

J SPEAKING OF JUSTICE

NEWS FROM FFLA

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Former Medal of Honor recipients Ret. Justice Peggy A. Quince, left, and John Patterson, right, with 2026 Medal of Honor for a Lawyer recipient H.T. Smith and Medal of Honor for a Non-Lawyer Sarah H. Pappas.

Smith, Pappas awarded Medal of Honor

In June, FFLA awarded Miami lawyer H.T. Smith the 2026 Medal of Honor Award for a Lawyer, and educator and philanthropist Dr. Sarah H. Pappas the Medal of Honor Award for a Non-Lawyer. The Medal of Honor is FFLA's highest honor.

Smith, a Miami attorney and Inaugural Director of the Trial Advocacy Program at Florida International University College of Law, was honored for his lifetime of distinguished advocacy, enduring contributions to justice and transformative service that strengthened communities, expanded opportunity and elevated the legal profession.

"For more than five decades, he has not only practiced law at the highest level, he has modeled what it means to live a life anchored in service, courage, and a steadfast belief that the law

can expand opportunity and strengthen communities," wrote Monica Vignes-Pitan, Esq., CEO of Legal Services of Greater Miami, in her nomination of Smith. "His career reflects a legacy not simply of achievement, but of transformation."

After earning a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Florida A&M University, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the United States Army and served in Vietnam. Upon returning home, he earned his law degree from the University of Miami School of Law, becoming the fourth Black graduate in its history.

Smith began his legal career as a staff attorney at Legal Services of Greater Miami, representing low-income individuals and families. He went on to become Miami's first Black Assistant

[See AWARDS, p. 7](#)



FFLA President Maria C. Gonzalez took office July 1, 2026. Gonzalez is managing partner at the Law Offices of Maria C. Gonzalez, P.A., in Hollywood, where she focuses her practice on marital and family law and guardianship matters. She has extensive experience across all areas of marital and family law and is a past-Chair and current Trustee of The Florida Bar Family Law Section. Gonzalez is a Board Certified Marital and Family Law Specialist by The Florida Bar and is a Florida Supreme Court Certified Family Law Mediator and a fellow of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (Florida Chapter). She has previously served as president of First Family Law American Inn of Court and president of the Florida Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts. She also served on the Florida Supreme Court's Commission on Professionalism and Civility.

It is my honor to serve as FFLA's president, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to build on the momentum established by those who led before me.

I'm pleased to share several important developments already underway. First, our Board of Directors has approved covering the full cost of legal research services for our grantees with IOTA funds, reducing the administrative burden of requiring reimbursement. After much research and negotiation, FFLA also decided to change vendors and entered into an agreement with LexisNexis. FFLA will maintain its current vendor, Westlaw, through December 2027, giving grantees time to transition, while LexisNexis AI services and onboarding have already begun. This transition is expected to save more than \$950,000 over five years, while providing grantees access to twice the number of licenses and a broader suite of products.

We're also continuing work toward our long-term goal of transitioning all grantees to a single case management system. FFLA will fund grantee case management systems for the upcoming fiscal year while grantees conduct an RFP process for case management systems, to be completed by February 2027.

Finally, FFLA is aligning our grant programs to the same annual cycle. Most grant applications will now be due in July, with funding decisions made in the fall and funds distributed to grantees in December. This will allow grantees to operate on a calendar year grant cycle with reports due the following spring.

Thank you for your continued support of FFLA's mission, and I look forward to all we will accomplish together in the year ahead.

Maria C. Gonzalez

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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.



Mayanne Downs, Esq.

Downs, a former Florida Bar president, is founding shareholder at DownsAaron in Orlando. She was appointed by The Florida Bar to serve a three-year term.



M. Scott Thomas, Esq.

Thomas is a partner at Burr & Forman in Jacksonville, where he practices commercial litigation. He will serve as Florida Bar President Michael Fox Orr's delegate.



Bryan Gowdy, Esq.

Gowdy is an appellate lawyer at Creed & Gowdy in Jacksonville. He was appointed by The Florida Bar to serve a three-year term.



