

# 2020 ANNUAL REPORT



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STATEWIDE PROSECUTOR

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## **OVERVIEW OF THE OFFICE OF STATEWIDE PROSECUTION IN 2020**

2020 was the year of COVID-19. Like other state agencies, the pandemic had a significant impact upon the operations of the Office of Statewide Prosecution (OSP). Remote work, travel restrictions and court closures all factors outside of OSP's control, slowed pending investigations and prosecutions.

OSP responded to this challenge by enabling and encouraging our employees to embrace working remotely to continue our mission and assist law enforcement. The effort to make this successful and maintain our positive output and work product would have been impossible without the assistance of the Attorney General's Information Technology staff, the Human Resources and Finance teams, and most importantly Attorney General Moody and her leadership team who understood not only the operational needs of the office, but the fears, health concerns, and health challenges of our employees. Changes and upgrades to our IT hardware and software systems were addressed, to maintain the capability of all of our staff to work remotely. Personnel and management guidelines and practices enabled our employees to work successfully in this new manner, to attend meetings, hold court, etc. OSP met these challenges and enabled our office to continue doing the work of the People of the State of Florida.

Within OSP, our management team faced the daunting tasks associated with managing a remote office and staff. This required daily communications with all staff members. Likewise, it required all staff to work closely with the chiefs, report their progress and output daily, as well as receiving new assignments or direction as the office continued to fully function with our investigative law enforcement partners. OSP saw great success in this effort and continues to find itself moving in a positive direction. This success is a testament to the hard work, effort and desire of our staff to succeed.

COVID-19 threw us all off our game initially. But the quick response and adaptability of our team, with the help, oversight and direction of the Attorney General, resulted in as successful of a 2020 as possible.

All prosecutors around Florida obviously saw significant reductions in output and statistics in the measures of our workload. Statewide Prosecution was not immune from this trend. With the closing of state courts and judicial centers, and law enforcement having to refocus their attention, along with responding to remote access, much of our typical daily work came to a halt. Full access to the courts essentially shut down for months so that most hearings and all trials were continued or suspended. Therefore it was no surprise that numbers and statistics relating to the number of active cases (down 17% for the year), the number of cases filed (down 19% for the year), and the number of defendants convicted (down 54% for the year) were impacted. These are all areas where OSP has historically not only met our goals, but far exceeded them.

Until the Courts closed, and upon reopening and the use of virtual technology, OSP again enjoyed an outstanding conviction rate, attaining a perfect 100%. Despite such a huge conviction success, given the significantly lower number of cases we could dispose of, sentencing statistics were abnormally low as cases were just not capable of being resolved. Incarceration rates in jails or prisons, house arrest and probationary terms were cut from one third to one half due simply to the fact that cases were incapable of being tried or pled out. Likewise, the conditions associated with these sentences were also

reduced since so few cases could be disposed of. However, our financial assessments for restitution and related case costs, while cut in half, still exceeded the budget allotted for this agency.

After shifting its operations from closed courthouses and office spaces to a work-from-home environment, prosecutors and staff seamlessly adapted; the investigation and prosecution of OSP cases continued uninterrupted. Because OSP's mission of prosecuting cases statewide necessarily causes its prosecutors and staff to travel and work remotely in a myriad of locations throughout the state, the office was well equipped to handle the shutdown of its office spaces. OSP began utilizing electronic notary for all pleadings requiring a notarial attestation and online software for investigative meetings, depositions and interviews.

Laptops, mobile phones and a strong remote computer network were key tools already in place. They allowed OSP members to work from home efficiently, while also remaining safe, during a period of uncertainty. Prosecutors appeared for court hearings virtually or by telephone, and but for the suspension of jury trials, litigation of its cases continued – motions were litigated, sentencings were conducted, depositions were taken, and the testimony of some witnesses perpetuated. Prosecutors also regularly met with law enforcement partners virtually or by telephone to advance ongoing or new investigations.

With COVID-19's impact on traditional law enforcement investigative techniques, we worked closely with many of our police partners and turned to other successful manners of discovering and investigating criminal activity. As an example, we saw the largest number of wiretap investigation in over 5 years. In 2020, we nearly doubled the number of these electronic surveillance techniques that we worked with law enforcement. This is significant as it shows how our office was able to switch gears to maintain our pressure with the police on criminal organizations through this complex investigative process that requires a great deal more work and attention to detail by the prosecutor.

Additionally, despite the impact of COVID-19 on our typical measures, most of Attorney General Moody's primary areas of focus have seen increases in activity during 2020. The number of active human trafficking cases, most of which are commercial sex related criminal activity, saw an increase of over 20%. We had more active defendants in 2020 for cases involving organized retail theft, over 300, than we have seen in our history. Active organized retail theft cases in 2020 increased by almost 20% as law enforcement continued to learn of our zero tolerance towards retail theft organizations. So too we saw an increase in the numbers of active Medicaid Fraud cases during 2020 (up 14%) and the number of active defendants in those cases (up 10%).

So, while many reductions have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic for all of us in government, Assistant Statewide Prosecutors have adapted to the "new normal", refocused their attention, and maintained a steady progress in cases involving the Attorney General's priorities.

OSP has also tried to refocus attention on those matters that could be successfully handled in a COVID-19 environment. For this reason, during 2020, we began to work with the Attorney General on staffing and building a computer fraud unit. We also sought the approval of the Supreme Court of Florida to take a novel approach with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement towards our Statewide Grand Jury Operations by utilizing secure virtual technology. The Supreme Court granted our request to hold a virtual grand jury, which has allowed continued progress in examining the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas tragedy, and enabled the grand jury to continue to issue reports and recommendations.

