

MINUTES
SENATE JUDICIARY & RULES COMMITTEE

DATE: Wednesday, February 18, 2026

TIME: 1:30 P.M.

PLACE: Room WW54

MEMBERS PRESENT: Vice Chairman Shippy , Senators Brooks(Lakey), Ricks, Foreman, Lent, Lenney, Keyser, Wintrow, and Ruchti

**ABSENT/
EXCUSED:** None

NOTE: The sign-in sheet, testimonies and other related materials will be retained with the minutes in the committee's office until the end of the session and will then be located on file with the minutes in the Legislative Services Library.

CONVENED: **Vice Chairman Shippy** called the meeting of the Senate Judiciary and Rules Committee (Committee) to order at 1:32 p.m.

RS 33312C1 **Relating to the Small Claims Department of the Magistrate Division, To Revise a Provision Regarding the Scope of a Claim. Senator Codi Galloway**, District 15, presented **RS 33312C1**, explaining that the proposal was brought forward after a constituent approached her with a concern and a potential solution. **RS 33312C1** sought to increase Idaho's small claims court limit from \$5,000 to \$15,000. She explained that raising the limit would allow individuals and small businesses to resolve common disputes—such as repair costs or unpaid bills—more efficiently and without the expense and complexity of full civil litigation.

MOTION: **Senator Wintrow** moved to send **RS 33312C1** to print. **Senator Foreman** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

RS 33423 **Relating to Weights and Measures; Amending Section 71-234, Idaho Code, to Provide for Cash Rounding. Senator Ricks**, District 34, presented **RS 33423**, explaining that the legislation addressed penny rounding in light of the federal government's decision to stop minting pennies as of November 12, 2025. He noted that as the supply of pennies diminished, consumers and businesses may increasingly encounter situations in which exact change was unavailable for cash transactions. He stated that the proposal, developed in coordination with the Retailers Association, provided common sense guidance for merchants on rounding cash payments. Under **RS 33423**, merchants would be permitted—but not required—to round totals to the nearest five cents. Amounts ending in one or two cents would round down, while those ending in three or four cents would round up to five cents. **Senator Ricks** further clarified that sales tax would be calculated on the final total amount rather than on individual line items, and any rounding for cash payments would apply only to the total invoice. Non-cash payments, such as credit or debit cards, would continue to be processed to the exact penny.

MOTION: **Senator Foreman** moved to send **RS 33423** to print. **Senator Keyser** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

H 518

HUMAN TRAFFICKING - Amends existing law to provide that the Attorney General shall have certain authority. Representative Bruce Skaug, District 10, presented **H 518**. He noted that it had passed unanimously on the House floor. He explained that the legislation granted the Attorney General authority to accept investigations and prosecute human-trafficking cases upon request from local law enforcement. He stated that although the Legislature had strengthened Idaho's human-trafficking statutes in recent years, these cases remained highly complex, often spanning multiple counties or even states. As a result, individual jurisdictions frequently lacked the resources or reach to effectively investigate and prosecute all parties involved.

Rep. Skaug described the bill as an initial step toward a more coordinated, statewide approach—similar to the Idaho Crimes Against Children (ICAC) model, which had been successful in addressing crimes against minors. He acknowledged that the Attorney General's Office did not yet have the specialized expertise or dedicated personnel to handle such prosecutions but explained that granting the authority now would allow the office to begin preparing and planning. He indicated that future legislation could seek funding to support a specialized prosecutor within the Attorney General's Office.

DISCUSSION: **Senator Ricks** asked Rep. Skaug to explain what currently occurred when human-trafficking cases arose, and to further clarify how the proposed legislation would change or affect the handling of those cases. **Rep. Skaug** responded that under current law, local law enforcement agencies could not directly refer human-trafficking cases to the Attorney General's Office. Instead, cases had to come through a county prosecutor's office. He explained that the proposed legislation would allow law enforcement to refer cases directly to the Attorney General, similar to how the ICAC task force operated, enabling the Attorney General's Office to review and potentially take on those cases at the request of law enforcement.

