

SPEAKING OF JUSTICE

NEWS FROM FFLA

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Villalobos, Henderson awarded Medal of Honor Awards



Jose A. "Pepe" Villalobos was named the 2025 Medal of Honor for a Lawyer recipient. He is pictured with FFLA President Ashley N. Sybesma, Florida Bar 2024-25 President Roland Sanchez-Medina Jr. and former Florida Bar President and Florida Lawyers Mutual Insurance Company Director Ray Abadin.

Jose A. "Pepe" Villalobos is FFLA's 2025 Medal of Honor Award for a Lawyer recipient, and Maria Henderson is the recipient for a Non-Lawyer. The Medal of Honor is FFLA's highest honor.

The Medal of Honor Awards, sponsored by Florida Lawyers Mutual Insurance Company, were presented at FFLA's Annual Award Ceremony in June. Villalobos, an attorney with Akerman in Miami, was honored for his exceptional legal acumen, dedication to justice, and advocacy for higher education and judicial diversity, which has left a lasting impact on the South Florida community and the legal profession.

"As impressive as his day-to-day professional practice is, the basis for this nomination is Pepe's exceptional, life-long service and steadfast commitment to the betterment of the legal profession and greater community," wrote Amanda L. Fernandez, Esq., President of CABA, in her nomination of Villalobos.

Villalobos graduated from law school in Cuba in 1959 as Fidel Castro rose to power. Faced with the requirement to pledge allegiance to the Castro regime to practice law, Villalobos chose exile over compromising his principles. In the U.S., he supported his family through various occupations— as a farm laborer, longshoreman, and roofer—while rebuilding his legal career. He earned a bachelor's degree from Biscayne College and participated in a University of Florida program for Cuban lawyers, being admitted to The Florida Bar in 1976.

Villalobos has served the public through extensive pro bono work and government appointments. Governor Bob Graham appointed him to the Marketable Record Title Act Commission and the Judicial Nominating Committee. During the 1980 Mariel boatlift, Villalobos provided pro bono representation for hundreds of unaccompanied children and earned The Florida Bar's Pro Bono award. Beyond law,

[See MEDAL, p. 7](#)



FFLA President Ashley N. Sybesma took office July 1, 2025. She is an attorney at The Smith Law Firm in Key West. A graduate of the University of Miami School of Law, she was honored with The Florida Bar's President's Pro Bono Service Award for the 16th Judicial Circuit in 2018. She has previously served as chair of the 16th Circuit Unauthorized Practice of Law Committee and as a longtime member of the 16th Judicial Circuit's Professionalism Committee. In 2020, she was appointed by Governor Ron DeSantis to the 16th Circuit Judicial Nominating Commission. Sybesma has been recognized for her civic involvement and leadership throughout Monroe County, having served as president of the Monroe County Bar Association and a board member of Florida Keys Healthy Start Coalition.

FFLA is actively pursuing new strategies that will significantly strengthen the impact of our grants and create new pathways for our grantees' success.

For instance, our Operations Reserve Fund, created last year, uses investment income rather than IOTA collections to fund our operations budget. This allows FFLA to increase the amount of IOTA distributions to grantees.

FFLA is also working to convert all of our IOTA-funded grants to Calendar Year grants to reduce applications, streamline reporting and ease administrative burden on both staff and grantees.

We have also established a special work group to explore the possibility of providing IOTA grantees with a three- to five-year projected minimum annual distribution amount. The goal is to give grantees more information for their planning and budgeting purposes, which will help them achieve greater stability, commit to new staff positions and enhance and expand client services.

In addition, we are developing an Elder Law grants program to address legal issues specific to Florida's rapidly growing elderly population.

Finally, we are in the process of researching organizations throughout Florida that may be eligible to become IOTA grantees. FFLA hopes to increase the number of legal aid providers in our network, especially in underserved areas (legal deserts), ultimately growing the infrastructure that supports the many Floridians who need legal help.

