

# SPEAKING OF JUSTICE

NEWS FROM FFLA

VOL. 17 | ISSUE NO. 2

## Children's Legal Services program changes lives for the better



*Since the early 1990s, tens of thousands of children in Florida have received legal services from legal aid programs funded by FFLA's Children's Legal Services grant program. Children with disabilities, foster children, and abused and neglected children benefit from the dedicated service of legal aid attorneys.*

FFLA's Children's Legal Services grant program has caused positive change throughout communities across the state for decades. The legal services funded by FFLA have provided crucial support to thousands of vulnerable children and families while delivering important economic returns.

"The impact is clear in the numbers: 3,483 clients received direct legal services at an average cost of just \$287 per client during our 2023-24 grant cycle," FFLA President Roberto R. Pardo said. "In addition, these services generated more than \$1.9 million in economic impact through judgments, awards, and benefits secured for clients."

The reach extends far beyond clients, with an estimated 37,488 low-income individuals benefiting indirectly from these legal services last year.

The momentum continues to build. In the 2024-25 grant cycle, FFLA awarded ten organizations \$1,022,580 in funding. Halfway through the cycle, these grantees have already served 2,816 clients - 147% above their contractual goals. Of these, 890 clients are receiving full legal representation. And, pro bono attorneys accepted Children's Legal Services cases at a rate of 96% of the cases referred to them.

Behind these statistics are real children and families whose lives have been transformed. Kyla\*, a client of Brevard County Legal Aid (BCLA), was aging out of foster care. Initially planning to opt out of extended foster care, she changed course after meeting with a BCLA attorney who explained the benefits of extended foster care.

With help from her legal aid attorney, Kyla opened a checking

[See CHILDREN, p. 5](#)



*FFLA President Roberto R. Pardo's term began July 1, 2024. He practices in the areas of criminal defense and personal injury in Miami. Pardo earned his law degree from the University of Miami School of Law. Pardo served on the board of directors of The Florida Bar Foundation, now FFLA, from 2007-2013. He rejoined the board in 2016 and has served on more than a dozen committees. He served eight years on the Eleventh Circuit Judicial Nomination Commission. He has also served on the boards of the Cuban American Bar Association, earning its Presidential Award in 2021, the Miami chapter of the Florida Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers and the League of Prosecutors. Pardo also served on the Eleventh Circuit Unlicensed Practice of Law Committee "D" and the Grievance Committee "B," for which he twice received a Meritorious Public Service Award.*

FFLA's board of directors recently approved several measures that will effectively increase IOTA funding for grantees and stability for FFLA. Since the 2021 IOTA rule amendment, FFLA has deferred using IOTA funds for our administrative expenses while we created a methodology for calculating those direct expenses.

After Mauldin & Jenkins CPAs & Advisors found that the methodology was accurate, the board approved reimbursement for past administrative expenses and established an operations reserve as allowed by the rule. This reserve is expected to generate meaningful investment income, enabling FFLA to fund its operations budget without depleting the principal.

Perhaps more importantly, it will increase the annual distribution to grantees from 85% of IOTA collections to at least 90%, with flexibility to adjust up to 98%, which is what our board decided to do for the remainder of this fiscal year. This scalable approach maximizes grantee funding while safeguarding FFLA's financial stability during turbulent economic times.

These proactive financial measures reaffirm FFLA's commitment to responsible stewardship and our mission of expanding access to justice. By optimizing our operational funding structure, we create a win-win scenario that increases resources for grantees while ensuring our operational sustainability. We look forward to the future and remain dedicated to maximizing the impact of every IOTA dollar in support of legal aid services throughout our state.