TESTIMONY: **Robert Gillis**, Idaho Tough on Crime, shared that during 25 years in law enforcement in Los Angeles, serving on organized crime and gang task forces, human-trafficking was a significant issue connected to gangs and cartels. He explained that human-trafficking cases were often set aside because they were complex, difficult to prove, and lacked specialized prosecutors. Victims were frequently fearful, threatened, or manipulated, making cooperation and testimony challenging. As a result, many cases were not pursued. He noted that Los Angeles later established a specialized human-trafficking unit with dedicated prosecutors, which led to more successful prosecutions. He expressed his belief that creating similar capacity within the Idaho Attorney General's Office would be beneficial. He emphasized that human-trafficking does occur in Idaho and often crossed county and state lines, citing an example in which a victim was trafficked from Idaho to Tennessee. He stated that providing prosecutors with an additional avenue to handle these complex cases would strengthen enforcement efforts and concluded by expressing support for **H 518**.

Lieutenant Jason Kimball, Nampa Police Department, testified that his detectives regularly investigated human-trafficking and witnessed firsthand how networks exploited vulnerable community members. He explained that human-trafficking cases rarely remained local—they often began with a minor incident, such as a traffic stop, and quickly spanned multiple counties, with connections reaching northern Idaho. This created jurisdictional challenges, as local prosecutors often faced heavy caseloads and limited resources for multi-county cases. He stated that **H 518** would address these boundary issues by allowing the Attorney General's Office to act as a central hub, enabling investigations to continue across the state without losing momentum. He emphasized that human-trafficking cases were

complex and required specialized prosecutors with specific training and skills for successful prosecution. The legislation would permit a sheriff or chief of police to request the Attorney General's Office to prosecute a case, complementing—not replacing—local prosecutors. **Lieutenant Kimball** concluded that the bill was vital for dismantling trafficking networks, supporting victims, and targeting offenders.

Jeannie Strohmeyer, Executive Director of the Nampa Family Justice Center, testified in support of **H 518**. She explained that her organization provided coordinated services for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, elder abuse, stalking, and human-trafficking through a co-located, victim-centered model. She emphasized that human-trafficking survivors were often re-traumatized by having to repeatedly recount their experiences as cases moved across multiple jurisdictions. She stated that **H 518** would create a more victim-centered approach by allowing the Attorney General's Office to serve as the lead authority, establishing a centralized prosecution model with specialized, trauma-informed prosecutors and investigators. She concluded that the bill would make justice more accessible and compassionate for survivors and urged the Committee to recommend its approval.

MOTION: **Senator Keyser** moved to send **H 518** to the floor with a **do pass** recommendation. **Senator Foreman** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

S 1257 **CHILD PROTECTION - Amends existing law to establish provisions regarding visitation and termination of parental rights.** **Senator Wintrow**, District 19, acknowledged her co-sponsor Representative Josh Wheeler. She then presented **S 1257**, explaining that the legislation sought to balance parental rights with the best interests and safety of children. She stated that the primary purpose of the bill was to clarify in statute that mandatory in-person visitation would not be required in cases where sexual abuse or severe physical abuse of a child had been substantiated. She noted that the definitions of abuse referenced existing Idaho Code and applied to egregious conduct, including life-threatening, disabling, or disfiguring physical abuse, as well as sexual abuse. The bill codified provisions that were already contained in administrative rule, which the Legislature had previously approved, in order to provide clearer statutory guidance to the courts.

Senator Wintrow explained that when the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (DHW) substantiated abuse and denied or paused visitation, parents would retain the right to appeal through an administrative hearing process. She described this process as more timely and less adversarial than court proceedings, while preserving judicial discretion. If a court chose to override a denial of visitation in a substantiated abuse case, the bill required the court to document its reasoning and outline safety measures. The bill also addressed termination of parental rights. Specifically, it clarified that when the DHW initiated a request for termination, courts could consider that fact, particularly in cases where a parent had been incarcerated for a substantial portion of the child's life. She emphasized that the provision did not mandate termination but ensured consistency across courts in recognizing the DHW's role in initiating such proceedings. **Senator Wintrow** concluded that **S 1257** provided clear statutory guidance, reinforced child safety in substantiated abuse cases, preserved due process for parents, and supported consistent judicial application statewide. She then turned the floor over to Jean Fisher from DHW.

DISCUSSION: **Senator Foreman** remarked that he believed the bill was exceptionally well written and thoughtfully crafted. He noted that it struck an appropriate balance between protecting children and preserving parental rights, acknowledging that such a balance could be difficult to achieve. He also appreciated that the bill maintained judicial oversight. In his view, the legislation was necessary, measured, and protective of all parties' rights.