## 2020 Statewide Prosecution Annual Report

Finally, our prosecutors continue to stand out to law enforcement. Assistant Statewide Prosecutors continue to be recognized by law enforcement for their hard work and attention to detail. They also are routinely complimented for their positive “can do” attitudes and willingness to be creative in the approach to solving crime. Our prosecutors continue to be sought out by law enforcement to handle complex matters. In 2019, ASP Cynthia Honick was named the FWC’s prosecutor of the year for her work against marine wildlife violations. In 2020, OSP prosecutors Kelly McKnight and Paul Dontenville were likewise given this annual award for their work protecting numerous species of Florida’s indigenous wildlife.

Therefore, despite the difficulties experienced in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Statewide Prosecution has effectively adapted in a manner to keep this office’s fight against crime to continue in a healthy manner.

The following articles on areas of particular interest were authored by the prosecutors of OSP, most of whom specialize in the particular area they report.

- Nick Cox, Statewide Prosecutor

### **ENVIRONMENTAL CASES**



**OSP continues to expand on the work done in 2019 in prosecuting and investigating criminal wildlife violations alongside the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).**

In 2019, FWC along with OSP began a 19-month long investigation into the poaching and trafficking of Florida’s flying squirrels. The suspects involved orchestrated a plan in which over 3600 flying squirrels, a protected animal, were captured and sold as part of an international illegal wildlife trafficking scheme between the United States and South Korea. The investigation began in Bushnell, Florida, with the owner of Knox Farms which was a licensed breeding business for alligators, turtles, and flying squirrels. However, the owner of Knox Farms, Rodney Knox, was not breeding animals. Rather, he was poaching them from the wild and later selling them to the exotic pet trade in South Korea utilizing a number of individuals. Knox paid local suspects to help build squirrel traps and then place over 10,000 traps throughout Sumter, Marion, and Citrus County. These individuals would periodically check the traps, getting paid for each squirrel collected. These same individuals would also collect other protected species like turtles and get paid per turtle. Knox would facilitate the sales of large numbers of squirrels to

South Korea. The squirrels were transported by vehicle to an exotic animal pet store in Chicago, Illinois. That pet store owner would ultimately forge the necessary documents to ship the animals to South Korea. The poaching of these animals was valued collectively at over \$500,000. Although flying squirrels and turtles are protected under Florida law, punishment for taking a flying squirrel or turtle is a misdemeanor which usually results in minimal fines. Rodney Knox had a history of poaching, but with minimal punishment, he continued to poach. OSP and FWC wanted to deter this activity and protect this scarce natural resource. Five (5) individuals were arrested in 2020 for a variety of charges including, Racketeering, Conspiracy to Commit Racketeering, Scheme to Defraud, Dealing in Stolen Property, and Grand Theft. The investigation into others that may be involved is ongoing.

Further, OSP was recognized in 2020 for our attorneys' hard work and dedication to combating environmental crimes. Assistant Statewide Prosecutors, Kelly McKnight and Paul Dontenville, were awarded prosecutors of the year by FWC for their work in prosecuting these complex criminal wildlife violations.



OSP is committed to protecting Florida's precious natural resources and will continue to work with FWC. OSP's most recent partnership with FWC includes the development of legislation that would expand the definition of racketeering to include environmental and wildlife crimes. The possibility of this new legislation will expand OSP's legal resources in combating these crimes that can have a deterring impact on Florida's protected environmental resources. However, even if the legislation is not passed, OSP will continue working with FWC and continue to prosecute these poachers for their egregious crimes in hopes of deterring this criminal activity and avoid the minimal punishment these poachers have received in the past.

- Kelly McKnight, Special Counsel

### **CYBER FRAUD ENFORCEMENT UNIT FUTURE**

During the 2020 legislative session, Attorney General Moody obtained funding and positions to create the Cyber-Fraud Enforcement Unit. The CFE Unit will combine the resources and capabilities of the Office of Statewide Prosecution and the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division. Reaffirming the Attorney General's commitment to protect Florida's elderly population, the CFE Unit will utilize civil and criminal enforcement to combat online scams targeting seniors. The CFE Unit is also partnering with state and federal partners to promote greater cyber security in the public and private sector, which will ultimately benefit all Floridians.

- Joseph Spataro, Chief of Cyber Fraud Enforcement

### **ORGANIZED FRAUD**

The oft-noted truism that 'the bad guys invent the crimes' was on regrettable display in full force during 2020. Never ones to miss an opportunity to exploit a crisis, fraudsters spread the novel

notion of COVID-19 fraud at a rate seemingly equal to that of the virus itself. By early April, OSP bureaus were partnering with State and Federal agencies, and in some instances even international entities, to assist with investigations into sales of fraudulent personal protection equipment; phony advertisements for such product; the use of fake or substandard testing equipment; and other scenarios which depict the very worst of human nature.

Another guiding truism in our 2020 efforts is ‘nature—and criminals—abhor a vacuum.’ The opportunity presented to them by COVID-19 did not distract from the usual array of fraud-based crimes investigated or charged by OSP in partnership with law enforcement. In West Palm Beach, arrests were made of individuals using straw buyers and stolen identities to purchase luxury sports cars through fraudulent finance applications, ‘washing’ the car titles by obtaining duplicate titles, and then selling the vehicles to good-faith purchasers. Seemingly not operating out of any sense of desperation, these defendants include the owners of an art gallery, a car dealership and a real estate investment company. Other case scenarios around the State include a scam utilizing third party purchasers to defraud large



retailers; a bank employee providing customer names to assist his associates in submitting false life insurance applications so as to collect unearned commissions; cell phone account takeovers to fraudulently obtain and resell phones; a resident attempting to obtain unemployment benefits from States beyond just Florida; a complex employee theft enterprise betraying the trust of its well-known Central Florida employer; and even an old-fashioned slip and fall con artist. As varied as the crimes they commit, these perpetrators run the gamut of backgrounds, which is the final and most important truism for all Floridians to bear in mind in their financial and identity-based dealings.

