

J SPEAKING OF JUSTICE

NEWS FROM FFLA

VOL. 18 | ISSUE NO. 11

Legal aid lawyers, volunteers transform lives of at-risk children

Seventeen-year-old "John", who had endured significant trauma early in life, was adopted and struggled with mental health concerns. While in Juvenile Mental Health Court (JMHC), his Hillsborough County circuit court judge recognized that his case had stalled and that he needed additional support to move forward. The judge referred John's case to Crossroads For Florida Kids.

The organization, founded in 2012, trains and utilizes pro bono attorneys to take on complex representations of children in foster care and those facing delinquency charges. Crossroads For Florida Kids received a 2024-25 FFLA Children's Legal Services grant.

By the time of his referral, John no longer trusted that his adoptive parents were acting in his best interest. He resisted services and had developed a reputation for obstinance that only deepened his belief that authority figures were working against him.

Crossroads appointed Richard Anderson as John's Attorney ad Litem alongside an experienced co-counsel as part of their practice of pairing new volunteers with seasoned attorneys. Although it was Anderson's first Crossroads case, he quickly became the attorney that John trusted most, a connection that proved pivotal to the young man's progress.



Richard Anderson

"I made it clear that I was there to represent him and him alone, and that I would always be in his corner—no matter what," Anderson said.

That commitment became the foundation of a relationship built on empathy,



Pro Bono Attorney Richard Anderson, left, John with his adoptive parents, and Judge Kim Brennan after John graduated from Juvenile Mental Health Court

consistency, and trauma-informed advocacy. The Crossroads team reframed John's behavior not as defiance but as a predictable response to years of instability, allowing trust and open communication to develop.

With steady support, John began engaging in services, improved his grades, and identified a career goal of becoming an electrical lineman. His attorneys helped him research training programs and secure a job-shadowing opportunity. As his confidence grew, so did his stability—his mental health improved, his academic performance strengthened, and his family relationships began to heal.

John ultimately graduated from JMHC, his charges were

See CROSSROADS, p. 8



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.

As I reflect on my tenure as FFLA's president this past year, I am proud to report that it has been a year of remarkable achievement for our organization, and there is much more to come!

With increased IOTA funding, FFLA has seen demonstrable growth in our programming. This summer, 47 law students will work as Summer Fellows in legal aid organizations across the state, up from 14 last year (see page 6). We are in the process of creating an Elder Law grant program that we plan to roll out in 2027.

We are also developing a disaster relief program in which grantees will be funded to provide continuing legal education to Voluntary Bar Associations (VBA). Local communities often turn to VBAs for help after a disaster, and we are confident that our grantees have much wisdom to share with them.

FFLA is also continuing our efforts to help grantees build capacity. We have increased our subsidies for legal research and case management services, and we are working on an AI workshop for better office management. Our Loan Repayment Assistance Program has grown, with more than 210 legal aid lawyers applying for loans this year to pay down their law school loans.

Our board and staff remain focused as always on the IOTA rule and the objective standards. It has been an honor to oversee the responsible and transparent management of the funding entrusted to us.

Lastly, I hope to see you at our Annual Award Ceremony and Breakfast on June 18. It will be an uplifting event as always.

Ashley N. Sybesma

EXECUTIVE

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

COMMUNICATIONS

Jessica Brown
Deputy Executive Director, Communications Director
jbrown@FundingFLA.org

DEVELOPMENT

Michelle Fonseca, CFRE
Development Director
mfonseca@FundingFLA.org

FINANCE

Julie Collins
Finance Director
jcollins@FundingFLA.org

GRANTS

Ember Long
Interim Grants Manager
elong@FundingFLA.org

IOTA

Lushawn Phillips
IOTA Program Director
lphillips@FundingFLA.org

2025-26 OFFICERS

Ashley N. Sybesma, President
Maria C. Gonzalez, President-elect
Ret. Judge Hugh Carithers, First Vice President
Ret. Justice Peggy A. Quince, Second Vice President
Roberto R. Pardo, Immediate Past President

DESIGNATED DIRECTORS

A. Dax Bello, Stewart Tilghman Fox Bianchi & Cain
(Delegate for Roland Sanchez-Medina, Past President, The Florida Bar)
Joshua T. Chilson, Johnson Pope Bokor Ruppel & Burns LLP
(Delegate for Sia Baker-Barnes, 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.
Melissa VanSickle, Kutak Rock
(Delegate for Michael Fox Orr, President-elect, The Florida Bar)

PUBLIC MEMBERS

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

DIRECTORS

(Terms expire 2026)
Sarita Courtney-Baigorry
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

