WEST VIRGINIA CODE: §29-22B-1805

§29-22B-1805. Procedures for forfeiture.

(a) The following procedures for forfeiture shall be followed:

(1) Any proceeding wherein the state seeks forfeiture of property subject to forfeiture under this section shall be a civil proceeding. A petition for forfeiture may be filed on behalf of the state and any law-enforcement agency making a seizure under this article by the prosecuting attorney of a county, or duly appointed special prosecutor;

(2) A petition for forfeiture may be filed and proceedings held thereon in the circuit court of the county wherein the seizure was made or the circuit court of the county wherein any owner of the property subject to forfeiture may reside;

(3) Any civil trial stemming from a petition for forfeiture brought under this part 18 at the demand of either party shall be by jury;

(4) A petition for forfeiture of the seized property shall be filed within ninety days after the seizure of the property in question. The petition shall be verified by oath or affirmation of a law-enforcement officer representing the law-enforcement agency responsible for the seizure or the prosecuting attorney and shall contain the following:

(A) A description of the property seized;

(B) A statement as to who is responsible for the seizure;

(C) A statement of the time and place of seizure;

(D) The identity of the owner or owners of the property, if known;

(E) The identity of the person or persons in possession of the property at the time seized, if known;

(F) A statement of facts upon which probable cause for belief that the seized property is subject to forfeiture pursuant to the provisions of this article is based;

(G) The identity of all persons or corporations having a perfected security interest or lien in the subject property, as well as the identity of all persons or corporations known to the affiant who may be holding a possessory or statutory lien against such property; and

(H) A prayer for an order directing forfeiture of the seized property to the state, and vesting ownership of such property in the state.

(b) At the time of filing or as soon as practicable thereafter, a copy of the petition for

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forfeiture shall be served upon the owner or owners of the seized property, as well as all holders of a perfected security interest or lien or of a possessory or statutory lien in the same class, if known. Should diligent efforts fail to disclose the lawful owner or owners of the seized property, a copy of the petition for forfeiture shall be served upon any person who was in possession or alleged to be in possession of the property at the time of seizure, where such person's identity is known. The above service shall be made pursuant to the provisions of the West Virginia Rules of Civil Procedure. Any copy of the petition for forfeiture so served shall include a notice substantially as follows:

"To any claimant to the within described property: You have the right to file an answer to this petition setting forth your title in, and right to possession of, the property within thirty days from the service hereof. If you fail to file an answer, a final order forfeiting the property to the state will be entered, and such order is not subject to appeal."

If no owner or possessors, lienholders or holders of a security interest be found, then such service may be made by Class II legal publication in accordance with the provisions of article 59-3-1, et seq., of this code, and the publication area shall be the county wherein such property was located at the time of seizure and the county wherein the petition for forfeiture is filed.

(c) In addition to the requirements of subsection (b) of this section, the prosecuting attorney or law-enforcement officer upon whose oath or affirmation the petition for forfeiture is based, shall be responsible for the publication of a further notice. Such further notice that a petition for forfeiture has been filed shall be published by Class II legal advertisement in accordance with article 59-3-1, et seq., of this code. The publication area shall be the county wherein the property was seized and the county wherein the petition for forfeiture is filed. The notice shall advise any claimant to the property of their right to file a claim on or before the date set forth in the notice, which date shall not be less than thirty days from the date of the first publication. The notice shall specify that any claim must clearly state the identity of the claimant and an address where legal process can be served upon that person. In addition, such notice shall contain the following information:

(1) A description of the property seized;

(2) A statement as to who is responsible for the seizure;

(3) A statement of the time and place of seizure;

(4) The identity of the owner or owners of the property, if known;

(5) The identity of the person or persons in possession of the property at the time of seizure, if known; and

(6) A statement that prayer for an order directing forfeiture of the seized property to the state, and vesting ownership of such property in the state, shall be requested of the court.

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(d) If no answer or claim is filed within thirty days of the date of service of the petition pursuant to subsection (b) of this section, or within thirty days of the first publication pursuant to subsection (b) of this section, the court shall enter an order forfeiting the seized property to the state. If any claim to the seized property is timely filed, a time and place shall be set for a hearing upon such claim. The claimant or claimants shall be given notice of such hearing not less than ten days prior to the date set for the hearing.

(e) At the hearing upon the claim or claims, the state shall have the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that the seized property is subject to forfeiture pursuant to the provisions of this part 18.

(f) Any order forfeiting property to the state and entered pursuant to this section perfects the state's right, title and interest in the forfeited property and relates back to the date of seizure: Provided, That in any proceeding under this article the circuit court shall in its final order make specific findings with respect to whether or not probable cause to seize such property existed at the time of such seizure.

(g) During the pendency of a forfeiture proceeding, it is unlawful for any property owner or holder of a bona fide security interest or other valid lien-holder to transfer or attempt to transfer any ownership interest or security interest in seized property with the intent to defeat the purpose of this article, and the court wherein the petition for forfeiture is filed may enjoin a property owner or holder of a security interest or other lien-holder from making such a transfer should one come to its attention. Any such transfer, that is made in violation of the provisions of this subsection, shall have no effect upon an order of the court forfeiting seized property to the state if a notice of lis pendens is filed prior to the recording of the instrument of transfer.

(h) The court may void any transfer of property made before or after a forfeiture proceeding has been commenced, which is subject to forfeiture, if the transfer was not to a bona fide purchaser without notice for value.

(i) An appeal of a decision of the circuit court concerning a forfeiture proceeding brought pursuant to this part 18 must be filed within one hundred twenty days of the date of entry of the final appealable order. The appellant shall be required to give notice of intent to appeal within thirty days of the entry of such appealable order.

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