- Robert Finkbeiner, Chief Assistant Statewide Prosecutor

## **SENIOR PROTECTION**

In 2019, the State of Florida’s senior population comprised approximately 20.1% of the state’s total population.<sup>1</sup> This means that the total number of Florida residents 65 years of age or older in 2019, was estimated at approximately 4,134,536. Florida’s senior population was projected to reach 4,404,239 or 20.4% of the total population in 2020.<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that this senior population, which makes up nearly a quarter of the state’s population, is more frequently targeted for fraud and financial exploitation by opportunistic scammers than victims of any other age group. This population also remains at the highest risk to various forms of abuse and neglect by known perpetrators

<sup>1</sup> University of Florida, Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR), Florida Estimates of Population 2019, Table 14.

<sup>2</sup> Florida Demographic Estimating Conference, December 2019 and the University of Florida, Bureau of Economic and Business Research, Florida Population Studies, Bulletin 186, January 2020.

(i.e. family members and close friends of the senior). Recognizing the increased risk of victimization faced by Florida's senior population, Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody established the Senior Protection Team in March 2019.

Since its inception the Senior Protection Team has received thousands of complaints regarding senior victims and consumers, with over three thousand complaints classified and handled as "Senior Protection Complaints" in 2020 alone. The Office of Statewide Prosecution (OSP) has played an integral role for the team in ensuring that complaints involving crimes committed against seniors are appropriately routed to and investigated by the appropriate local and state law enforcement agencies.

In 2020, OSP worked to improve communications and referrals with local law enforcement by working with the Florida Sheriffs Association to identify designated senior crime investigators within each of the sheriffs' offices in the state. At the beginning of 2021, OSP had compiled a list of designated senior crime investigators within 39 of Florida's 67 county law enforcement agencies, with the objective of identifying designated investigators in all 67 agencies by mid-2021. In 2020, approximately 445 Senior Protection Complaints were routed to local law enforcement agencies for additional investigation and review. Not only will these newly designated senior crime investigators help improve the efficacy and response by law enforcement with senior crime cases and complaints across the state, but these points of contact will also add to an important, growing network of experts in senior crime investigations which spans the state. OSP plans to utilize this network for information and education sharing purposes, as well to increase inter-agency collaboration in identifying and combating senior crime trends and issues.

In addition to working with local law enforcement in 2020, OSP also worked directly with state attorneys' offices across Florida to ensure that the prosecution of crimes against seniors truly becomes a state-wide priority. OSP assisted local prosecutors with the investigation and prosecution of specific senior crime cases, as well as with the development of tools, resources, and workgroups aimed at tackling senior crime issues on a local level. In 2020, OSP assisted local state attorneys' offices in at least eight different judicial circuits with specific cases and the development of key senior crime prevention and investigation tools. With continued coordination between OSP and the Florida Prosecuting Attorneys Association in 2021, OSP anticipates the number of inter-agency requests for assistance on senior crime cases, especially those involving financial exploitation, will continue to grow.

In addition to OSP's successful and coordinated efforts with investigations and prosecutions, OSP has also demonstrated its commitment to combating crimes against seniors this past year by increasing OSP's overall number of investigations and prosecution cases involving senior crimes and senior victims. Despite investigative delays and court closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, OSP filed criminal charges in nine new senior crime cases and successfully resolved an additional three criminal cases involving senior victims. Overall, in 2020, OSP had open cases of crimes against seniors in seven out of eight bureau offices across the state; OSP had sixteen charged, pending criminal cases and at least twenty-two open criminal investigations involving crimes against seniors and senior victims. OSP's total number of senior crime cases has and will continue to grow as we move into 2021.

- Karen Murillo, Assistant Statewide Prosecutor & Senior Protection Coordinator



## **HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

As mentioned above, 2020 brought about many overall changes to criminal investigations, court proceedings and prosecution. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, 2020 continued to be an active year in the area of human trafficking (“HT”) for OSP. Assistant Statewide Prosecutors (“ASP’s”) continue to serve on human trafficking task force units throughout the state. Additionally, OSP began conducting in-house human trafficking round-table discussions to collectively address human trafficking investigations and prosecutions pending with OSP.

ASP’s continue to work with federal, state and local law enforcement partners in the investigation and prosecution of cases across the State. ASP’s were involved in several law enforcement operations in the Tampa Bay and Polk county area that targeted human trafficking of children. Additionally, OSP continued to be a vital partner in the Tampa Bay Area Human Trafficking Super Bowl LV Committee and the Tampa Bay Human Trafficking Task Force in preparation for the upcoming Super Bowl in 2021. The OSP continued its commitment to work with the public to raise awareness regarding human trafficking by providing training and presentations to law enforcement, non-governmental organizations, community organizations and the general public. Finally, OSP was also asked to assist in formulating educational opportunities with the Florida Prosecuting Attorneys Association involving sexual crimes, including Human Trafficking.