Roberto R. Pardo

## EXECUTIVE

**Dominic C. "Donny" MacKenzie**, Executive Director  
dmackenzie@FundingFLA.org

## COMMUNICATIONS

**Jessica Brown**, Communications Director  
jbrown@FundingFLA.org

## DEVELOPMENT

**Michelle Fonseca**, Development Director  
mfonseca@FundingFLA.org

## FINANCE

**Andrew Frye**, Director of Finance  
afrye@FundingFLA.org

## GRANTS

**Mary Giraulo**, Grants Manager  
mgiraulo@FundingFLA.org

## IOTA

**Lushawn Phillips**, IOTA Program Director  
lphillips@FundingFLA.org

## 2024-25 OFFICERS

**Roberto R. Pardo**, President  
**Ashley N. Sybesma**, President-elect  
**Maria C. Gonzalez**, First Vice President  
**Ret. Judge Hugh Carithers**, Second Vice President  
**Murray B. Silverstein**, Immediate Past President

## DESIGNATED DIRECTORS

**A. Dax Bello**, Stewart Tilghman Fox Bianchi & Cain  
(Delegate for Roland Sanchez-Medina, President, The Florida Bar)  
**Joshua T. Chilson**, Johnson Pope Bokor Ruppel & Burns LLP  
(Delegate for Sia Baker-Barnes, President-elect, The Florida Bar)  
**Joseph "Jody" Hudgins**  
(Delegate for F. Scott Westheimer, Immediate Past President, The Florida Bar)  
**Honorable Paetra T. Brownlee**, Sixth District Court of Appeal  
**Honorable Thomas D. Winokur**, First District Court of Appeal  
**Michael R. Tein**, President, Florida Legal Services, Inc.

## PUBLIC MEMBERS

**Vincent F. Cuomo**  
**Deborah C. Giles**  
**James P. Schwarz**

## DIRECTORS

(Terms expire 2025)  
**Min Cho**  
**Katie Fackler**  
**Honorable Stefanie C. Moon**  
**Robert W. Murphy**  
**Ret. Justice Peggy A. Quince**  
**Raychelle A. Tasher**

(Terms expire 2026)  
**Sarita Courtney-Baigorri**  
**Ayana Barrow**  
**Brian E. Currie**  
**Joseph Kadow**  
**Kyle Robisch**  
**Steve Salzer**

(Terms expire 2027)  
**Ian M. Comisky**  
**Joe Jacquot**  
**Patrick S. Montoya**  
**Magdalena Ozarowski**  
**Douglas H. Reynolds**  
**Honorable Edwin A. Scales III**





# FFLA

FUNDING FLORIDA LEGAL AID

# 2025

## AWARD CEREMONY & BREAKFAST

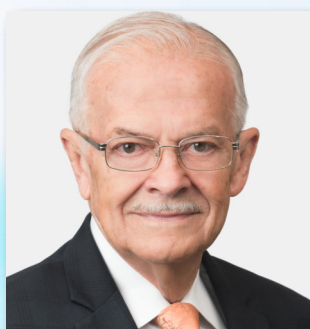
**Thursday, June 26 | Tickets \$60**

*During The Florida Bar Annual Convention at The Boca Raton*



**MARIA HENDERSON**  
Akerman LLP

*Medal of Honor Award  
for a Non-Lawyer*



**JOSE A. VILLALOBOS, ESQ.**  
Akerman LLP

*Medal of Honor Award  
for a Lawyer*



**LESLEY MENDOZA, ESQ.**  
CABA Pro Bono Legal Services

*Jane Elizabeth Curran  
Distinguished Service Award*

*Thank you to our Early Bird Sponsors*



**Florida Lawyers Mutual<sup>®</sup>**  
INSURANCE COMPANY

MEDAL OF HONOR AWARD SPONSOR



TABLE SPONSOR



PRESIDENT'S AWARD SPONSOR



KEY WEST, FLORIDA

A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

TABLE SPONSOR

BEDELL FIRM - ADVERTISING SPONSOR



Sponsorships, tables and tickets may be purchased at [FundingFLA.org/tickets](https://FundingFLA.org/tickets).  
For more information, contact Development Director Michelle Fonseca, CFRE,  
at [mfonseca@FundingFLA.org](mailto:mfonseca@FundingFLA.org) or 407-960-7019.

