



ANNUAL REPORT

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STATEWIDE PROSECUTOR

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“OSP continues to experience increases in the total number of active cases.”

OVERVIEW OF THE OFFICE OF STATEWIDE PROSECUTION IN 2023

The Office of Statewide Prosecution (OSP) had another productive year in 2023. In addition to an increasing caseload, expanding our practice areas, and maintaining our conviction rate, the office has well qualified and highly experienced criminal prosecutors. While 2023 presented challenges to this office as well, our attorneys and legal staff were able to navigate them and succeed. With the increase of work for our office as you will see in this report, the need for consistency is most important. And if our trend of the last several years continues, our needs will grow. The Florida Constitution and our enabling statute, F.S. 16.56, calls on us to focus on organized crime. As such we hire and maintain the type of experience and acquired skill that comes with years or work in our field due to the size and complexity of our cases. Our work does not lend itself to hiring entry-level lawyers. We must maintain this effort into 2024 as caseloads continue to increase.

Following the pandemic, prosecutors throughout Florida were faced with growing challenges finding and retaining legal talent. OSP was not immune to those challenges. We worked closely with, and at the direction of, the Attorney General to address not only filling vacancies, but continuing to do so while aiming for highly qualified attorneys. During 2023 we have seen positive results from these efforts. Throughout the entire year, Statewide Prosecution only lost five (5) Assistant Statewide Prosecutors, which is approximately 7 to 8% of our attorney positions. This represents the lowest loss of prosecutors since before the pandemic began. We could not have done this without the help of the Attorney General, the Legislature and the Governor with our budget. Attracting those who want to be career prosecutors looking for the challenge Statewide Prosecution offers is not easy. But thanks to the efforts of all of our staff who “get the word out”, we have attained a high level of success.

OSP was busy during 2023. We continue to experience increases in the total number of active cases. We also saw significant increases in the numbers of cases brought to us and filed. The number of requests for the assistance of OSP by

law enforcement rose 20%. As a result, the numbers of cases filed increased 60%. Likewise, we increased the numbers of actual defendants charged by 40% and increased the numbers of charges by 32%. But even more notable, one of the most significant data points for prosecutors, the office conviction rate, is where our prosecutors continue to shine. For the third year in a row, OSP maintained a 99% conviction rate, hitting a high of 99.79%. This office is built in a manner that involves our prosecutors from the inception of the investigation until the closure of the case. As such, prosecutors can assist law enforcement in building the best case possible for presentation to a Court or jury. Therefore a higher than normal conviction rate should be expected. However, for an office to maintain such a high rate of conviction for many years again underlines the skill and expertise within our office, both lawyers and staff.

These continued performance improvements took place while the OSP was called on to address several specialized areas of prosecution.

The Attorney General has continued to push for increased awareness and enforcement of retail theft crimes. The organizations behind these crimes are not only extensive, but have become increasingly sophisticated. The financial impact of these crimes is extreme and touches every Floridian. Florida has been a hotspot for enforcement against such crimes, and the volume of prosecutions has increased rapidly. As a result, the Attorney General directed more OSP resources be dedicated to fighting these criminal organizations, and the results have been evident in the number of cases we handled in 2023. The number of active retail theft cases increased over 50% during 2023 to 132. The numbers of defendants charged during 2023 in these cases increased 72% with 459 targets/defendants. Finally, the number of convictions also rose 20% last year. We expect that number to continue to rise in 2024. However, the statistic that we always seem to keep at a very high level is that of our conviction rate. Over the past 5 years our lowest conviction rate was at an impressive 96% in 2018. However, in 2022, despite the increases in caseloads as noted above, prosecutors and staff of the OSP earned a conviction rate of 99.55%.

Human Trafficking remains one of our priorities. We have about a dozen Assistant Statewide Prosecutors for these cases. As with all sex crime related cases, human trafficking requires not just a special legal knowledge, but the ability to understand and react to the needs of trafficking victims who are usually critical to proving the case. With a 46% increase in the number of active cases during 2023, this need will continue. Likewise there was an increase in the number of defendants charged with trafficking crimes. We have seen an increase in trafficking trials we handled in 2023 as opposed to plea negotiations, but have fortunately had the highest level of success in obtaining convictions.