Christian Waugh, Esq.

Waugh is founder of Waugh PLLC in Orlando, where he practices real estate law. He was appointed by the Florida Supreme Court to a three-year term.



Paige A. Greenlee, Esq.

Greenlee will serve as a designated director as president-elect of The Florida Bar. She practices commercial litigation and real estate in Tampa and previously served two terms on FFLA's board.



Josh Webb, Esq.

Webb is a shareholder with Lawson Huck Gonzalez in Tampa where he practices commercial litigation. He was appointed by the Florida Supreme Court to a three-year term.



Alison F. Smith, Esq.

Smith is a partner with Weiss Serota Helfman Cole + Bierman in Fort Lauderdale. She will serve as Florida Bar Immediate Past President Rosalyn Sia Baker-Barnes' delegate.

Directors award grants, oversee fundraising, set policies and adopt the annual budget. The board can be contacted at BoardofDirectors@FundingFLA.org.

FFLA establishes Elder Law Grant Program

FFLA has established an Elder Law Grant Program. Approved by FFLA's board of directors on June 18, 2026, the program will provide funding to legal aid organizations to provide legal assistance to needy older adults in critical areas that affect their safety, wellbeing and ability to remain independent.

"With one of the largest elderly populations in the country, Florida has no shortage of seniors navigating complex legal issues tied to aging," FFLA Executive Director Donny MacKenzie said.

"FFLA intends to address that need directly by funding legal services in areas like health care access income maintenance, consumer protection, probate and

estate matters, and protection against domestic violence, abuse, and exploitation."

FFLA solicited input from its grantees and other stakeholders to create the program. The funding criteria established by FFLA for these grants are designed to encourage local matching funds and collaboration with other agencies providing services to older adults and among legal aid organizations that provide elder law services and assistance.

FFLA allocated \$1,500,000 for the first year of the program and will award the first grants in December to be used in 2027.

June 2026 Board of Directors report

The FFLA Board of Directors met in person on June 18, 2026, in connection with its Annual Award Ceremony and Breakfast during The Florida Bar Annual Convention in Orlando.

Adoption of Fiscal Year 2026-27 Operating Budget

The Budget and Finance Committee recommended, and the Board approved, FFLA's operating budget in the total amount of \$2,745,260, which represents less than 2% of FFLA's total projected expenses for the 2026-27 fiscal year. The operating budget includes three new positions: IOTA Enhancement Manager, Grants Data and Compliance Analyst and Communications Coordinator. The board also adopted a proposed capital budget in the amount of \$70,000 for expenses associated with FFLA's office building.

Grants Committee Report

Five Improvements in the Administration of Justice Grants Awarded

The Improvements in the Administration of Justice (AOJ) grant program provides funding for programs that support the process of operating the courts in an effective and expeditious manner. The Board previously approved an allocation of \$900,000 to fund the AOJ Program for FY 2025-26. In an effort to align AOJ grants with all other FFLA grants to a calendar year grant cycle, the grant period for 2026 AOJ grants was extended by six months, to run from July 1, 2026, to December 31, 2027. The Executive Committee voted to increase the grant allocation to \$1,350,000 to provide for the six-month extension. An additional \$450,000 will be allocated from the FY 2026-27 grant allocation.

FFLA received 10 applications requesting a total of \$2,156,155. A work group independently reviewed and scored applications then met to review scores and financial and staffing data. The work group presented funding recommendations to the Grants Committee for consideration, which thereafter made recommendations to the board. The board reviewed and approved funding five projects (see chart, pg. 5). All other applications were respectfully declined.

FFLA appreciates the efforts of Ayana Barrow, Brian Currie, Deborah Giles, Doug Reynolds, Kyle Robisch and Lynn Drysdale, who were assisted by staff members Jessica Brown, Julie Collins, Michelle Fonseca, Jonathan Guitard, Ember Long, Donny MacKenzie and Lindsey Stout.