# March Board of Directors report

The FFLA Board of Directors met in Gainesville on March 14, 2025, at the University of Florida Levin College of Law. FFLA is grateful to the University of Florida for hosting as this hospitality allowed FFLA to save considerable expenses associated with its committee and board meetings. Prior to the meeting, a moment of silence was observed for the passing of Senator Geraldine Thompson, wife of Retired Judge Emerson Thompson, former President and Board member of FFLA. A presentation was also made by Donna MacRae, Executive Director, and Tonya Lipscomb Smith, Managing Attorney, of Three Rivers Legal Services, Inc. The Board is grateful for the presentation and the work Three Rivers Legal Services does in its community and throughout the state. The major actions of the board and reports received included:

## Board Ratifies Committee Selections for 2025 Medal of Honor Awards

The Board ratified the Medal of Honor Awards Committee's selections of the following recipients:

- Medal of Honor (Lawyer): Jose Villalobos, Esq.
- Medal of Honor (Non-lawyer): Maria Henderson
- Jane Curran Distinguished Service Award: Lesley Mendoza, Esq.

These distinguished recipients will be invited to attend FFLA's Annual Award Ceremony and Breakfast in June to be recognized and presented with these awards.

## Board Retains Investment Advisor

The Investment Committee, through a work group, engaged in a comprehensive process over the span of seven months whereby 19 investment firms were invited to submit proposals for consideration. The process was initiated as a matter of course and due diligence. 13 firms responded and six semi-finalists were then selected for interviews. A second round of interviews of three finalists were conducted which resulted in a recommendation that FFLA retain Morgan Stanley/Graystone Consulting as its investment advisor.

Ian Comisky, chair of the Investment Committee, presented the committee's recommendation and further explained that the recommendation was accompanied by a request that further discussions with Morgan Stanley/Graystone be held to discuss fee structure and amount, subject to review and approval by the work group. After discussion on the committee's own motion, the Board approved the recommendation and authorized the work group to proceed.

*Note: Subsequent to the board meeting, discussions were held with Morgan Stanley/Graystone Consulting that resulted in a fee reduction of approximately \$18,000 per year, which was approved by the Executive Committee on April 9, 2025.*

## Loan Repayment Assistance Program

Maria C. Gonzalez reported that the Grants Committee voted and approved the staff's recommendation to:

- Rescind \$100,097.43 in unused LRAP awards by 31 participants that fully or partially declined their LRAP loans or defaulted prior to their second disbursement.
- Forgive 136 LRAP loans in the total amount of \$625,142.27. (Note: \$21.30 was moved by the committee from repayment to forgiveness due to its small size.)
- Accept repayment totaling \$35,154.23 from 10 participants that either did not apply for loan forgiveness (2); returned unspent funds (1); received Public Service Loan Forgiveness on their 2024 LRAP loans (1); or resigned (7).

The Board approved the committee's recommendation.

## Improvements in the Administration of Justice Grants Awarded

The Improvements in the Administration of Justice (AOJ) grant program is designed to assist in the improvement in the administration of justice in areas within the broader framework of the justice system, with emphasis on the process of operating the courts in an effective and expeditious manner. It has historically been used to fund programs that are not otherwise or regularly funded by FFLA's other grant programs.

The board approved an allocation of \$900,000 to fund AOJ projects this fiscal year. FFLA received eleven applications requesting a total of \$2,275,842. A scoring group, consisting of Directors Carithers, Moon, Currie, Robisch, Tasher as well as Laura Boeckman and staff recommended, and the board approved, funding four applicants for a total of \$675,000 with Other Funds (non-IOTA) - see pg. 7 for a list of recipients.

## 2025 Paul Doyle Children's Advocacy Award

Maria C. Gonzalez reported on the 2025 Paul Doyle Children's Advocacy Award Committee's report and recommendation. The two applications received did not entirely meet the awards's criteria. The committee recommended that this year's award should be given universally to grantees who have dedicated significant resources to serving children in need, along with private attorneys and donors who have contributed considerable time, talent, and treasure in support of FFLA's Children's Legal Services Program.

The committee requested that the Grants Committee approve the award in concept and allow more time for staff to identify potential candidates for recognition at the upcoming awards ceremony in June. Further, the work group requested that special tokens of appreciation be created for that purpose with the understanding that the candidates would

See BOARD, p. 5

**BOARD from p. 4**

be brought back to the Grants Committee for final approval in time for the June awards ceremony. The Grants Committee approved the report and recommendation.