The cyber crime unit has had significant growth during 2023. Cases and investigative efforts have taken off with an emphasis on internet fraud and cryptocurrency. These cases are typically very complex and long term. Yet, the cyber division has already begun trying cases. In 2023 there were 3 dozen active cases pending in the cyber crime unit, with 60 targets/defendants, which is significant for the 3 assigned prosecutors with cases of such magnitude. There is a high likelihood that those numbers will again increase in 2024.

Finally, the OSP has formed a unit to deal with cold homicide cases. These cases typically take a great deal of time and law enforcement resources to investigate and solve. The work by the prosecutor not only requires a special knowledge of science and criminal forensics, it also requires an attorney with a high level of creativity. We have many Assistant Statewide Prosecutors with homicide prosecution experience, but have made an effort to maintain those with a great deal of skill, experience, and a philosophy consistent with the often circumstantial nature of these cases. This work will begin to see more results of our work during 2024 as the cases advance to the point of charging and filing.

Not all of our work provides data or numbers to indicate the efficiency and success of our prosecutors. In 2023 the OSP has continued its work as the legal advisors for two Statewide Grand Juries ordered by the Florida Supreme Court. Statewide Grand Jury 21 has thus far issued 5 presentments regarding immigration, and Grand Jury 22 recently issued its first presentment relating to the Covid pandemic. Handling two grand juries at one time has been a significant task in terms of prosecutorial resources. Yet each of the prosecutors has not only done their job advising the grand jury, but they have also continued to maintain their case loads for their normal, day to day work. The work is extensive, the subject matter learning curve is always present, and the coordination of week long sessions is exacting and difficult. Homework is a constant in grand jury work and it is something that becomes a part of any involved prosecutors lives. This work continues into 2024.

- Nick Cox, Statewide Prosecutor



“In 2022 OSP was presented with many new directions and enforcement priorities.”

21ST STATEWIDE GRAND JURY

During 2022, Governor DeSantis petitioned the Florida Supreme Court to empanel the 21st Statewide Grand Jury to investigate illegal immigration into our State, especially as related to Transnational Criminal Organizations, criminal activity, and human trafficking especially of Unaccompanied Alien Children. The Supreme Court granted the Governor’s petition on June 29, 2022, and on October 27, 2022, the 21st Statewide Grand Jury was empaneled.

To date, the 21st Statewide Grand Jury has issued five (5) public Presentments (they can be found at <https://acis-api.flcourts.gov/courts/68f021c4-6a44-4735-9a76-5360b2e8af13/cms/case/651d8f68-f322-4cd0-831f-74dc9b0d77a8/docketentrydocuments/57d791ab-196f-41df-8e1b-47e04a3468e1>).

The Grand Jury’s findings have been referenced in bills introduced in the Florida Legislature and several of the Grand Jury’s recommendations were incorporated into Florida Statutes passed during the 2023 legislative session as well as multiple bills proposed for the 2024 session.

During the 2022 legislative session, the Florida Legislature and Governor DeSantis directed our office and others to address elections law violations and illegal gaming. Following the 2022 legislative session, the Office of Elections Security was created to address criminal activity that takes place related to voting, elections, petition activities, and anything that can impact the integrity of Florida’s elections. OSP was directed to join the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and the Department of State in an effort to investigate and prosecute elections law violations and any related criminal activity. This began with the FDLE and Department of State’s investigations of convicted felons who voted in the 2020 General Election. As we proceed forward, the Elections Crime Task Force will continue to look into illegal registrations and voting.

Additionally, the 2022 legislative session addressed gaming crimes in the State of Florida. The OSP was directed to work with the Florida Gaming Control Commission (FGCC) and other law enforcement to investigate and prosecute crimes involved with illegal gaming. We have already begun this work and have prosecutors who are specializing in these cases working with law enforcement and the FGCC.

In 2022 OSP was presented with many new directions and enforcement priorities. While these have proven daunting at times, having experienced and highly competent prosecutors and staff to take on these efforts has been critical. In addition having the relationships we enjoy with law enforcement, our State Attorney colleagues, the FDLE, the Department of State and so many other agencies, both state and federal, makes this happen too. It’s been very hard work, but OSP continues to make great strides.

- Richard Mantei, Special Counsel

22ND STATEWIDE GRAND JURY

In December of 2022, Governor DeSantis petitioned the Florida Supreme Court to empanel the 22nd Statewide Grand Jury to investigate whether fraud was committed with respect to the administration of Covid-19 vaccines. The Supreme Court granted the governor’s petition on December 22, 2022, and the Grand Jury was sworn in on June 26, 2023. Seven Assistant Statewide Prosecutors and one attorney from Antitrust have been designated to assist as Legal Advisors, and the Grand Jury released its first Interim Report on February 2, 2024.