Ashley N. Sybesma

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New members join FFLA Board of Directors

FFLA has six designated directors, including the president of Florida Legal Services, the president, president-elect and immediate past president of The Florida Bar, and two judicial officers. Eighteen at-large directors serve a maximum of two three-year terms, with one-third selected by the Florida Supreme Court, one-third by The Florida Bar Board of Governors and one-third by FFLA's board. Up to four public members also serve three-year terms. Directors award grants, oversee fundraising, set policies and adopt the annual budget. The board can be contacted at BoardofDirectors@FundingFLA.org.



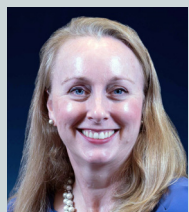
Lakeisha Babers, Esq.

Babers is a former legal aid lawyer who now practices family law at her firm Simply Blessed Law Firm in Winter Haven. She was appointed by FFLA to serve as an at-large director.



Miriam Soler Ramos, Esq.

Ramos is a real estate attorney at Holland & Knight in Miami and a past president of the Cuban American Bar Association. The Florida Bar appointed her as an at-large director.



Laura Boeckman, Esq.

Boeckman serves as assistant general counsel for the City of Jacksonville's Office of General Counsel. She was appointed by the Florida Supreme Court to FFLA's board as an at-large director.



James "Jim" Robinson, Esq.

Robinson is a partner at White & Case LLP and leads the firm's Americas Litigation Section. The Florida Supreme Court appointed him as an at-large director.



Lynn Drysdale, Esq.

Drysdale is a senior attorney in the Consumer Advocacy and Litigation Unit at Jacksonville Area Legal Aid. The Florida Bar appointed her as an at-large director.



Melissa VanSickle, Esq.

VanSickle is a transition partner with Kutak Rock in Tallahassee. She will serve as Florida Bar President-elect Michael Fox Orr's delegate on the board.

Family Law Section presents donation for Summer Fellows

The Florida Bar Family Law Section continued its support of FFLA by donating \$39,600 to provide four additional 2025 Civil Legal Aid Summer Fellows. Section leadership presented a ceremonial check to FFLA leadership during The Florida Bar Annual Convention in June.

"Supporting young lawyers is vital to the future of our profession," said Aimee Gross, chair of the Family Law Section. "Thanks to our legal aid partners, these talented students are gaining invaluable, real-world experience in Family Law—experience we hope will inspire them to serve Florida's families for years to come."

The section also announced that it had approved funding six fellows for the Summer 2026 program. FFLA is extremely grateful for the section's ongoing program assistance.

"There's no better way to pay it forward to the next generation of family law attorneys than by supporting

these fellowships," said Christopher Rumbold, Immediate Past Chair of the Family Law Section.

"We're proud we've had the ability to contribute more than \$750,000 to FFLA over the past decade, and we're particularly honored to help fund the fellowship program for the past three years. It's a valuable investment in these future family law attorneys."



June Board of Directors report

The FFLA Board of Directors met in person on June 26, 2025, in connection with its annual breakfast and awards ceremony during The Florida Bar Annual Convention in Boca Raton. The major actions of the Board and reports received included:

Adoption of Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operating Budget

The Budget and Finance Committee recommended, and the Board approved, the FY 2025-26 operating budget in the total amount of \$2,601,750, which represents a 4% decrease from the previous year's operating budget. The Board also adopted a proposed capital budget in the amount of \$35,500 for expenses associated with FFLA's office building.

The committee also reported that projected actual expenses for FY 2024-25 were expected to be under budget by about 7% or roughly \$192,000. This marks the seventh year in a row in which FFLA has come in under budget.

Eight Children's Legal Services Grants Awarded

The Children's Legal Services Program provides funding for legal assistance to needy children in critical areas that affect their safety, well-being and future development. The Board previously allocated \$1,500,000 in funding for FY 2024-25, using \$1,000,000 in IOTA collections and \$500,000 from other collections.