(Terms expire 2028)
Lakeisha L. Babers
Laura Boeckman
Lynn Drysdale
Miriam Soler Ramos
James Robinson
Raychelle Tasher



FFLA

FUNDING FLORIDA LEGAL AID

2026

AWARD CEREMONY

and Breakfast

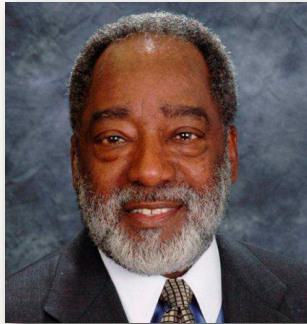
Thursday, June 18, at 8 a.m. | Tickets \$60

*During The Florida Bar Annual Convention at Signia by Hilton Bonnet Creek,
join us as we honor*



DR. SARAH H. PAPPAS

*Medal of Honor Award
for a Non-Lawyer*



H.T. SMITH, ESQ.

*Medal of Honor Award
for a Lawyer*



ROSEMARY ARMSTRONG, ESQ.

*Jane Elizabeth Curran
Distinguished Service Award*

Thank you to our Sponsors



Florida Lawyers Mutual®

INSURANCE COMPANY

Medal of Honor Award Sponsor



SEARCY | DENNEY | SCAROLA | BARNHART | SHIPLEY

Coffee Station Sponsor



*President's Award
for Excellence Sponsor*

WHITE & CASE

Continental Breakfast Sponsor



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

March 2026 Board of Directors report

The FFLA Board of Directors met in Tallahassee, Fla., on March 27, 2026, at Florida State University College of Law. Prior to and during the meeting, presentations were made by:

- Alison DeBelder, Director of Career Services at the College of Law, who shared comments on the value and impact of FFLA's Civil Legal Aid Summer Fellowship Program;
- Doug White, Executive Director, Emerald Coast Legal Aid, who provided an excellent overview of the work Emerald Coast Legal Aid provides people of limited means in the western part of Florida's panhandle;
- Leslie Powell-Boudreaux, Executive Director of Legal Services of North Florida, who provided a comprehensive and impressive overview of LSNF's work in 16 counties in Florida's panhandle through 5 offices. She described the challenges faced given the demographics and geography involved and also shared her organization's disaster relief efforts and its innovative mobile "Justice Bus" program, involving mobile office units, one of which was brought to the venue and available for directors to tour after the meeting; and
- Dr. Paolo Annino, Glass Professor of Public Interest Law with Jillian Mellinek, law student, along with Rima Nathan, Clinical Professor, Claude Pepper Elder Law Clinic, with Kit LaPlante, law student, and Alexis Fulton, graduate student, who presented on their respective civil legal clinics and the work they do.

Erin O'Hara O'Connor, Dean of the FSU College of Law, also welcomed the Board to the campus and was applauded for her ten years of extraordinary service as Dean. FFLA is grateful to the college for hosting as this hospitality allowed FFLA to save considerable money and expenses associated with its committee and board meetings.

The major actions of the board and reports received included:

Board ratifies officers and directors

Pursuant to FFLA's Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, the Nominating Committee presented the following officer nominees for election by the Board of Directors for a term beginning July 1, 2026, and concluding June 30, 2027:

President: Maria C. Gonzalez (automatic)
 President-elect: Ret. Judge Hugh Carithers
 First Vice President: Ret. Justice Peggy A. Quince
 Second Vice President: Brian E. Currie
 Immediate Past President: Ashley N. Sybesma (automatic)

The Board ratified the Nominating Committee's selection and duly elected those persons as officers for the term indicated.

The Nominating Committee also presented the following slate of director nominees for ratification:



Representatives from Florida State University College of Law attended the board meeting (From left: Nathan, LaPlante, Fulton, O'Connor, Mellinek and Annino)

- FFLA Seat 13: Ayana K. Barrow, Esq., Altamonte, Fla., three year term
- FFLA Seat 16: Joseph J. Kadow, Esq., Tampa, Fla., three year term

The Board ratified the Nominating Committee's selection and Directors Barrow and Kadow's upcoming terms shall commence on July 1, 2026, and expire on June 30, 2029.

Board ratifies Medal of Honor Awards Committee Selections for 2026

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

- Medal of Honor (Lawyer): H.T. Smith, Esq.
- Medal of Honor (Non-lawyer): Dr. Sarah H. Pappas
- Jane Curran Distinguished Service Award: Rosemary Armstrong, Esq.