The work on these highly complex issues is confidential by law, as with Grand Jury 21. However, as indicated in the Grand Jury’s first Interim Report, this is a highly diverse group of people working very hard to learn the science and much more from witnesses with varying specialties and backgrounds.

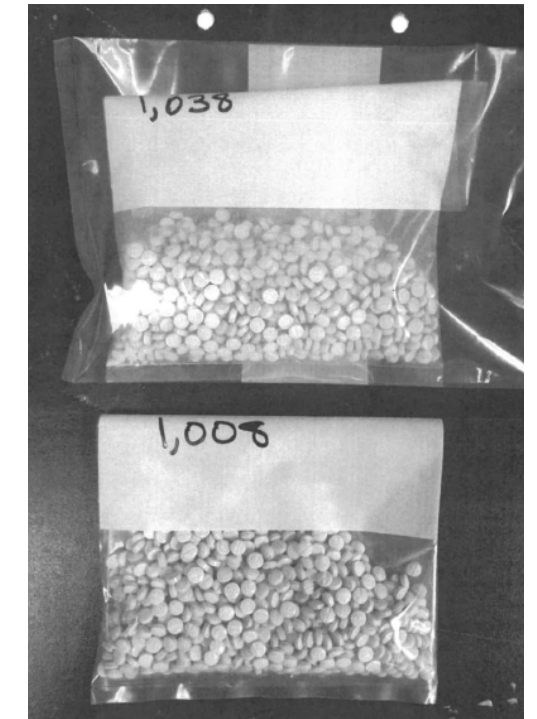
- Jeremy Scott, Chief Assistant Statewide Prosecutor



WIRETAPS AND ILLICIT DRUGS

“...law enforcement partners successfully utilized wiretap investigations and conspiracy prosecutions to dismantle multiple criminal organizations”

The Office of Statewide Prosecution continues to work collaboratively with federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute criminal organizations operating throughout the State of Florida. In doing so, the Office of Statewide Prosecution often utilizes electronic surveillance of communications (commonly referred to as wiretaps) to investigate and dismantle entire criminal organizations, toppling those criminal organizations from the top down. To do this, the Office of Statewide Prosecution, along with our law enforcement partners, often employ the use of wiretaps to gather evidence that leads not only to the arrest of those individuals who are directly involved in the day to day trafficking of illegal narcotics and other criminal activity, but also to the arrests of those individuals in leadership positions within the criminal organizations' hierarchies who are directing the illicit activities of the organization. These are the individuals who are often realizing most of the ill-gotten gains derived from the criminal activity, and yet are usually the ones most well insulated from law enforcement detection. Wiretap investigations permit the prosecutors within the Office of Statewide Prosecution and our law enforcement partners to gather evidence of communications directing criminal activity from within the organization, thus permitting the prosecution of the leaders of the criminal organization through criminal conspiracy prosecutions. The Office of Statewide Prosecution has utilized this investigative tool successful in the investigation and prosecution of narcotics organizations, criminal street gangs and human trafficking rings throughout the state.



In the past year, the Office of Statewide Prosecution partnered with law enforcement agencies to seek the real time interception of sixty-two (62) telephones, two (2) social media accounts, and the audio and video interception of a business suspected of engaging in organized criminal activity in Florida. Efforts to fight fentanyl and other opioid related trafficking continues to be at the forefront of the office's efforts at investigating and prosecuting narcotics trafficking organizations; however, the office also has had success in investigating and prosecuting organizations involved in trafficking in other illicit substances, such as methamphetamine and cocaine, throughout the past year. During 2023, the Office of Statewide Prosecution and our law enforcement partners successfully utilized wiretap investigations and conspiracy prosecutions to dismantle multiple criminal organizations that were operating in various parts of the state.

For example, in February 2023, the Office of Statewide Prosecution, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office and the United States Drug Enforcement Administration utilized a judicially authorized wiretap to intercept communications between members of a national criminal street gang. These intercepted communications uncovered evidence of the gang's narcotics trafficking activities which led to the seizure of five (5) kilograms of fentanyl, two (2) kilograms of cocaine, two (2) kilograms of methamphetamine and fourteen (14) firearms. The investigation also led to the arrest and prosecution of four (4) violent members of the criminal street gang.