In May 2020, several cases involving HT were filed by OSP Orlando. Both cases were investigated by the Metropolitan Bureau of Investigation. First, Defendants John Gillespie, Mark Featherman, Annie Goodwin and Nicole Sullivan were charged with Human Trafficking in a coordinated operation in which Defendant, Gillespie, used his law practice to traffic female victims. He began his activities in 2014 when he exchanged legal services for sexual activity. Ultimately, Gillespie along with co-defendant Annie Goodwin advertised victims on escort services websites and arranged for “dates.” Currently, John Gillespie is being held on no bond in Orange County jail.

Second, OSP Orlando charged Defendant Jeremy Manuel with Human Trafficking for coercing victims to engage in prostitution and theft activities by using drugs, violence and threats of violence against them. One victim became pregnant with the defendant’s child and ultimately turned herself in for charges related to the operation in order to escape him.

In August 2020, four additional HT cases were filed by OSP. Defendants Lorenzo Gonzalez and Piard Youance were charged by Orlando OSP with Human Trafficking when they were found to be trafficking runaway victims in both Broward and Orange Counties. The investigation was led by the Metropolitan Bureau of Investigation. These activities only ceased because one of the victims was beaten up by a “john.” This victim was also romantically involved with Defendant Youance.

Orlando OSP also charged Defendants Desha Turner and Melinda Shingler with Human Trafficking when it was discovered that they were trafficking a minor victim. The case was referred to OSP for prosecution by the Seminole County Sheriff’s Office. Defendant Turner advertised the minor victim on escorting websites and then transported the victim to an Altamonte Springs hotel for the “dates.” Defendant Shingler rented the rooms and assisted the victim in preparing for the sexual activity.

The Seminole County Sheriff’s Office also referred for prosecution by the Orlando OSP the case of Jawan Parker who was charged with Human Trafficking when he encountered the victim through a

mutual friend. The victim was a juvenile runaway and the Defendant transported the victim to various hotels in Altamonte Springs and Orlando. The Defendant used other females to exert control over the victim. Additionally, the Defendant was found to have trafficked another juvenile victim. This victim came to light after an altercation with a “john.”

Defendant Joseph Olrith was charged by the OSP West Palm Beach with Human Trafficking for his conduct of using drugs and violence to traffic a victim to engage in sexual activity for commercial benefit in Broward and Palm Beach counties. During one occasion the victim was attacked and burned with a hotel iron leading to her hospitalization. The case was investigated by the Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office.

In September 2020, two cases were referred to the Orlando OSP for prosecution by the Metropolitan Bureau of Investigation. Defendants Leonard Redwood, Khadisha Nelson and George Nelson were charged with Human Trafficking when they located a victim on a social media application in Gainesville. The victim was a 14-year-old runaway who indicated she needed money for food. The Defendants traveled to provide her money. They then transported her to Kissimmee and engaged in sexual activity with her. They also advertised her services. Defendant Khadisha Nelson accompanied her to the “dates”. She was able to escape the Defendants when they went to Osceola county, but was later found by Defendant Redwood who threw her into a car and started to drive off. The juvenile victim was able to open the back door and jump out of the moving vehicle. This was all captured on a store security camera. The Defendants remain in jail on no bond status.

Additionally, Defendant Antone Affrunti was charged by Orlando OSP after the Metropolitan Bureau of Investigation referred their case to them. It involved activities of the Defendant who met the underage victim through a dating application. He arranged for dinner with the victim and provided her with a drink that had a negative impact on the victim. He paid her to stay the night with him. She woke up to find herself naked and the Defendant taking photographs and video of her. He proceeded to have sexual relations with the underage victim and told her he would continue to provide her money if she continued a sexual relationship with him. Because the Defendant knew that the victim was under the age of 18, he forced her to hold a forged birth certificate showing an age over 18. During the investigation, MBI discovered that the Defendant also engaged in the same conduct with another underage girl.

In October 2020, the OSP Tampa assisted the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office in an undercover operation targeting on-line sexual exploitation of children. During the operation, undercover detectives communicated with individuals who wanted to engage in sexual conduct with children and then traveled to meet whom they believed to be a minor for sexual activity. During the operation, detectives communicated with Defendant Christopher Lalley from Pinellas County, who offered to pay \$125 for sex with whom he believed to be a minor boy. The Defendant traveled into Hillsborough County and was arrested by law enforcement. A search incident to his arrest revealed \$125 and a condom in the Defendant’s pocket. The Defendant was charged with Human Trafficking and Traveling to Meet a Minor.

In November 2020, the Orlando OSP bureau filed Human Trafficking charges against Defendant Ronald Hinton who was referred for prosecution by the Metropolitan Bureau of Investigation. The Defendant met the victims, one of whom was 15 years old at the time, and soon thereafter began acting like their paramour and groom them for sexual activity. He coerced them to walk the streets and “turn tricks” by use of violence, threats and drugs. The Defendant kept all the money they obtained and would also physically harm them when he was angry. The investigation revealed that as early as 2014, the

Defendant beat one of the victims so badly that she had to be taken to the hospital. After he was charged with multiple crimes, he drove the victim to the State Attorney's Office to sign a declination of charges.

