour for employers with 501+ employees; \$20.57 per hour for employers with 15-499 employees worldwide or over \$2 million of annual gross revenue in Renton.
- SeaTac: \$20.74 per hour, only applicable to employers in the hospitality and transportation industries.
- Seattle: \$21.30 per hour, with no distinction based on business size.
- Tukwila: \$21.65 per hour. Tukwila no longer has tiered rates for mid-to-large employers. An employer is a "covered employer" if it (1) employs at least 15 employees, regardless of where the employees reside; and (2) has an annual gross revenue of over \$2 million generated within Tukwila city limits.
- Unincorporated King County: \$20.82 per hour with three temporary exceptions: (1) \$18.32 per hour for employers with 15 or fewer employees and an annual gross revenue of less than \$2 million; (2) \$19.82 per hour for employers with 15 or fewer employees and an annual gross revenue of \$2 million or more; and (3) \$19.82 per hour for employers with 16-499 employees and an annual gross revenue of any amount.

Failure to pay employees the legally required minimum wage may result in audits and investigations by the Department of Labor and Industries, as well as private civil actions, including class action lawsuits. Employers should review every employee's compensation to ensure they are in compliance.

#### Washington Expands the Domestic Violence Leave Act

As of January 1, 2026, the Domestic Violence Leave Act ("DVLA") expanded to afford workplace protections to victims of hate crimes who must be absent from work "to seek legal or law enforcement assistance or remedies to

protect their own health and safety or that of a family member, as defined under the DVLA (including a child, spouse, parent, parent-in-law, grandparent, or a person with whom the employee has a dating relationship)." This includes, but is not limited to, preparing for or participating in civil or criminal legal proceedings related to a hate crime for any of the following reasons:

- To obtain health care treatment from a licensed provider for physical or mental injuries resulting from a hate crime, either for themselves or a family member.
- To access services from a social services program that provides support or relief in response to a hate crime.
- To receive mental health counseling related to a hate crime, or to assist a family member in doing so.
- To engage in safety planning, relocate temporarily or permanently, or take other steps to enhance personal or familial safety in response to a potential future hate crime.

Employees are required to provide advance notice of leave in accordance with their employer's established policies, except in cases of emergency or unforeseen circumstances. Employers should review their leave policies to reflect clearly defined procedures when requesting non-emergency DVLA leave for covered reasons.

## New Protections for Isolated Workers in Certain Industries

In April 2025, House Bill 1524 was signed into law and took effect on January 1, 2026. The law amends RCW 49.60.515, which is Washington's statute that provides protection to workers who work in isolation within certain industries. The law encompasses hospitality, retail businesses, security guard entities, and property services contractors, such as janitorial and building services. The changes to the law broadens the definition of an isolated worker to an

employee who: (1) spends 50% or more of their working hours alone, or works in a location or situation where immediate assistance from another employee or supervisor is not available without summoning help; and (2) is employed by an employer as a janitor, security guard, hotel or motel housekeeper, or room service attendant.

Employers who employ at least one isolated worker must:

- Provide a panic button to isolated employees (an emergency contact device carried by an isolated employee by which the isolated employee may summon immediate on-scene assistance from another worker, a security guard, or a representative of the employer).
- Adopt a sexual harassment policy.
- Provide a resource with contact information for the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ("EEOC"), Washington State Human Rights Commission ("WSHRC"), and local advocacy groups focused on preventing sexual harassment and assault.
- Provide training to managers, supervisors, and isolated employees on:
  - Prevention of sexual harassment, assault, and discrimination;
  - How to use and respond to panic buttons;
  - Protections for employees who report law violations.

Violations of the law may result in a civil penalty of \$1,000 per violation. Repeated willful violations will result in civil penalties of at least \$2,000, but no greater than \$10,000, for each repeat willful violation.

Covered employers should review policies and procedures to ensure they meet the law's requirements. The attorneys at Sebris Busto James are available to help employers review policies and procedures to ensure compliance, as well as to provide the mandatory trainings.

For more information about this month's Employment Law Note  
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