These distinguished recipients will be invited to attend FFLA's annual breakfast and awards ceremony in June to be recognized and presented with these awards.

Report on Loan Repayment Assistance Program

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

- Rescind \$178,813.70 in unused LRAP awards by 29 participants that fully or partially declined their LRAP loans or defaulted prior to their second disbursement.
- Forgive LRAP loans to 148 participants totaling \$1,435,787.67.
- Demand repayment from 18 participants totaling \$87,338.66.

The Committee also presented two individual requests for

See BOARD, p. 5

FFLA announces Annual Minimum Distribution pledge

FFLA has announced its first annual minimum IOTA distribution pledge, designed to give grantee organizations a clearer picture of future funding. In March, FFLA notified grantees of a minimum annual pledge of \$120 million for calendar years 2027, 2028, and 2029 each.

Going forward, FFLA will provide grantees with a rolling three-year pledge of minimum annual distributions from IOTA collections on or before March

15 every year. The goal is to provide legal aid programs greater financial predictability so they can make more confident decisions about budgeting, staffing and long-term planning.

The program was developed by a work group convened in late 2025 and tasked with exploring its feasibility. After meeting four times and reviewing financial data, projections, and IOTA reserve assessments, the group unanimously recommended that FFLA establish the notification program.

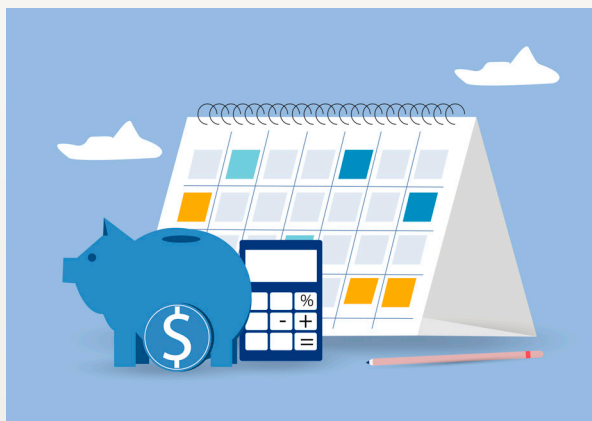
The recommendation was approved and adopted by FFLA's Board.

In March 2026, FFLA issued its first annual notice under the new program, sharing it directly with grantee executive directors and grant managers and

posting it to FFLA's Grantee Hub and website, where it is available to the public.

The pledge is designed to stay current. It will be reviewed at least annually, and after each completed year, the three-year window is intended to roll forward so that grantees will consistently have a multi-year outlook rather than waiting year to year.

"By offering as much clarity and advance information as possible, FFLA aims to support thoughtful planning and budgeting, promote organizational stability, and create meaningful opportunities for grantees to enhance and expand services to their clients," work group chair Doug Reynolds noted in approving the program.



BOARD cont.

forgiveness and two requests for funding. The committee deferred action on one of the forgiveness requests and recommended that the other request be granted in the amount of \$2,788.88 contingent on repayment of \$7,211.12. The committee also recommended granting two funding requests for LRAP loans in the amount of \$10,000 each based on the special circumstances involving each applicant.

The Board approved all of the Committee's recommendations.

2026 Goldstein - Van Nortwick Award for Excellence

Maria C. Gonzalez reported on the 2026 Goldstein-Van Nortwick Award for Excellence Committee's report and recommendation. The award committee, chaired by Maria Henderson, former FFLA president and wife of Judge Van Nortwick, selected the following projects to be recognized with the award:

- Access to Justice in Action: The Florida Tenant Eviction Answer Form (Coast to Coast Legal Aid South Florida, Florida Legal Services, Legal Services of Greater Miami, Legal Services of North Florida and Three Rivers Legal Services) - Winner (tie)
- Palm Lake Mobile Home Park Eviction Defense Project

(Community Justice Project & Legal Services of Greater Miami) - Winner (tie)

The Awards Committee, along with the Grants Committee, respectfully requested that the Board ratify the selections, direct staff to create two co-winner awards, and distribute the total prize money allocated for this year's awards in a pro-rated amount amongst the proposed co-winners.

The Board voted and approved the recommendations.

President appoints work group for banking RFP process

At staff's request, President Sybesma appointed a work group to commence an RFP process regarding FFLA's primary operating banking/depository services. The five persons appointed are Judge Paetra Brownlee, Ian Comisky, Joe Kadow, Patrick Montoya and Jim Schwarz.