Finally, in December, the OSP Tallahassee bureau filed against Michael Antoine Hill, Jessie Stebenne, Tabitha Bradshaw and Margarita Pedro. Defendant Hill was charged with Human Trafficking while the co-defendants were charged with offenses related to the investigation of human trafficking. The investigation began in Washington county when the Defendant was stopped in a vehicle and the juvenile victim was located with him. Investigation revealed that she was a runaway from state custody in Miami. Through the investigation it was learned that Defendant Stebenne, who was a guidance counselor/trust specialist with the Miami-Dade Public Schools maintained constant contact with the victim during her time being trafficked by Defendant Hill and Defendant Stebenne. At no time did Stebenne report the victim's whereabouts to authorities. In fact, she assisted the minor victim in obtaining fraudulent identification so that she could obtain a bank account and engage in commercial sexual activity. Defendant Bradshaw, a British national, assisted the victim in moving the funds from the commercial sexual activity to her bank account. It was also determined that Defendant Bradshaw was engaged in commercial sexual activity. Finally, Defendant Pedro was found to be grooming another female to engage in commercial sexual activity. It should be noted that Defendant Hill is a Violent Felon of Special Concern.

- Rita Peters, Assistant Statewide Prosecutor

### **ORGANIZED RETAIL THEFT**

Statewide Prosecution has been hard at work investigating and prosecuting individuals engaged in Organized Retail Theft across the State of Florida. 2020 was a unique year for many people, and criminals took the opportunity to plunder from many retailers during the year. The many Assistant Statewide Prosecutors who work these Organized Retail Theft cases work with local and state law enforcement to investigate those criminals who would blatantly steal from retailers. During this year, our prosecutors have continued to reinforce our close relationships with many retailers to help gather valuable evidence and build cases against those who do not want to pay for the goods they walk out with. Examples of such cases are mentioned below:

OSP in the West Palm Beach office, is prosecuting a case involving a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission employee who committed a string of retail thefts at Lowes, Home Depot, and Walmart in Broward, Palm Beach, and Martin Counties. This defendant would switch price tags on various items and pay for the lower amount tag. The defendant would then sell the stolen merchandise on Facebook marketplace. During the thefts, the defendant would wear his full FWC uniform and was driving his FWC vehicle. By working with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the OSP was able to bring charges of Dealing in Stolen Property and Retail Theft against this criminal.



There are also individuals who use a badge to try to avoid detection. OSP Orlando is prosecuting a case in Volusia County where the main defendant would go into stores wearing a fake police badge and wearing a replica pistol at his waist, load a cart full of merchandise, and walk out with the cart to his co-defendant's car. If the defendant was confronted by staff about not paying, the brazen criminal would display his fake badge and represent himself to be a police officer. Both defendants would sell



their stolen items to local pawn shops. The primary defendant has a substantial criminal record dating back to the 90s and qualifies as a habitual felony offender.

Finally, the OSP Jacksonville office, submitted warrants in 2020 for a group who would walk into various Home Depot stores, place merchandise into empty shopping carts, and walk out of the stores without paying for any of the merchandise. The investigation revealed that mostly power tool kits were stolen, and that the estimated value of loss during each theft was between \$300 to \$5,000. The total loss of merchandise from this criminal activity is \$145,706.50.

In the upcoming year, OSP will continue to work closely with law enforcement and retail stores to discover and thoroughly investigate similar criminal behavior. During 2020 and 2021, we have additional obstacles to overcome in identifying suspects wearing masks to try to conceal their identity. By working proactively and diligently, we can identify these suspects and will continue to prosecute these wrongdoers.

- Mitchell Cooper, Assistant Statewide Prosecutor

## **SYNTHETICS, ILLICIT DRUGS AND OPIOIDS**

In the year 2020, OSP continued the tradition of excellence in the fight against the trafficking of traditional street drugs, the battle against opioid distribution, opioid abuse, and synthetic drugs. While this kind of traditional drug prosecution is emblematic of the OSP's commitment to fight drug trafficking, for over a decade the OSP has also, quietly and consistently, watched for *emerging* drug trends. Members of OSP look not only at changes in drug *chemistry* but also changes in the *methods* that drug dealers use to obtain and market their poison. This continued education and knowledge aids in the ability of the OSP to continue to aid in stopping the flow of illicit drug distribution and stay a step ahead of the evolving chemicals used in manipulating street drugs.

### **Synthetic Drugs:**

In 2020, OSP continued to monitor seized drug trends in the forensic drug labs of this State, in the reports of the Drug Enforcement Administration's National Forensic Laboratory Information System, and as described by the National Institute of Drug Abuse and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. As well, the OSP continues in its decade-long collaboration with *forensic chemists* of FDLE to understand the ever-changing chemistry of synthetic drugs in Florida. This long-standing

effort to “listen” to what Florida’s forensic laboratory chemists observe as trends in seized drugs, in the context of National and global trends, has led to many successful legislative changes to Florida’s Drug Abuse laws, has helped to dramatically decrease the proliferation of many emerging synthetic drugs and has increased law enforcement’s ability to successfully investigate and prosecute drug crimes.

In addition to advanced drug prosecution and collaboration on legislation, OSP continues to serve as a resource to local, state and federal law enforcement in Florida, providing updates related to synthetic drugs and drug trends in Florida, and guidance on how to translate “new” drugs to Courts and juries during prosecution. OSP works in coordination with numerous law enforcement agencies, for example, OSP enjoys an on-going collaboration with the Department of Homeland Security/Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and has worked in conjunction with HSI Orlando in an effort to identify new drug trends and to assist Orlando special agents in applying Florida controlled substance and drug trafficking laws in casework. This collaboration has resulted in the successful prosecution of major drug importers and traffickers across Florida.