FFLA received 14 applications requesting \$2,305,022. A work group scored applications independently then met to review scores and financial and staffing data. The work group presented recommendations to the Grants Committee, which made recommendations to the Board. The Board approved funding eight grants (see pg. 7).

FFLA appreciates the efforts of Laura Boeckman, Jessica Brown, Brian Currie, Deborah Giles, Mary Giraulo, and Donny MacKenzie, who initially reviewed the applications.

Investment Committee Report

The Investment Committee recommended, and the Board approved, hiring BlackRock Low Duration Bond Fund to manage the Grantee IOTA Reserve, citing cost-effectiveness compared to other options. Chair Ian Comisky also advised that a report from Morgan Stanley/Graystone Consulting on the investment policy for the Operations Reserve was presented and approved in concept. The Committee will finalize the policy and return with details shortly.

IOTA Work Group Report

Director Steve Salzer, on behalf of IOTA Work Group #2, which is charged with an annual review of the Fair Distribution Plan and Objective Standards, reported that a work group was formed to assess the Fair Distribution Plan in preparation for the December 2024 IOTA distribution to grantees. Following that, the group conducted an overall review and potential update to the Work Plan, considering all the developments since its initial approval by the Executive Committee and

adoption by the Board in October and November 2022.

The work group, comprised of Laura Boeckman, Brian Currie, Kyle Robisch, Steve Salzer, Ashley Sybesma, Jessica Brown, Andrea De Voe and Donny MacKenzie, met over six months. It reviewed the existing document for general updates, grammatical refinements, and stylistic enhancements. It then established four subgroups to focus on each of the Work Plan's main sections.

The work group revised and approved the document on its first reading. The key proposed changes are:

1. Background

- The Work Plan has been converted into an Implementation Policy and Guidelines document.
- FFLA's current mission statement has been incorporated.
- Budget duties and compliance responsibilities under the IOTA rule have been clearly articulated for both FFLA and its grantees.

2. Objective Standards

- The required years of demonstrated successful experience providing qualified legal services for grantee applicants have been reduced from five to three.
- The document reiterates FFLA's commitment to expanding its grantee network to include more providers.
- Language in the Prohibited Areas (g) section was updated to reflect guidance provided by the Review Committee in response to a grantee inquiry.
- The term "single source audits" has been updated to "Use of IOTA Funds Audits" for clarity. The submission requirements were modified from 90 days after the end of each grant period involving IOTA funds to June 30 for all IOTA funds received and spent in the preceding calendar year.
- A reminder that grantees' independent audited financial statements must be submitted within 120 days after the end of their fiscal year.

3. The Fair Distribution Plan

- Revised language to articulate FFLA's primary funding objective for IOTA collections, as well as the means available to achieve it.
- Timeline and distribution processes for grants and awards containing IOTA collections are clarified to maximize compliance with the IOTA Rule.
- Pro Bono Support & Enhancement Grants may, but are not required, to be determined on a case-by-case basis through an application process.
- Provides that Disaster Relief grants—classified as periodic grants for limited purposes—may be awarded differently depending on exigent circumstances.

Lesley Mendoza receives 2025 Curran Award

Lesley Mendoza, executive director of CABA Pro Bono Legal Services, received FFLA's 2025 Jane Elizabeth Curran Distinguished Service Award for her zealous advocacy of clients in need, innovative ideas for providing services to those in need of pro bono attorneys and dedication to legal aid.

The Curran Award recognizes an individual who, over his or her career, has achieved meaningful, effective and lasting increases in access to civil justice for the poor in Florida. It was presented to Mendoza at FFLA's Annual Award Ceremony and Breakfast held June 26, 2025.

