



## Westhead: State attorney recommends further labour probe of junior hockey

By [Rick Westhead](#)

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The four Western Hockey League teams based in Washington state and the league itself have been advised by the state's department of labour and industries that an investigative team will expand a probe of major junior hockey to see whether teams have violated child labour laws.

TSN has learned the teams and the WHL were told this week that the state's attorney general has recommended a year-long investigation continue. Earlier this fall, Matt Erlich, a spokesman for the Washington Department of Labour and Industries, said his department had asked the attorney general for advice about whether to continue the investigation.

In 2013, the department received a complaint about how much money the players were paid in relation to the time they worked. The allegation claimed players receive less than the state's minimum wage.

Four Washington WHL teams are being investigated: Seattle, Everett, Tri-Cities, and Spokane. Erlich said the complaint came from within the state.

Now that the attorney general has recommended widening the probe, at least three investigators have been assigned to the case. They will conduct in-person interviews with WHL players and team staff and ask for written documentation in the coming months to see if there has been a violation of the industrial welfare act, Erlich told TSN.

Most players in the WHL are teenagers and stay with host families during the season. The teams provide the room and board and a promise of university scholarships after their playing careers, so long as they don't go on to long careers in pro hockey.

According to a recent lawsuit filed against the WHL and its parent Canadian Hockey League, the "for-profit" league has paid some players as little as \$50 a week. Unifor, a union that wants to organize junior players, says players work about 1,000 hours during the course of the season. In Washington state, where the minimum wage is \$9.32 an hour, that would mean each player should receive at least \$9,320.

WHL Commissioner Ron Robinson defending the league structure in an earlier statement.

*"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 said his department could ultimately impose civil and criminal penalties.

TSN couldn't immediately reach the CHL and WHL for comment.



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