### **Illicit Drugs:**

In 2020, The OSP has continued to work hand in hand with law enforcement throughout the state in order to combat illicit drug sales, deliveries and abuse. For example, in February, the OSP West Palm Beach Bureau successfully prosecuted a man for trafficking Methamphetamine, resulting in Wilson Harvey Shafer, Jr., being sentenced to serve 17 years in prison. WPB OSP also had major busts in both June and August of 2020. The first, resulted in the seizure of a kilo of cocaine and a firearm, while the second case involved heroin trafficking tied to a human trafficking organization which coerced its victims by keeping them addicted. This case led to not only trafficking in heroin charges, but human trafficking along with deriving proceeds from prostitution charges as well. (Those charges are discussed further in the HT section of this report).

The Orlando OSP was also busy during 2020. Operation Ice Queen resulted in the arrest of fifteen members of a drug trafficking organization which worked together to distribute methamphetamine, cocaine and heroin throughout Central Florida. Charges range from Rico to various narcotic trafficking offenses including conspiracy to commit these offenses.

In addition to the changes COVID-19 forced in our lives, it also impacted drug use, drug production, and drug markets across the globe.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, drug use and dangerous consequences of drug use, including overdoses, began to rise. In April, in the early stages of the pandemic, Attorney General Ashley Moody recognized the increase in drug overdose calls to first responders in some parts of the state and country. Raising awareness, the Attorney General cautioned Floridians that the rise in overdoses may be attributed to factors caused by the pandemic, such as the rise in financial troubles and uncertainty; reduced access to substance abuse treatment; self-medicating because of reduced access to doctors’ offices and pharmacies; and social distancing leading to feelings of loneliness and depression, or users getting high alone. To help fight the pandemic-fueled overdose crisis, in September, the Attorney General’s DoseOfRealty.com --a comprehensive statewide resource to help Floridians fight back against the opioid epidemic-- partnered with 211. In the partnership, 211 shares resources from DoseOfRealtyFL.com and DoseOfRealtyFL.com, in turn, points visitors to 211’s plethora of local resources to help Floridians struggling with Opioid Abuse.

Global COVID-19 restrictions have also impacted illicit drug production and distribution. In the report *COVID-19 and the Drug Supply Chain: from Production and Trafficking to Use* (available to the public online), the United Nations Office of Drug and Crime Global Research Network detailed how efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19, including national border closings and restrictions on international travel, have had collateral effects on global production, transportation, and distribution of traditional major drugs of abuse, such as heroin and cocaine, at times shifting markets to synthetics and alternative drugs. As well, at the local level, COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing has substantially altered drug use patterns and disrupted distribution methods, including pushing consumers from traditional drug sale methods toward illegal markets on the web or through messaging applications.

Recognizing the shifts in illicit drug trafficking under COVID-19 restrictions, the OSP and their law enforcement partners adapted. For example, during the summer and into the fall of 2020, two separate OSP bureaus working with law enforcement partners utilized social media platforms to investigate drug trafficking organizations. In an investigation that resulted in Court approval for the interception of communications occurring on a particular social media platform, OSP Fort Myers Bureau worked with local and federal partners to disrupt and dismantle a poly-drug trafficking organization alleged to traffic in Methamphetamine, and distributing Cocaine and “Molly” [this genre of street-drug traditionally contained MDMA, but now typically contains various stimulant compounds of the class Substituted Cathinones].



Meanwhile, in a separate investigation, the OSP Tallahassee Bureau, working with Tallahassee Regional FDLE agents, investigated a Drug Trafficking Organization that utilized social media, as well as more traditional telephone communications. The Tallahassee FDLE investigation quickly spiraled into several branches of supply reaching to Texas and California, resulting in seizures of narcotics including cocaine, heroin and “Molly” (likely Substituted Cathinones). Portions of the Tallahassee investigations continued into 2021.

### **Opioids:**

With COVID-19 shutting down businesses, including doctor’s offices, it would follow that investigations into doctor’s prescribing methods slowed in 2020. However, the proliferation of the use of fraudulent prescriptions for obtaining opioids did not. One example of this is the filing of Racketeering charges out of the Tallahassee Office wherein nine defendants were charged for traveling throughout Clay, Hernando, Duval, Marion, Sumter, Pasco Alachua, Polk, Manatee, Sarasota, Hillsborough and Brevard Counties wherein they would visit pharmacies with fraudulent prescriptions for Promethazine (cough syrup with codeine). Once the prescriptions were filled, they would obtain the bottles and sell them on the black market. This is but one case exemplified in this report. Currently there are cases pending trial involving this scheme as well as others similar in nature still in the investigative phase.

Throughout 2020, the OSP remained committed to serving the mandate of our enabling statute, s.16.56, subsection (c), to “[u]pon request, cooperate with and assist state attorneys and state and local law enforcement officials in their efforts against organized crimes.” At all times, even in a pandemic, OSP remains ready to serve and assist law enforcement in the State in understanding and effectively prosecuting both traditional and advanced drug crimes in our ever-changing illicit and licit drug markets. In the new year the OSP will continue to monitor trends in the illicit drug markets and continue to work with our law enforcement partners to adapt in our collective and on-going efforts to keep Florida safe from dangerous drugs.

- Shannon MacGillis, Special Counsel

### **THE 20TH STATEWIDE GRAND JURY**

The Statewide Grand Jury continued its work examining the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas tragedy in 2020. However, in March courts statewide, including within the 17th circuit where the grand jury is seated, were closed to the public. After months of being idle, the Office of Statewide Prosecution filed a motion in the Florida Supreme Court to allow the grand jury to continue its work in a virtual format. After the Court approved, the grand jury continued its work and issued more presentments and recommendations.

While statutory confidentiality prevents us from disclosing anything that takes place before the grand jury, we are happy to report that this jury has made substantial progress. The 20th Grand jury is scheduled at this time to sunset in May 2021, at which time we anticipate the likelihood of a final report being issued.