In March 2023, a joint investigation by the Office of Statewide Prosecution, the Metropolitan Bureau of Investigation, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, and the United States Postal Service utilized a judicially authorized wiretap investigation to gather evidence of a drug trafficking organization operating in and around Central Florida with ties to Puerto Rico. The investigation resulted in the seizure of three hundred and thirty-nine (339) kilograms of cocaine, worth an approximate street value of \$6,780,000, and twenty-five (25) firearms. The investigation also led to the arrests and prosecutions of thirty-five (35) individuals involved in the criminal conspiracy which utilized the United States Postal Service to ship numerous kilograms of cocaine to Central Florida from Puerto Rico, and to ship numerous firearms from



Central Florida back to Puerto Rico. In July 2023, a joint investigation by the Office of Statewide Prosecution, the United States Homeland Security Investigations, the United States Postal Service, and the Clay County Sheriff's Office led to the seizure of eight hundred and fifty-seven (857) grams of black tar heroin and four thousand, one hundred and thirty (4,130) fentanyl pills and the arrests of those individuals engaged in the importation of those substances from Arizona to Florida. In December 2023, a wiretap investigation in Palm Beach County conducted by the Office of Statewide Prosecution, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, and the Boynton Beach Police Department led to the seizure of eighteen (18) kilograms of cocaine and the arrests and prosecutions of eighteen (18) individuals involved in the intended distribution of that cocaine on to the streets of this state.



Throughout the year, the Office of Statewide Prosecution has secured numerous convictions of drug traffickers and sought significant sentences that were commensurate with the harm caused by the criminal activity of these individuals. For example, prosecutors with the Office of Statewide Prosecution secured a twenty-five year prison sentence in February 2023 for Ekatte Isemin. Isemin was a licensed pharmacist and pharmacy owner who was convicted by a Volusia County jury of acting outside the course of her professional practice to illicitly traffic in opioids. Similarly, Pedro Melendez was sentenced to thirty (30) years in prison in March 2023 after he was found guilty by a Seminole County jury of trafficking in large quantities of cocaine. In July 2023, Ervin Barrett was sentenced to twenty-five (25) years in prison after an Orange County jury found that Barrett had been conspiring with others to traffic large amounts of heroin throughout Central Florida. Moreover, in August 2023, Romario Burrowes, a citizen of Jamaica, in this country illegally, was sentenced in Volusia County to twenty-five (25) years in prison for his role in trafficking fentanyl, heroin and methamphetamine on to the streets of this state.



Through valued partnerships with various law enforcement agencies at the local, state, and federal levels, the Office of Statewide Prosecution will continue to be at the forefront of the fight to combat organized criminal activity in the State of Florida. The Office of Statewide Prosecution will continue to use all investigative tools and resources at its disposal to lead the charge against those involved in the importation and trafficking of fentanyl, heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, and other illicit substances in this state. The Office of Statewide Prosecution will continue to utilize wiretap investigations and criminal conspiracy prosecutions to hold the leadership of those criminal organizations, and those assisting them in their criminal endeavors, to account for the destruction their criminal activity causes to the citizens, families, and communities of this state.

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- David Gillespie, Special Counsel
- Mary Sammon, Senior Assistant Statewide Prosecutor



“... the number of prosecutors in the office has doubled with a resurgence of cooperative efforts with other prosecutorial agencies...”



TALLAHASSEE BUREAU

The Tallahassee Bureau (TLH) of the Office of Statewide Prosecution (OSP) was resurrected by Statewide Prosecutor Nick Cox in 2019. Initially, the staff was limited but great work had begun through multiple wiretap investigations with local and state law enforcement. During this last year, the number of prosecutors in the office has doubled with a resurgence of cooperative efforts with other prosecutorial agencies and a long list of law enforcement agencies. The additional prosecutors arrived with many years of experience and a wealth of local contacts with whom they had developed positive working relationships. While two Assistant Statewide Prosecutors developed a unique skill set for tackling those criminals who wish to defraud our constitutional voting system, they also have been charging hard against the full spectrum of crime from a violent robbery crew to a high-level fraud organization which utilized the Dark Web. During this same time, TLH was led to its first jury trial since the reopening. A repeat Habitual Felony Offender who specialized in trafficking heroin while possessing multiple firearms was convicted and quickly sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for exploiting those who suffer with opioid addiction.