Elder Law Grant Program Description Approved

The Grants Committee recommended and the Board approved the Elder Law Grant Program description. Chair Maria Gonzalez reported that staff will prepare and publish the grant application with inaugural awards expected to be decided at the Board's meeting in September for distribution in December. The Board previously allocated \$1,500,000 for

the program's first grant cycle.

Children's Legal Services Bridge Funding Approved

Executive Director Donny MacKenzie reported that, due to FFLA converting its grant cycles to a calendar year, there will be a six-month gap between the previous Children's Legal Services (CLS) grant cycle and the next. As a result, FFLA received a request from CLS grantee Florida State University for six months of bridge funding. The Board approved the committee's recommendations to award FSU a six-month extension in the amount of \$57,100.

The Board further approved a plan whereby FFLA will notify all other current CLS grantees that they may apply for a similar extension, subject to an application process and limited to the amount of unawarded CLS funds remaining from the prior grant cycle. Applications for these extensions were accepted until August 15.

President and President-elect's Reports

President Ashley Sybesma passed the gavel to President-elect Maria Gonzalez. Ms. Gonzalez presented her committee assignments and dates for board meetings for FY 2026-27, which were approved by the Board. Ms. Gonzalez's term begins July 1, 2026. President Sybesma also recognized those members of the Board and the Foundation Endowment Trust who were terming off on June 30, 2026, and thanked them for their service and commitment. Those are:

- Bob Pardo, Immediate Past President of FFLA, who termed off the Board but will continue to serve as an Endowment Trustee.
- Steve Salzer, who concluded two three-year terms on the Board.
- Sarita Courtney-Baigorri, who termed off the Board after completing the remainder of a vacated three-year Bar-appointed seat, followed by an additional three-year term.
- Stephen R. Senn, who concluded his service as an Endowment Trustee.

Next Meeting

The Board's next scheduled meetings will be on September 10-11, 2026, in Fort Lauderdale. FFLA greatly appreciates Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad College of Law for hosting FFLA and these meetings. This meeting will include FFLA's annual orientation for new directors, with all directors invited.

FFLA will also be hosting an orientation for new grantees on September 9, 2026 in Fort Lauderdale. Director Doug Reynolds and the Tripp Scott law firm will be hosting FFLA for the orientation, which FFLA greatly appreciates.

Administration of Justice grants awarded

In June, FFLA's Board of Directors awarded five organizations 2026-27 Improvements in the Administration of Justice (AOJ) grant awards. This program provides funding to support the process of operating the courts in an effective and expeditious manner and supports projects that enhance civil legal services through innovative and cost-effective means, provide direct civil legal services to groups

of clients currently underserved, improve the operation and management of the court and justice systems or otherwise promotes the improvement in the administration of justice. In an effort to align the AOJ grant cycle with all other FFLA grants, awards were extended by six months, to run from July 1, 2026, to December 31, 2027.

2026-27 Improvements in the Administration of Justice Grants

Organization	Project	Grant
CABA Pro Bono Legal Services	Neurodivergent Legal Assistance Program	\$ 150,000
Florida's Children First	Empowering Youth through Legal Collaboration	\$ 525,000
Florida Rural Legal Services	AI-Powered Intake and Hotline System	\$ 88,560
The Florida Bar Appellate Practice Section	Pro Se Handbook	\$ 53,846
United Way of Indian River County	Access to Justice Self Help Centers	\$ 295,000
		Total: \$1,112,406

FFLA hosts 2026 Annual Award Ceremony & Breakfast



FFLA held its Annual Award Ceremony & Breakfast on June 18 during The Florida Bar Annual Convention. Use your phone's camera to scan the QR code to see more photos of the event.



The Florida Tenant Eviction Answer Form won the Goldstein - Van Nortwick Award for Excellence. The project enables tenants to select common defenses, provide factual support and file a motion to determine rent when disputing the rent owed. The form also protects a tenant's constitutional right to demand a jury trial. This form is now used across the state, helping thousands by appropriately responding to eviction lawsuits.