Next Meeting

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

47 Civil Legal Aid Summer Fellows placed for 2026

FFLA will fund 47 Civil Legal Aid Summer Fellowships in 2026. 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 grantees to cover payroll taxes.

The Florida Bar Family Law Section made a donation of \$59,400 to provide funding for six fellows working in family

law programs. One-hundred and seven students from 17 law schools applied.

More than 450 law students have completed summer fellowships since the program was established in 1995. Many have gone on to careers in legal aid, including four of last year's summer fellows who now work for FFLA grantee organizations.

Aaliyah Andrews

Florida State University College of Law
Bay Area Legal Services: Domestic Violence

Leia Bamasi

Florida State University College of Law
Americans for Immigrant Justice:
Children's Legal Program

Stacey Bazile

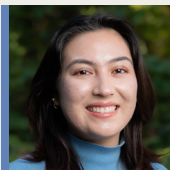
Florida International University College of Law
Legal Services of Greater Miami:
Community Economic Development

Sania Borom

St. Thomas University School of Law
Innocence Project of Florida: Exonerating
Wrongfully Convicted Individuals

Abigail Briones

Lewis & Clark Law School
Florida Rural Legal Services: Economic
Justice and Stability



Briones, who speaks Spanish, has a master's degree in social work. She has interned with FSU's Center for the Advancement of Human Rights.

Luciana Cardenas

Stetson University College of Law
Innocence Project of Florida: Exonerating
Wrongfully Convicted Individuals

Joshua Carson

Florida State University College of Law
Innocence Project of Florida: Exonerating
Wrongfully Convicted Individuals

Erica Clare

University of Miami School of Law
Legal Services of Greater Miami:
Community Economic Development

Celina Corvea

Florida State University College of Law
Seminole County Bar Association Legal
Aid Society: Housing Law

Deana Daoud

Jacksonville University College of Law
Jacksonville Area Legal Aid: Community
Economic Development

Aaliyah DeBarros

Florida State University College of Law
Innocence Project of Florida: Exonerating
Wrongfully Convicted Individuals

Matthew Dickens

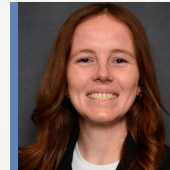
Jacksonville University College of Law
Three Rivers Legal Services: Heirs
Property and Estate Planning



Dickens, who has a master's degree, is a former public middle school teacher and now works as a paralegal while in law school.

Ashley Ellingham

Nova Southeastern University College of Law
Bay Area Legal Services: Foster Care



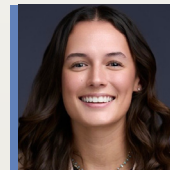
Ellingham works as a paralegal, has volunteered as a Guardian ad Litem in Pinellas County and interned with the 17th Judicial Circuit.

Ayanna Ervin

Howard University School of Law
Innocence Project of Florida: Exonerating
Wrongfully Convicted Individuals

Molly Feldman

Stetson University College of Law
CABA Pro Bono Legal Services: Children's
Legal Services



Feldman worked as a paralegal at Legal Aid Society of Hawaii. For six summers in a row before college, she shadowed a Guardian ad Litem.

Alexandra Figueiroa

Belmont University College of Law
Bay Area Legal Services: Family Law, Tax
and Housing

Amalia Garcia

University of Miami School of Law
Americans for Immigrant Justice:
Detention Program

Reflections from 2025 Summer Fellows

"I was given hands on work. I completed tasks to assist our clients and worked directly with attorneys that answered any and every question I asked. My supervisor provided consistent and lengthy feedback on documents I drafted. She provided constructive criticism on tasks that I did not understand."

"The environment was extremely supportive and nurturing. I got to learn a lot and was guided with respect."

"I developed client interviewing, legal drafting, and research skills. Because I wish to pursue a field of law that is heavy client interaction, the opportunity to interview and interact with clients was very beneficial."

Addie Gold

University of Florida College of Law
Coast to Coast Legal Aid South Florida:
Advocating for Older Adults

Natasha Gonzalez

Stetson University College of Law
Gulfcoast Legal Services: Domestic
Violence

Virginia Grier

Barry University School of Law
Florida Legal Services: Legal Matters
Rotation

Sarah Howard

Jacksonville University College of Law
Three Rivers Legal Services: Consumer
and Foreclosure Matters



Howard is a former police officer and has assisted pro se litigants as the Alachua County Family and Civil Justice Center's self-help center program assistant.