S 1257

Jean Fisher, Division Administrator, Youth Safety and Permanency, DHW, and former Ada County prosecutor, testified in support of **S 1257**. She explained that the DHW's primary mission in child welfare was the safety of the child, while reunification with parents remained a goal when appropriate. She stated that the bill clarified visitation standards, noting that in some cases children in foster care had been required to attend disruptive in-person visits, including at correctional facilities. The legislation would give courts clearer statutory guidance to determine when in-person visitation was not in a child's best interest, particularly in cases of substantiated sexual or severe physical abuse.

Ms. Fisher explained that substantiation standards referenced in the bill were long-standing and included adjudication, confession, medical or physical evidence, or a preponderance of evidence following an investigation. She emphasized that courts—not the DHW—would retain final authority over visitation decisions, with due process protections and appeal options available to parents. Regarding termination of parental rights, she stated that the bill clarified that courts could consider parental incarceration—especially when a child had formed a significant bond with a foster family during a lengthy incarceration—while still preserving judicial discretion. She concluded that the bill provided a balanced, thoughtful approach that strengthened child safety, clarified court authority, and supported consistent decision-making statewide.

DISCUSSION: **Vice Chairman Shippy** asked Ms. Fisher for clarification regarding page six, subsection (b) of the bill. He noted that the language indicated that when the DHW had substantiated a claim of sexual or physical abuse against a parent, guardian, or custodian, in-person visitation would not be permitted unless the court made specific findings. He asked whether court oversight would be required before visitation could be paused, or whether the DHW could initially enact the pause, subject to later court review. **Ms. Fisher** responded that the court would authorize a pause in in-person visitation. She explained that having the court make that determination ensured the decision aligned with the DHW's legal obligations and the best interests of the child.

TESTIMONY: **Dr. Kylie Billingsley**, a licensed child psychologist and foster parent, testified in support of **S 1257**. She explained that, in her professional and personal experience, some foster children who had experienced substantiated abuse were still required to attend in-person visits with their alleged abusers, which she said re-traumatized them. She described observing severe trauma responses in children before and after visits, including extreme anxiety, self-harm behaviors, night terrors, and sexualized behaviors in a young child. She emphasized that such behaviors were clear signs of trauma, not defiance, and warned that forced contact could worsen long-term psychological harm, including complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and attachment disorders. She stated that she ultimately stopped accepting long-term placements because she could not support a system that required children to endure further trauma. She urged support for **S 1257** to ensure that children's safety and well-being were prioritized in visitation decisions.

Ivy Walker, Idaho Voices for Children, testified and shared her experience growing up in Idaho's foster care system. She stated that, despite being removed for abuse, she had been required to attend ongoing visitation with her abuser, which caused significant anxiety, panic, and continued emotional harm. She explained that forced contact after substantiated abuse worsened trauma and could intensify PTSD, depression, and anxiety. She described a traumatic incident during a supervised visit that ultimately led the DHW to end visitation and pursue a no-contact order. She said **S 1257** clarified that mandatory in-person visitation should not be presumed safe when sexual or physical abuse had been substantiated, and that child safety should come first. She urged passage of the bill to prevent children from being re-traumatized through required visitation.

Aide Moore, Elevate Empire Social Enterprises, testified in opposition to **S1257**. She acknowledged that child trauma and abuse were real and serious but argued that judges already had authority to pause or restrict visitation when it was not in a child's best interest. She contended that the bill elevated substantiation findings in a way that could shift cases toward termination of parental rights. She argued that restricting visitation early in a case could weaken parent-child bonds, which might later be used to justify termination, creating what she described as structural momentum toward severance. She also raised concerns about potential conflicts with federal reunification requirements and warned that the bill could disproportionately impact low-income families, families with disabilities, and families of color. She shared personal concerns about her family's experience with adoption and the child welfare system, alleging failures by foster parents and the DHW. She urged the Committee to oppose the bill, and expressed concern that it could undermine family preservation and constitutional protections.

DISCUSSION: **Senator Ricks** asked whether, given her opposition to the bill, she believed current law was adequate or whether she would like to see specific changes made to existing statute. **Ms. Moore** explained that, while the child welfare system needed broad systemic reform, she did not believe the bill provided the necessary overhaul to support reunification and healthy development for children and families. She emphasized that making termination easier did not benefit families, and true support would come from investing in prevention and social safety nets, including child care, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid, rather than creating opportunities for children to be removed from their homes.