The Palm Lake Mobile Home Park Eviction Defense project also won the Goldstein - Van Nortwick Award by helping 90 families with evictions from a single mobile home park. They appeared in the cases and defended against eviction. After significant litigation and obtaining partial summary judgment in their favor, the homeowners negotiated a settlement.



Bethanie Barber, Executive Director of Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association, accepts the President's Award for Excellence from President Ashley Sybesma.



Larri Thatcher and Scott Leitner with Liz McCausland, right, who received the 2026 Alan B. Bookman Service in Leadership Award.

Armstrong receives Curran Award for Distinguished Service

FFLA, in June at its Annual Award Ceremony and Breakfast, awarded Rosemary Armstrong, Esq., co-founder and Director Emerita of Crossroads For Florida Kids, the 2026 Jane Elizabeth Curran Distinguished Service Award for her decades of unwavering pro bono service, her steadfast advocacy for vulnerable children and families, and her leadership in expanding access to justice across the state of Florida.

The Jane Elizabeth Curran Distinguished Service 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.

After earning her law degree from Columbia Law School, she began volunteering as a pro bono lawyer for Bay Area Legal Services in Tampa. She helped create a Family Law Mentor Project to recruit pro bono attorneys and mentors for family law cases, a model later replicated by other pro bono programs. She served on BALS' board of directors for 22 years, including three terms as president, and chaired the 13th Judicial Circuit Pro Bono Committee.

In 2012, she received The Florida Bar's Tobias Simon Pro Bono Service Award, the highest honor the Bar bestows for pro bono service. That same year, she co-founded Crossroads For Florida Kids, a pro bono organization in Hillsborough County devoted entirely to representing children in dependency, delinquency, criminal and related matters.

"Ms. Armstrong is a talented, passionate attorney who has devoted her career to advocating on behalf of the most vulnerable of our citizens, and particularly on behalf of children," wrote Katherine Earle Yanes of Kynes Markman & Felman in her letter supporting Armstrong's nomination. "She has achieved professional excellence and has used her time and talents to represent some of those in our society most in need of pro bono assistance: needy children."



Rosemary Armstrong, Esq., Director Emerita of Crossroads For Florida Kids

Over the next decade, Armstrong served as Crossroads' full-time, unpaid executive director, building a comprehensive, trauma-informed model of representation that has become a blueprint for pro bono children's advocacy in Florida. Under her leadership, more than 280 volunteer attorneys were recruited and trained, collectively contributing more than 55,000 pro bono hours to over 1,700 children. She has personally represented more than 150 children, many of whom had significant mental and physical health needs and complex challenges.

"There was no other attorney fighting harder for the rights of disadvantaged children in our community than Rosemary Armstrong," wrote Lisa Kilbride of Zuckerman Spaeder LLP in a letter of support. "Rosemary's commitment and professionalism in all aspects of her work is literally second to none."

Summer Fellow Spotlight: Mia Melnizki



Mia Melnizki was one of 47 FFLA Civil Legal Aid Summer Fellows in 2026. Melnizki is a 3L student graduating in December, with plans to take the Bar exam in February. During her fellowship at Bay Area Legal Services, she had the opportunity to work alongside attorneys on several trials, meet with clients, assist with case preparation and gain hands-on experience.

"I have strengthened my communication and client-interaction skills," Melnizki says. "This has given me valuable insight into the day-to-day work of an attorney and has helped me grow both professionally and personally as I prepare to begin my legal career. FFLA gave me the best opportunity law school has given me. I was able to act as a lawyer before being barred, which helped me build relationships I will forever cherish."

AWARDS cont.

Public Defender and later Miami-Dade County's first Black Assistant County Attorney. He subsequently became a partner in the first Black law firm to establish offices in downtown Miami. For more than 52 years, Smith has practiced in civil rights, personal injury and criminal defense.

Beyond the courtroom, Smith led the Boycott Miami campaign, which resulted in meaningful economic and educational opportunities for Black communities, including development of the first Black-owned, convention-quality hotel in the United States. In 1995, he spearheaded the effort to raise \$5 million to build the NFL Youth Education Town Center in Liberty City, which continues to serve hundreds of children and families annually.