**Grants Committee forms additional work groups**

The Board was informed that the following work groups had been formed:

1. Community Economic Development (CED)  
Application – scoring work group: Dax Bello, Katie Fackler, Ashley N. Sybesma.
2. FFLA Carryover & Unspent Funds Policy – review work group: Brian Currie, Maria C. Gonzalez, Hon. Stefanie C. Moon.
3. Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) – Potential LRAP Grantee Status – work group: Magie Ozarowski, Sarita Courtney Baigorri.

The work groups will assemble and present reports and recommendations for consideration as soon as possible.

**Board Ratifies Creation of Operations Reserve Fund**

Earlier in the meeting, a matter relating to the Executive Committee's February 12, 2025, approval to proceed with recommendations relating to the creation of an Operations Reserve Fund was taken off the consent agenda for specific discussion. Executive Director MacKenzie summarized the three-year process and development of a proposed Operations Reserve Fund, as explained in a report and recommendation contained in the Board materials (and available for review upon request).

In compliance with the IOTA Rule and to ensure long-term financial sustainability, the FFLA Board of Directors ratified and approved the Executive Committee's creation of an Operations Reserve Fund. This decision follows extensive review of administrative expense limitations under Rule 5-1.1(g) of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar and FFLA's multi-year effort to identify and develop a cost allocation

methodology regarding its operations and fiscal infrastructure.

Following a detailed external assessment by Mauldin & Jenkins and prior validation by Carr, Riggs & Ingram, FFLA applied a time-tracking and cost allocation model to determine its direct administrative expenses from July 1, 2021 to Dec. 31, 2024. Based on this model, the Board approved a reimbursement of \$8,098,077 in previously incurred administrative costs to be paid from IOTA collections previously deposited into a separate account (MLTI DEX) per the Rule's requirement. It also approved the allocation of at least \$60 million from the MLTI DEX account to formally establish the operations reserve.

The Operations Reserve will:

- Promote stability in grantee distributions, especially during periods of fluctuating IOTA collections; and
- Increase the amount of IOTA funds available for distribution to grantees by increasing the percentage of IOTA collections distributed to grantees from 85% to at least 90%, with flexibility to go as high as 98%, based on reserve balances.

Additional measures include developing an investment policy, soliciting proposals from investment managers (including Florida-based banks), establishing a scalable distribution formula, and publishing annual transparency reports.

These actions position FFLA to remain in compliance with the IOTA Rule while enhancing its ability to deliver consistent funding to legal aid organizations across Florida while increasing the amount of IOTA funds available to qualified grantee organizations.

**Next Meeting**

The board's next scheduled meeting will be in conjunction with The Florida Bar's Annual Convention in Boca Raton, Fla., in June. The specific date and time will be shared as soon as they are established by the convention's event coordinator.

**CHILDREN from p. 1**

account and a savings account and secured a credit card. She earned her high school diploma, and with her attorney's help, enrolled in the Postsecondary Education Services and Support program, allowing her to attend the University of Central Florida this fall.

Similarly, Seminole County Bar Association Legal Aid Society helped Julia\* gain custody of her seven-year-old grandson Diego\*. Born weighing only two pounds and facing numerous health challenges and a learning disability, Diego needed stable care that his mother—who struggled with addiction and criminal issues—couldn't provide.

Julia's legal aid attorney helped her obtain custody and the necessary legal authority to ensure Diego receives the

ongoing medical and educational support he requires.

Children's Legal Services grants were funded by a combination of donations and IOTA collections. Last year, more than 4,500 lawyers donated \$537,209 to Children's Legal Services through The Florida Bar's fee statement.

These stories represent just a fraction of the thousands of lives being improved through work funded by the Children's Legal Services program. By providing targeted legal assistance at critical moments, legal aid lawyers break cycles of instability and create pathways to brighter futures for Florida's most vulnerable children.

*\*Client names have been changed to protect their privacy.*



# 14 Civil Legal Aid Summer Fellowships awarded

With help from The Florida Bar Family Law Section, FFLA will fund 14 Civil Legal Aid Summer Fellowships in 2025. The program, through which law students spend 10 weeks working at a legal aid grantee organization, provides a \$9,000 stipend to each fellow, in addition to extra funds to cover payroll taxes. The Family Law Section made a donation of

\$39,600 to provide funding for four more fellows than had been allocated in FFLA's budget. Forty-three law students from nine law schools applied. FFLA intends to expand the number of fellowships next year to provide more opportunities to law students and hopes that other sections may follow the Family Law Section's lead.