Mendoza, born in Miami to Cuban immigrants and raised in Hialeah, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1998, then earned her law degree from the University of Miami School of Law in 2002. She began her law career at White & Case in New York in its commercial litigation practice group.

Mendoza joined CABA Pro Bono Legal Services as its executive director in 2013 and transformed the organization through her innovative leadership. In 2014, she was instrumental in developing a plan to recruit South Florida lawyers to staff immigration courtrooms to expand representation for unaccompanied minors, which led to her recognition by the Daily Business Review as the "Most Effective Lawyer in the Area of Pro Bono."

Under Mendoza's leadership, the organization expanded to represent more individuals and developed programs focused on human trafficking victim representation, domestic violence victim representation, foster children, veterans, and legal assistance for neurodivergent persons.

She has been recognized for her advocacy on behalf of vulnerable populations, being named Child Welfare



Amanda Fernandez, president of the Cuban American Bar Association, the sponsor of the Jane Elizabeth Curran Distinguished Service Award, presents it to CABA Pro Bono Legal Services Executive Director Lesley Mendoza.

Professional of the Month in 2017 by Florida Foster Care Review's Citizen Review Panel for her exceptional representation of a young adult in foster care.

Mendoza spearheaded growing CABA's immigrant children program, last year providing holistic representation for more than 1,000 children.

"Mrs. Mendoza makes it a point to become involved with her clients and ensure they are receiving the help they need, no matter what type of help that is," wrote Johnathan Padilla in his nomination of Mendoza. "Experienced firsthand, her clients' lives are forever changed. She remains in continuous contact with them and will drop everything for them in a moment's notice and truly becomes invested in their accomplishments and progression in life."

4. Compliance and Reporting

- Updates and clarifies FFLA's responsibilities for the separate IOTA audit per section (g)(10) of the IOTA Rule.

The work group respectfully requested, and the Board approved, the document on first reading and returning the document to the work group for a second reading and final drafting, and that:

- The resulting document be submitted to the Executive Committee for review and consideration of final approval, so that the updated Implementation Policy and Guidelines can be in effect in time for the upcoming IOTA distributions related to FYE 6-30-25 collections pursuant to the IOTA Rule.

- Any board member wishing to participate in the second reading and submission to the Executive Committee may volunteer to join the work group.

Board Member updates

President-elect Ashley Sybesma's FY 2025-26 committee assignments and board meeting dates were ratified by the Board. President-Elect Sybesma recognized those members of the Board and the Foundation Endowment Trust who were terming off and thanked them:

- Murray Silverstein
- Bob Murphy
- Katie Fackler
- Min Cho
- Hala Sandridge

President-elect Sybesma also welcomed and introduced new directors (see pg. 3).

Next Meeting

The Board's next scheduled meetings will be on September 25-26, 2025, in Coral Gables. FFLA greatly appreciates the University of Miami School of Law hosting these meetings.

FFLA hosts Annual Award Ceremony and Breakfast

FFLA held its Annual Award Ceremony & Breakfast on June 26 during The Florida Bar Annual Convention in Boca Raton.

Use your phone's camera to scan the QR code to see more photos of the event, or visit FundingFLA.org.



Photo gallery



FFLA board member Ret. Justice Peggy A. Quince, last year's Medal of Honor for a Lawyer recipient, pins 2025 recipient Jose A. "Pepe" Villalobos.



Maria Henderson, recipient of the 2025 Medal of Honor for a Non-Lawyer, was unable to attend the ceremony and accepted her award in Jacksonville.



Juliette Lippman and Tierra Fulwood



John Patterson of Shutts, sponsor of the President's Award, presents the award to FFLA President-elect Ashley Sybesma, who accepted the posthumous award on behalf of former Florida Bar Foundation CFO Lou Ann Powell.



FFLA grantees, including Kristen Feuer and Karen Ladis of Dade Legal Aid, spoke about the impact that increased IOTA funding has had on their organizations, allowing them to hire more lawyers and serve more clients.



