



Washington expands probe of WHL, hockey franchises

Chris Daniels, KING 5 News 6:49 p.m. PST December 4, 2014

OLYMPIA, Wash. - State regulators confirmed Thursday they have expanded their investigation into the Western Hockey League and its member franchises over possible violations of child labor laws.

Matthew Erlich, of the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries, said Thursday they have requested additional information from the WHL and its member franchises. L&I had previously consulted with the State Attorney General's Office for guidance on how to proceed, which Erlich says is a common occurrence.

Erlich says the latest move focuses on the "relationship between teams and the participants." He says there is no timeframe for completion of the investigation, but it is likely that it will take "many more months."

KING 5 first reported back in September that a 2013 complaint to the department pointed to how much money the players were paid in relation to time worked. The allegation hinted that it may be below the state's minimum wage.

Related: [State probing WHL for possible child labor violations](#)

Four Washington WHL teams are the subject of the investigation: Seattle (Kent), Everett, Tri-Cities and Spokane. Erlich would not comment on where the complaint originated, but said it came from within the state.

Many of the players are 16 or 17 and stay with host families during the season. The teams provide the room and board and a promise of college scholarships after their playing careers. It's unclear just how much a typical player is paid.

The Kent School District has 11 Seattle Thunderbird players in their classrooms.

"The Thunderbirds are a big part of our community," Chris Lofsis, spokesperson for the district, said at the time. "I can imagine it's a real challenge for them and we do everything we can to help them."

The Thunderbirds practice six days a week this time of the year and are in the middle of their WHL season.

The Thunderbirds and Everett Silvertips have declined formal comment on the allegations.

However, WHL Commissioner Ron Robinson issued a statement in September defending the league structure:

"The Western Hockey League (WHL) Member Clubs in Washington are aware that the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries has been taking a look at junior hockey with regard to the status of our amateur players. Our WHL Clubs in Washington have responded to the government, providing requested information and explaining that our players are student athletes playing in a developmental hockey league, and participating in and contributing to their sport the same way as other amateur athletes. We are advised by the Department that..no decision has been reached in the matter. Amateur hockey players have competed within the WHL in the State of Washington since 1977. The WHL certainly recognizes that undoubtedly any changes to the status of junior hockey players could impact the status of other amateur athletes in the state as well."

Erlich previously said if L&I determined there is a violation, it could result in civil and criminal penalties.