TESTIMONY: **Kevin Watson**, testified that, as a foster parent in Idaho for five years, he had cared for 26 children and was deeply involved in the local foster community. He shared an anonymous statement from a foster parent whose children experienced abuse during unsupervised visitation, despite prior reports and a documented history of domestic violence. The children suffered significant trauma, including suicide attempts, anxiety, behavioral issues, and academic struggles, particularly during periods of unsupervised visitation. **Mr. Watson** also shared his own experience as a former foster child, forced into repeated visitation with an abusive parent, which led to long-term mental health impacts for him and his siblings. He argued that earlier evaluation of abuse allegations and caution before permitting unsupervised visitation were critical to protecting children, and he urged support for **S 1257**.

Jeremy Rudolph, a licensed Idaho foster parent since 2022, testified he was speaking on behalf of another foster parent who wished to remain anonymous. He emphasized that they supported parental rights and reunification when safe, but stressed that the bill was a narrow measure to protect abused children without weakening parental rights. He described a foster child who had been repeatedly removed from abusive parents and grandparents, yet was still required to attend court-ordered visits with a parent who rejected them. The repeated contact caused further harm despite prior removals. He argued that removing a child from abusers was insufficient if visits continued to traumatize them and urged support for **S 1257** to protect vulnerable children while balancing parental rights.

Anthony Henry testified in support of **S 1257**, sharing his personal experience in the foster care system. He described being removed from his family multiple times as an infant while his sister was placed in stable homes. His father had abused his sister, and her parental rights were terminated immediately, but his were not. He endured repeated, manipulative visits with his father, which caused trauma and instability. He experienced 27 placements, including stays in orphanages and a group home, before emancipating at 17. He emphasized that the State had a duty to protect him and argued that parental rights should end when abuse is involved,

as his father's entitlement had negatively affected his life.

Nicole Egbert testified in support of **S 1257**, sharing the story of Isaiah, a foster child who experienced repeated trauma. When Isaiah entered her care at two-and-a-half, he showed severe signs of abuse and fear, including avoiding men, vomiting after visits with his biological mother and her boyfriend (who were later convicted of child injury), and having intense night terrors. Despite her reports, visits continued, and Isaiah suffered further physical and emotional harm, including a missing tooth. During COVID, when visits paused, he began to stabilize, but reunification efforts repeatedly exposed him to trauma. Eventually, Isaiah returned to care under even worse circumstances before being placed in a permanent adoptive home. **Ms. Egbert** emphasized that repeated contact with abusive parents caused lasting harm and argued that when abuse is substantiated, child safety must be non-negotiable.

Joseph Egbert testified as a former foster parent who had cared for traumatized children, including two that were placed in his home due to concerns about their mother's mental health and substance abuse. When they arrived, they were emotionally fragile, anxious, and in need of stability. During their placement, they were required to attend in-person visits with their biological father, who had a history of violent incidents against their mother in the children's presence. Despite clear signs of fear and repeated concerns raised by him and his wife, the visits continued. He argued that, given the father's track record and the children's distress, the Department should have prioritized the children's safety and halted the visits.

Monique Peyre, a District 13 resident and adoptive mother of three foster children, testified that her children's sibling was the infant who recently died in Nampa. Her son re-entered foster care in 2022 after suffering abuse by a caregiver who had convictions for injury to a child. He had been physically assaulted and lived in unsafe, unsanitary conditions. Court-ordered visits with his biological parents began shortly after the case opened. Her son showed severe trauma symptoms, including nightmares, hiding from workers, self-harm behaviors, illness before visits, and significant regression. Her young daughter also experienced extreme distress and behavioral outbursts related to visits. The children needed days to stabilize after each visit, and this continued weekly for 18 months. In 2024, her son was diagnosed with severe PTSD and began psychiatric medication. Therapists, school staff, a guardian, and social workers recommended suspending visits due to documented harm. After a formal affidavit detailed the children's ongoing deterioration, visits were finally stopped. She urged lawmakers to prioritize child safety in abuse cases and to pass **S 1257** to create safeguards for vulnerable children.

MOTION: **Senator Foreman** moved to send **S 1257** to the floor with a **do pass** recommendation. **Senator Keyser** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

ADJOURNED: There being no further business at this time, **Vice Chairman Shippy** adjourned the meeting at 2:58 p.m.

Senator Lakey
Chair

Sharon Pennington
Secretary

Senator Shippy
Vice Chair

Melissa Price
Secretary