Three Rivers Legal Services Executive Director Donna MacRae, Bay Area Legal Services Executive Director Joan Boles and Three Rivers Deputy Director Heidi Kempf



Left: Former Medal of Honor recipients John Patterson and Ret. Judge Emiliano "EJ" Salcines; Middle: Friends and family of Medal of Honor recipient Jose A. Villalobos; Right: Former Florida Bar Foundation president Adele I. Stone announces Alan B. Bookman Service in Leadership Award recipient Jason J. Quintero of Carlton Fields.

Eight Children's Legal Services grants awarded

Brevard County Legal Aid* The Children's Legal Advocacy Project provides legal services for children in the care of the state, including dependent children with special needs as well as those aging out of foster care. \$80,000	Catholic Legal Services The Displaced Youth Empowerment Project provides trauma-informed and holistic legal services to unaccompanied children under the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. \$178,252	CABA Pro Bono Legal Services* The Children's Legal Representation Program helps children who have been abused, abandoned or neglected by one or both parents, securing their safety and well-being. \$315,000
Dade Legal Aid* The Children's Legal Collaborative provides representation, protection and education to disabled children, foster youth and vulnerable teen victims for issues such as dependency and family court proceedings. \$125,000	Florida Legal Services Using direct representation, the Children's Health Access Advocacy Project will remove barriers to Medicaid coverage and benefits faced by at-risk children. \$141,243	FSU College of Law Public Interest Law Center The Vulnerable Children Project provides direct legal representation to children who have been trafficked, infants in the dependency system, and children with severe disabilities. \$180,505
Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association* The Special Education Advocacy Project provides legal advocacy to secure appropriate educational supports or services for dependent youth with special education needs. \$45,000	Legal Services of North Florida* The Panhandle Counsel for Children Project provides direct representation for children in foster care and assists children with accessing free, appropriate public education. \$101,464	FFLA's Board of Directors approved funding eight Children's Legal Services grants for the 2025-26 grant cycle, totaling \$1,166,464. *Five projects were funded with IOTA collections. The remaining three were funded using other collections.

MEDAL cont.

Villalobos helped to secure funding for Florida International University and facilitated innovations at Kendall Regional Hospital as chair. Villalobos has received numerous honors, including CABA's Lifetime Achievement Award, the 11th Judicial Circuit Historical Society's Legal Legend Award, and Miami-Dade County's proclamation of "Pepe's Day" in 2019.

Maria Henderson, a consultant at Akerman in Jacksonville, was honored with the Medal of Honor Award for a Non-Lawyer for her unwavering dedication to increasing access to justice for the vulnerable and her exceptional contributions as a non-lawyer advocate, making a transformative impact on pro bono efforts and Florida's legal community.

Henderson graduated with a degree in math and physics from the University of Florida and earned a master's degree in information management from American University. She began her career in banking and gained experience at the Federal Reserve Board in Washington, D.C.

At Akerman, Henderson works with companies to navigate complex regulatory issues and create operations solutions. She also provides critical business support to Akerman's

Pro Bono Initiative, with a focus on communications and marketing, and increasing recruitment of the firm's lawyers to do more pro bono work.

In 2024, she helped lead a team to a litigation victory for a client fleeing persecution, devoting more than 200 pro bono hours. From 2004 to 2014, Henderson served on The Florida Bar Foundation's board, chairing various committees. She became the organization's first non-lawyer president in 2012.

Henderson has provided significant financial support for legal aid, including seed funding in 2019 for The Hon. William A. Van Nortwick Jr. Impact for Justice Fund, honoring her late husband.

"For decades, Maria Henderson has been devoted to helping the vulnerable," wrote Gina DelChiaro, Partner and Director of Pro Bono Initiatives at Akerman, in her nomination of Henderson. "This is not her full-time job, but it has been high on her list of priorities for such a long time, and it is central to who she is."



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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.

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