- Nick B. Cox, Statewide Prosecutor

### **COVID-19**

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Statewide Prosecution, along with the rest of the world, confronted challenges in 2020 unlike any others previously faced. On March 13, 2020, the Florida Supreme Court issued its first order suspending all face-to-face legal proceedings in the state for two weeks; an order that would be extended in various forms throughout the remainder of the year. For the Office of Statewide Prosecution, a premier criminal litigation agency, jury trials came to a sudden halt, but the OSP’s efforts to meet its mission of prosecuting organized crime continued in full force.

The COVID-19 pandemic also sparked a surge in a variety of scams committed by individuals and organizations seeking to profit from public panic. Among the types of crimes committed were counterfeit PPE sales, including N95 masks, COVID-19 test scams, unemployment benefit fraud and paycheck protection program schemes. Assistant Statewide Prosecutors served on a number of task forces stood up around the state, partnering with federal, state and local law enforcement to combat COVID-19 fraud.

## 2020 Statewide Prosecution Annual Report

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Beginning in June 2020, the majority of OSP office spaces gradually reopened, limiting personnel to 25%, and increasing to 50% capacity by Fall. Courthouses followed suit, permitting limited in person hearings, with some counties resuming a small number of jury trials for a brief time, only to be suspended once again by year's end. OSP Tampa seized the opportunity to proceed to a jury trial during that small window, and in November 2020 convicted a child sex predator who was immediately sentenced to life in prison. The Office of Statewide Prosecution remains eager to hold defendants accountable for their crimes and looks forward to the reopening of courts and the return of jury trials when safe. In the meantime, our caseload and resolve remain as strong as it has ever been.

- Diane Croff, Chief Assistant Statewide Prosecutor

### **CLOSING**

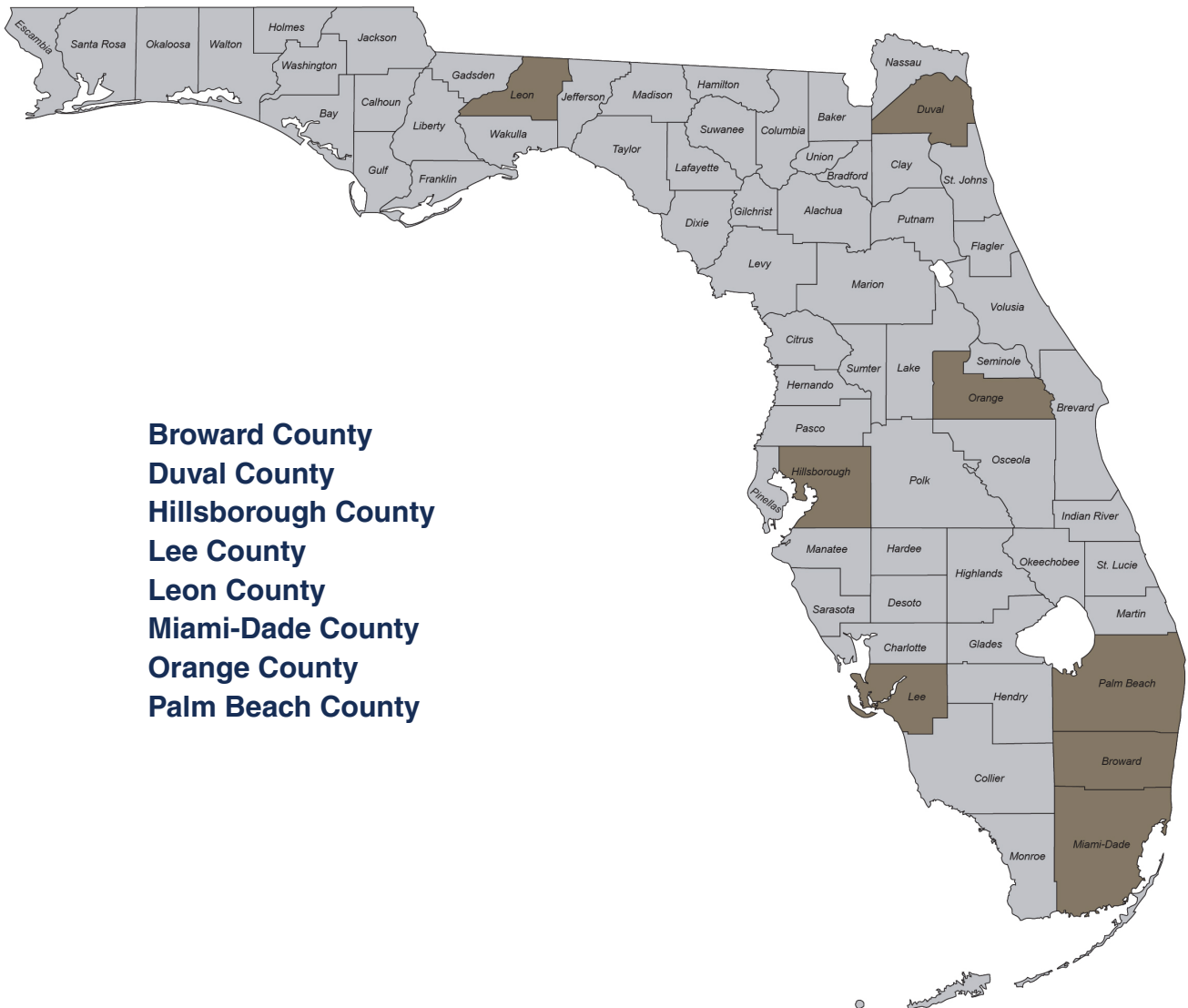
Despite the challenges of 2020, the Office of Statewide Prosecution continues to stay focused and visible to law enforcement and the entire criminal justice community. Our primary investigative technique of working with law enforcement during their investigation of criminal activity has proven very effective in a COVID-19 world.