\* *Certified Legal Intern*  
\*\* *Bilingual*

## Manshaa Babbar \*\*

- Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law
- Senior Citizen Law Project at **Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida**

## Bethany Boylan

- Florida State University College of Law
- Interpersonal Violence Victim Representation at **Legal Services of North Florida**

## Shakira Bullock

- Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law
- Community Economic Development Unit at **Legal Services of Greater Miami**

## Laney Fox

- Florida State University College of Law
- Civil rights litigation at **Florida Justice Institute**

## Mixa Hernandez \*\*

- St. Thomas University Benjamin L. Crump College of Law
- Children's Program at **CABA Pro Bono Legal Services**

## Hira Latif

- Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law
- Immigration law at **Americans for Immigrant Justice**

## Crystal Nesbeth

- Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law
- Pro Bono Project at **Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County**

## Christina Ocean

- Emory University School of Law
- Housing, immigration and health law at **Florida Legal Services**

## Zachary Rebert

- Florida State University College of Law
- Economic Advocacy and Community Health Project at **Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida**

## Dayna Rieger

- Florida International University College of Law
- Family Law Unit at **Dade Legal Aid**

## Kayla Shen \*

- Florida State University College of Law
- Sealing and Expungement at **Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association**

## Aaliyah Sims \*

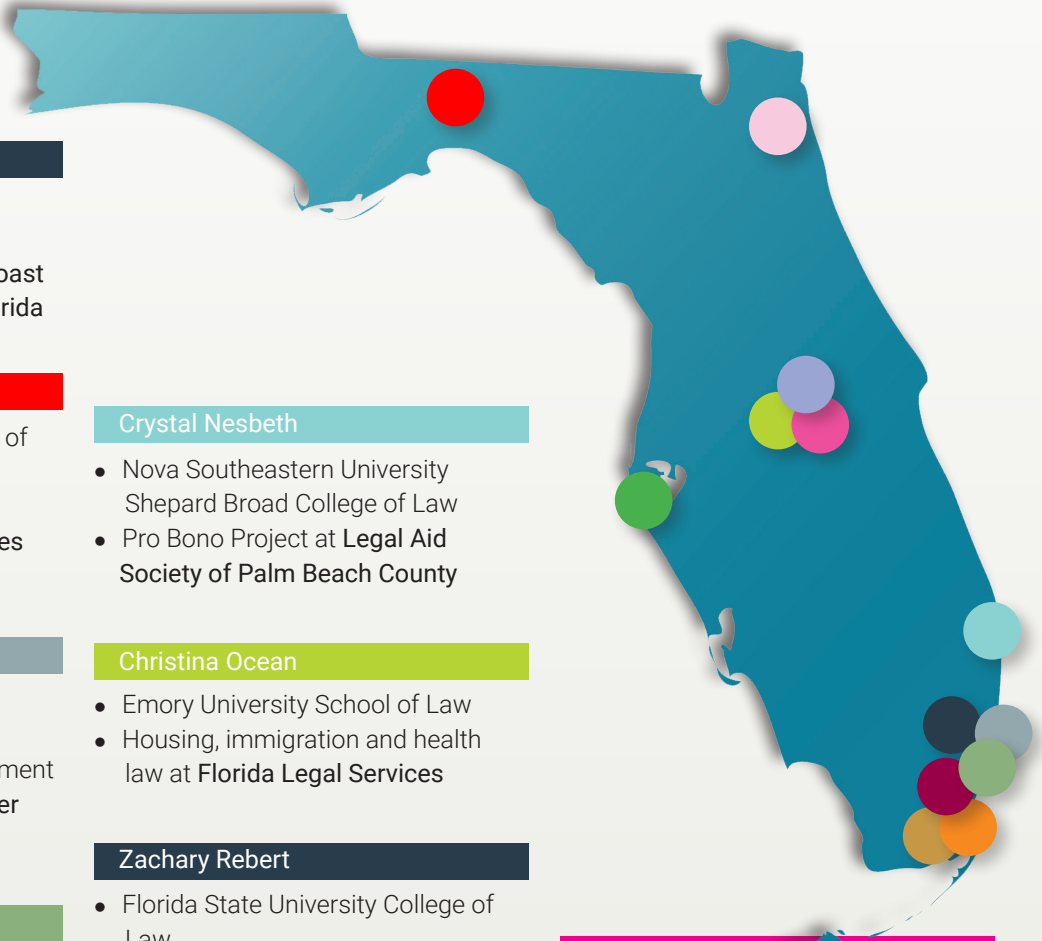
- Florida A&M University College of Law
- Family law at **Seminole County Bar Association Legal Aid Society**