Makayla Jefferson

Florida A&M University College of Law
Legal Aid Society of the Orange County
Bar Association: Family Law

Liam King

University of Florida College of Law
Southern Legal Counsel: From Intake to
Litigation to Closing

Veronica Lemieux

Florida A&M University College of Law
Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County:
Pro Bono Project

Ana Leon-Noda

St. Thomas University College of Law
Americans for Immigrant Justice: Family
Defense Program



Before starting law school, Leon-Noda worked in the 11th Judicial Circuit Public Defender's office for nine years as a legal secretary and mitigations specialist.

"I developed skills in speaking to and questioning clients. I also refined some of my skills in legal research and writing which was very helpful to see how it applies in a professional setting."

Mackenzie Manofsky

University of Miami School of Law
Catholic Legal Services: Housing and
Public Benefits

Gabriela Mantilla

University of Miami School of Law
CABA Pro Bono Legal Services: Children's
Legal Services

Noelle Matthias

Nova Southeastern University College of Law
Coast to Coast Legal Aid South Florida:
Advocating for Older Adults

D'Andra McFarlane

Barry University School of Law
Legal Aid Society of the Orange County
Bar Association: General Litigation

Christian Mckee

Emory University School of Law
Jacksonville Area Legal Aid: Veterans and
Family Law

Mia Melnizki

Cooley Law School
Bay Area Legal Services: Family Law and
Domestic Violence

Lewis Menendez

St. Thomas University School of Law
Legal Services of Greater Miami:
Veterans

Isabella Perez

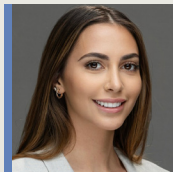
Florida A&M University College of Law
Seminole County Bar Association Legal
Aid Society: Family Law

Emmanuella Petit

St. Thomas University School of Law
Dade Legal Aid: Guardianship

Anjolina Retana

Barry University School of Law
Florida Legal Services: Legal Matters
Rotation



Retana is a 1L Student Bar Association Senator and former Florida Senate legislative intern. She has worked as a paralegal and legal assistant.

Gabriella Rodrigues

Florida International University College of Law
Jacksonville Area Legal Aid: Immigration

Jenny Said

Florida State University College of Law
Americans for Immigrant Justice: Victims
of Violence

Kourtney Salmon

Florida A&M University College of Law
Florida Justice Institute: Civil Rights
Litigation

Alexis Strider

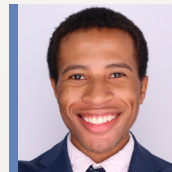
Stetson University College of Law
Bay Area Legal Services: Family Law and
Domestic Violence

Hayley Taylor

University of Florida College of Law
Legal Aid Society of the Orange County
Bar Association: Family Law

Cradler Volmar

University of Miami School of Law
Catholic Legal Services: Housing and
Public Benefits



Volmar, a former financial management intern at the Pentagon, is president of UM Law's OUTLaw Society and was a HOPE Public Interest Center intern.

Andrew White

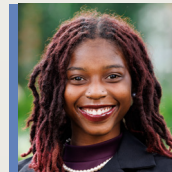
Stetson University College of Law
Bay Area Legal Services: Housing

Sasha Valon

St. Thomas University College of Law
Innocence Project of Florida: Exonerating
Wrongfully Convicted Individuals

Courtney Williams

University of Florida College of Law
Three Rivers Legal Services: Public
Benefits and Special Education



Williams serves as the section representative for three UF law associations, including the Public Interest and Government Law Association.

Adalyn Woeste

Florida State University College of Law
Legal Services of North Florida:
Interpersonal Violence Victim
Representation

Lochlainn Wood

Stetson University College of Law
Gulfcoast Legal Services: Low-Income
Taxpayer Clinic

Shamuell Yepes

St. Thomas University College of Law
Dade Legal Aid: Domestic Violence



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

CONTACT FFLA
(407) 960-7000



CROSSROADS cont.

dismissed, and his record remained clean. Even after his case concluded, he chose to remain connected to his attorneys, who continue to serve as mentors as he works nearly full-time, rebuilds his relationship with his adoptive parents, and prepares for adulthood.

FFLA is currently funding eight Children's Legal Services grants that address the needs of children in the dependency system, child victims of abuse, abandonment and neglect, children denied access to necessary medical services, children who have been trafficked and children with severe disabilities.

Last year, grantee organizations served 3,832 clients, a 10 percent increase over the previous year. More than \$4.6 million in judgements, fees, awards and other benefits were obtained for clients.

How Can I Help?

Your donations to our Children's Legal Services program support children like John, ensuring access to legal aid lawyers who represent them in court and protect their interests.



Scan QR code or visit
www.FundingFLA.org/children to donate.