TLH has worked with local city agencies, county sheriff's departments, multi-agency task forces, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the Florida Department of Financial Services, federal law enforcement agencies and a multitude of other law enforcement partners in a cooperative effort with our prosecutorial counterparts at the State Attorney's Offices and United States Attorney's Office. TLH has focused upon a wide array of criminal activity from multi-state methamphetamine traffickers to personal identity thieves to state agency fraudsters and even a ring exploiting the handicap parking permits provided by the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. The goal of the bureau is aligned with that of the entire Office of Statewide Prosecution which is to continue to work cooperatively with all our partners in an effort to represent the entire state in combating those organized criminals who prey upon our citizens.

- Brian Fernandes, Chief Assistant Statewide Prosecutor



“...true cybercrime uses deceitful tactics to convince victims to act voluntarily in detrimental ways unbeknownst to them.”



CYBER FRAUD ENFORCEMENT UNIT

In 2023, the Cyber Fraud Enforcement Unit (CFEU) formally declared its mission:

Prosecute, Disrupt, and Prevent.

The Cyber Fraud Enforcement Unit handles an array of crimes, but it's important to note that it is more than just online crime. Crimes committed in a virtual space are all technically cyber based crimes, but true cybercrime uses deceitful tactics to convince victims to act voluntarily in detrimental ways unbeknownst to them. Romance scams, impersonation scams, business email compromises, and investment scams continue to dominate the cybercrime landscape. And unfortunately, Floridians and our elderly population continues to be a primary target. This is why our Unit has set in place a plan to fight back.



PROSECUTE

The unit continues to successfully investigate, prosecute, and convict cybercriminals who prey on unsuspecting victims using innovative cyber schemes. For example, this year we prosecuted and convicted a Tampa man and Texas fugitive, Kevin Anderson, III for Organized Fraud, \$50,000 Or More; Criminal Use of Personal Identification Information, over 20 but Fewer than 30 Persons, and Trafficking in Or Possession of Counterfeit Credit Card, 15-49 Counterfeit Credit Cards. The Sarasota County Sheriff's Office and the Office of Statewide Prosecution's Cyber Fraud Enforcement Unit initiated this multi-circuit investigation upon receiving a complaint from a business owner in their county who had been defrauded by the suspect for tens of thousands of dollars. Investigation revealed the suspect was well versed in the dark web and its numerous illicit marketplaces and forums. He conducted fraudulent transactions by utilizing credit cards that had been recoded and embossed to appear legitimate, although they truly belonged to victims whose Personal Identifiable Information (PII) had been purchased from dark web merchants. The suspect provided a counterfeit Texas Driver's license to match these counterfeit credit cards bearing the name Marcus Rollack. We discovered Marcus Rollack to be a fictitious name being used by Kevin Anderson III. Upon further investigation, ten (10) agencies around the State of Florida were identified with similar fraud cases in which suspect Kevin Anderson, III used the aliases Marcus Rollack or Jonathan Hooker. Anderson defrauded merchants around the State of Florida of an estimated \$154,639.26. Anderson also victimized dozens of victims residing in Florida and various places around the country by utilizing their stolen Personal Identifiable Information (PII). Anderson was convicted of all counts and was sentenced to 72 months Florida State Prison, followed by ten years of probation, with special conditions that include a mandatory monthly payment of restitution to the victims. He faces a potential sentence of seventy-five (75) years in Florida State Prison if he violates this probation.

This Unit also convicted a cyber fraudster named Laquisha Chatfield for Organized Fraud, \$20,000 Or More, But Less Than \$50,000, Criminal Use of Personal Identification Information, \$5,000 Or More, and Reemployment Assistance Fraud. This Defendant stole a first responder's identity during the Covid Pandemic by engaging in dark web negotiations to purchase valuable identities with high credit scores. After receiving educational "how to commit fraud" courses offered by dark web instructors in exchange of a fee, the defendant unlawfully obtained unemployment benefits in the victim's name. As a first-time offender of any crime, she was sentenced to one year incarceration followed by 5 years of probation to pay restitution to the State of Florida in full. She faces a potential sentence of thirty-five (35) years in Florida State Prison if she violates this probation.