## Sophia Tuszynski \*\*

- Stetson University College of Law
- Domestic Violence Family Law at **Gulfcoast Legal Services**

## Grace VanHooser

- Florida International University College of Law
- Heirs Property Resolution Project at **Jacksonville Area Legal Aid**



# FFLA forgives 136 legal aid lawyers' student debt loans

In March, FFLA's board of directors approved forgiving 136 loans totaling \$625,142 made to legal aid lawyers through its Loan Repayment Assistance Program in 2024.

In December, FFLA's board of directors approved funding 151 LRAP applicants for a total amount of \$1,483,460 for calendar year 2025. If the participants meet the program's requirements, their loans may be forgiven in spring of 2026.

The purpose of LRAP is to strengthen and expand legal assistance for the poor by supporting the recruitment and retention of qualified civil legal aid staff attorneys. Participants are required to use the funds to pay down and reduce their student loan debt.

More than \$13 million in loans have been given since the program launched in 1996.



Tiffany Liy  
Staff Attorney  
Bay Area Legal Services

*“LRAP grants me the freedom to pursue my calling in nonprofit legal advocacy without being overshadowed by the burden of student loan debt. By easing this financial strain, LRAP allows me to fully immerse myself in serving those in need and advocating for justice, ensuring that my career remains impactful and financially viable.”*



Tiffany Coleman  
Senior Staff Attorney  
Bay Area Legal Services

*“LRAP has been a great help in allowing me to continue my work at Bay Area Legal Services without the constant stress of student loan debt. Because of this support, I can fully dedicate myself to serving the community.”*

## 2025 Administration of Justice grants awarded

FFLA allocated \$900,000 for 2025 Improvements in the Administration of Justice grants. Eleven organizations submitted applications requesting a total of \$2,275,842

to fund their projects. FFLA's board of directors approved funding four applicants for a total of \$675,000 using collections other than IOTA collections.

Applicant	Project	Amount Funded
Crossroads for Florida Kids	The Advocates for Children Who Have None: Increasing Access to Justice for Disadvantaged Youth project trains and mentors pro bono attorneys to represent disadvantaged children and young adults in dependency, delinquency, criminal, and other legal proceedings.	\$100,000
CABA Pro Bono Legal Services	The Neurodivergent Legal Assistance Program provides free legal services to individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities, providing alternatives to traditional legal guardianship for individuals who require some decision-making support.	\$125,000
Florida's Children First	In its third year of a three-year project, FCF will expand the number of current and former foster youth who receive high quality legal representation, identifying and addressing systemic problems.	\$350,000
United Way of Indian River County	The Access to Justice project will provide information and assistance in the areas of family law, small claims and residential evictions through self-directed legal kiosks, bilingual staff and pro bono attorneys.	\$100,000



FUNDING FLORIDA LEGAL AID

175 Lookout Place, Suite 100  
Maitland, FL 32751

Non-profit  
Organization  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit 273  
Orlando, FL

## *Mission*

To increase access  
to the justice system  
for people of limited means,  
FFLA funds legal services,  
develops innovative tools  
and programs, and supports  
legal aid providers  
and the courts.

[www.FundingFLA.org](http://www.FundingFLA.org)

CONTACT FFLA  
(407) 960-7000



## SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEGAL SERVICES TODAY

Vulnerable children—those with disabilities, in foster care, or survivors of abuse—can't fight for themselves in our complex legal system. They need specialized advocates who understand both the law and the unique challenges they face. Your donation directly funds grants that put skilled legal aid professionals by their side—professionals who will stand up for their rights, ensure their safety, and protect their future. *Give today.*

[FundingFLA.org/children](http://FundingFLA.org/children)