As we move into 2021, the COVID-19 struggle continues. But with OSP's hard work and desire to continue to punish criminal organizations and offenders, and with our continued effort to increase prosecutions of crimes against seniors, to the creation and implementation of the computer fraud unit, and much more, we will continue to work with law enforcement to investigate and dismantle criminal organizations and convict their members.

- Nick Cox, Statewide Prosecutor

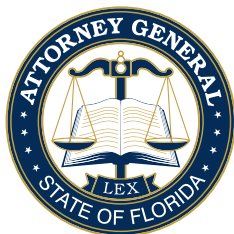


# OFFICE OF STATEWIDE PROSECUTION BUREAU LOCATIONS

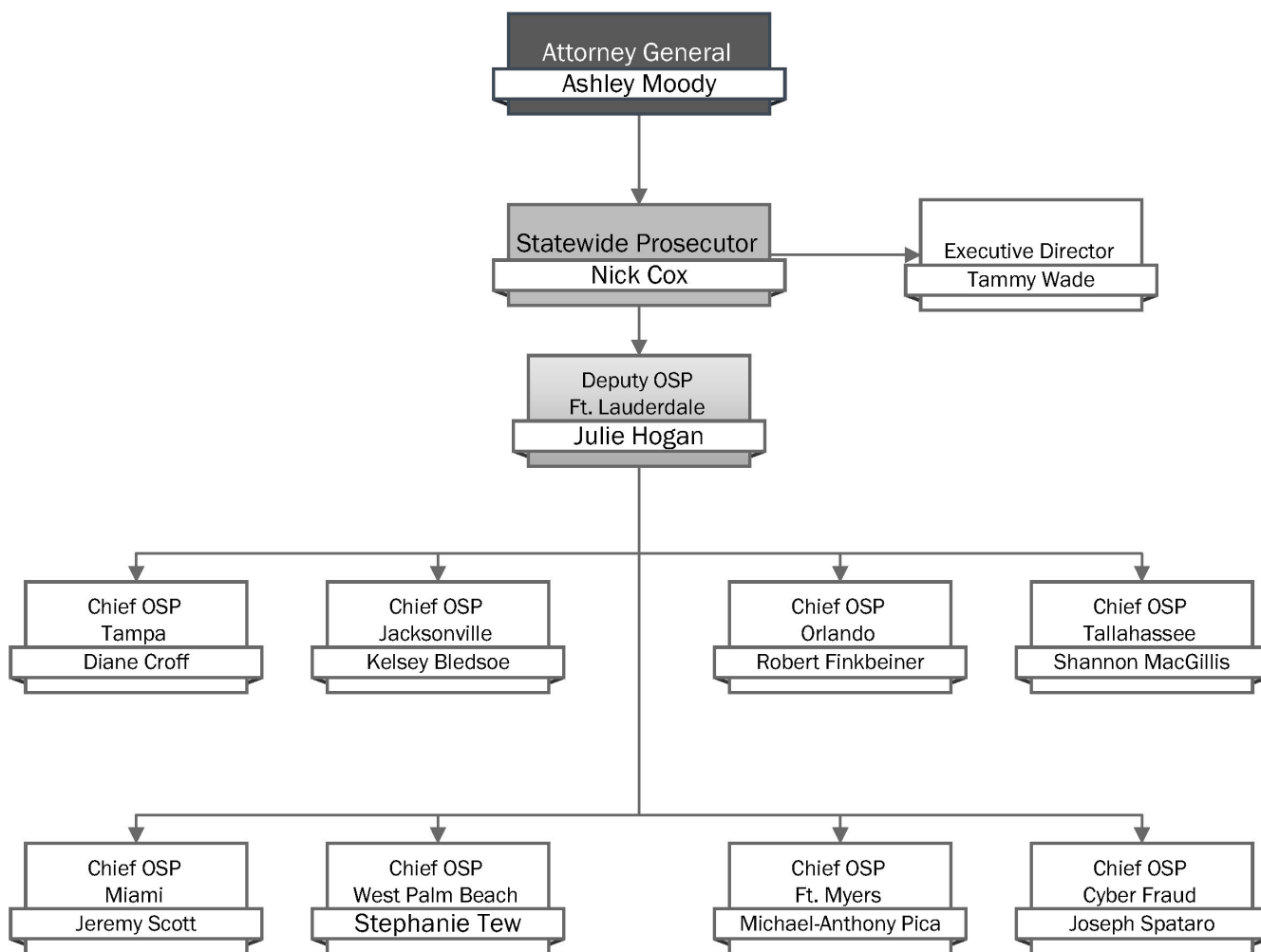


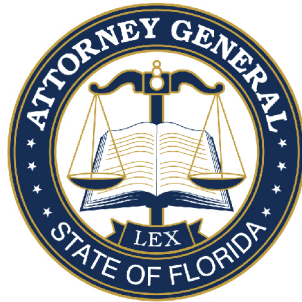
- Broward County**
- Duval County**
- Hillsborough County**
- Lee County**
- Leon County**
- Miami-Dade County**
- Orange County**
- Palm Beach County**

# OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL



# OFFICE OF STATEWIDE PROSECUTION





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