H.T. Smith, Esq.

His leadership within the profession has been historic and generational. Smith was founding president of the Wilkie D. Ferguson Jr. Bar Association and a founding member of the Gwen S. Cherry Black Women Lawyers Association. He served as president of both the Virgil Hawkins Florida Chapter of the National Bar Association and later the National Bar Association itself. He later

returned to Legal Services of Greater Miami as a board member and president.

His impact on legal education is equally profound. As Inaugural Director of Florida International University College of Law's Trial Advocacy Program, Smith built a nationally recognized program and personally mentored hundreds of young lawyers. At the University of Miami, which has a building that bears his name, he served on the Law Alumni Association board, the law school dean's advisory committee and as vice chairman of the board of trustees.

"He builds bridges between communities, across generations, and within the profession itself," Vignes-Pitan wrote. "His integrity and dedication to mentoring the next generation have left an indelible mark on our profession and our community."

Dr. Sarah H. Pappas

Pappas, a retired educator and philanthropist from Sarasota, received FFLA's 2026 Medal of Honor Award for a Non-Lawyer. Pappas was recognized for her exemplary leadership, advocacy, and support of initiatives that enhance justice, institutional integrity, and access to the courts across Florida.

"Dr. Pappas exemplifies the spirit of this award through her extraordinary commitment to advancing justice for some of Florida's most vulnerable citizens: individuals wrongfully convicted within the state's prison system," wrote Seth Miller, Esq., executive director of the Innocence Project of Florida, in his nomination of Pappas.

Born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Pappas spent the first 13 years of her life in Latin America, where her father worked for U.S. Steel. She earned a master's degree in social science education from the University of South Florida and a doctorate in curriculum and instruction from Nova Southeastern University.

Over a 44-year career in public higher education, she served at three community colleges and the University of Central Florida. She became the first female president of what is now the State College of Florida. During her tenures, Dr. Pappas was faced with many heartrending situations and committed time and resources to help rectify them.

Pappas was recognized as a 2024 Woman of Influence by Sarasota Magazine and has served on numerous boards throughout her career, including the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Foundation. She served as the president of the William G. and Marie Selby Foundation in Sarasota for nine years.

Pappas was introduced to the Innocence Project of Florida (IPF) in 2014, when she heard exoneree James Bain recount his 35 years of wrongful incarceration at a reception. She was deeply moved by the realities of wrongful conviction and increasingly committed herself to the cause.

In the years that followed, she deepened her involvement with the organization until, in 2022, she made a \$500,000 matching gift, the largest individual philanthropic investment in IPF's history, establishing the Dr. Sarah H. Pappas Fund for Innocence.

The gift served as the catalyst for IPF to significantly expand its capacity by hiring two additional attorneys, a second investigator, a paralegal and a second social worker. In total, Pappas has contributed more than \$700,000 to IPF's mission.

The impact of Pappas' investment is perhaps best understood through the experience of Stephanie Spurgeon, a paralegal at IPF who herself was wrongfully convicted.

"Dr. Pappas may not have stood in the courtroom during my hearings, but her commitment, advocacy, and support strengthened the very organization that fought for my freedom," Spurgeon wrote in a letter supporting the nomination.

"Because of her support, families have been reunited. Because of her commitment, innocent people have been given a second chance at life. I am one of those people."



Dr. Sarah H. Pappas



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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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CONTACT FFLA
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Donation roundup

ESTATE PLAN GIFT



In May, former Florida Bar Foundation president and Medal of Honor recipient Alexander Hamilton "Ham" Cooke passed away. A gift of \$16,835 was made to FFLA on behalf of Cooke's estate, as he was a member of the Legacy for Justice.

DONATIONS

At its June meeting, The Florida Bar Family Law Section

presented a ceremonial check for its \$59,400 donation to fund six 2026 Civil Legal Aid Summer Fellows. The section has contributed to FFLA for many years.



For more information or to make a donation, visit FundingFLA.org or contact Development Director Michelle Fonseca at 407-960-7000 or mfonseca@FundingFLA.org.