Additionally, this Unit prosecuted and convicted now felon, Cathy Green, for Organized Fraud, \$50,000 Or More after we received a report of a complaint from a business owner with offices in various counties of Tampa Bay who had been defrauded by the suspect for approximately \$148,000. The suspect was a longtime employee and trusted office manager who took advantage of her access to the business' computer systems and covertly changed her pay to include fraudulent, bogus overtime payouts to the tune of \$107,561.40. The suspect did this by using a sophisticated recoding scheme to avoid detection, allowing her to engage in this fraud from 2019- present day. The suspect also used the business Amazon account to purchase personal items and send them to directly to her home, amounting to \$41,078.15 in fraudulent purchases. She is now a convicted felon who has been court ordered to repay restitution over the next ten years while under supervision and faces thirty (30) years in Florida State Prison if she does not comply.



Furthermore, the Cyber Fraud Enforcement Unit was responsible for the imprisonment of a live-in caretaker who exploited the 88-year-old victim she was entrusted to care for. The caretaker, Cynthia Sirmans, used the victim's credit card while the elderly victim spent time in the hospital for a life-threatening illness. During a four-month period, Sirmans made transactions totaling more than \$47,000. This prosecution was challenging due to the cognitive decline of the elderly victim, but our Unit successfully convicted this callous caretaker. The transactions ranged from gift card purchases to expensive radio-controlled cars. The defendant was sentenced to 18 months in Florida State Prison.

We are currently prosecuting several other cybercriminals. One of the most notable is Justin Vassell and his cybercrime enterprise out of Orlando, who has led a sophisticated ring of criminal activity that victimized over 70 citizens and 10 online merchants. The defendant utilized dark web marketplaces to purchase bundles of personal identification information belonging to innocent victims. Mr. Vassell would then use these stolen identities to open dozens of credit cards and bank accounts in the victims' names and would use said accounts to purchase \$352,236.25 worth of merchandise from online merchants. He and the members of his criminal enterprise would then sell the unlawfully obtained merchandise to various pawn shops around the Orlando area to obtain cash, thereby obfuscating the source of his funds. We are prosecuting Justin Vassell and his five associates with Racketeering and Conspiracy to commit Racketeering; of which comprise of over 90 predicate incidents including Criminal Use of Personal Identification Information, Money Laundering, Extortion, and Dealing in Stolen Property. Justin Vassell faces additional charges of Grand Theft of \$100,000 or more, Extortion, and Criminal Use of Personal Identification Information over of over 30 persons. Justin Vassell faces a maximum penalty of 135 years Florida State Prison and a minimum mandatory sentence of ten years Florida State Prison due to Count Five. It should be noted that the websites that harvest stolen identities and sell them online to would-be criminals has also been investigated by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and the Office of Statewide Prosecution's Cyber Fraud Enforcement Unit and underwent domain seizure warrants thereby disabling the websites.

We have successfully taken down another ring of Cybercriminals in Sarasota County. Eleven people have been arrested and charged by the Cyber Fraud Enforcement Unit prosecutors for a complex fraud ring wherein stolen identities were used for months to fund extravagant lifestyles for these fraudsters. The bad actors purchased stolen PII on the dark web of over 200 innocent victims and then took out massive lines of credit in these victims' names. Credit in these victims' names was used to purchase hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of designer shoes and other extravagant purchases, including the leasing of a high-end Mercedes Benz. They successfully stole over one million dollars by utilizing unsuspecting consumers' stolen identities. These individuals are facing numerous criminal charges including Racketeering, Money Laundering, Criminal Use of Personal Identification Information, and Organized Fraud. They now face up to 120 years in Florida State Prison when our Unit convicts them.

Finally, not all cybercriminals act in groups. A Tampa man named Donald Johnson was arrested and charged with Organized Fraud by our Unit and now faces 30 years in Florida State Prison for an elaborate scheme targeting local Florida businesses. This fraudster stole checks from mailboxes of local businesses and meticulously examined them. He then went to Sunbiz.org and changed the registered agent names of these businesses to his own name. Next, he endorsed these checks as if they were meant for him, and proceeded to scam local banks by claiming since he was the registered agent of the business, the check could be cashed, and the funds could go directly to him. He walked away with over \$50,000 of fraudulently obtained funds. He is now facing thirty (30) years in Florida State Prison.

DISRUPT

The CFEU is unique in that many cybercrimes targeting Floridians are committed by bad actors located overseas. Rather than declare a dead end to these investigations, this Unit has partnered with our Civil Forfeiture Unit to aggressively pursue the fraudulent funds or virtual currency acquired by the bad actor. We do this by seizing the source holding the funds, regardless of if it is overseas or domestic, and then enter forfeiture proceedings to ultimately return the stolen funds to our Floridian victims. Even if we cannot travel overseas to arrest each cybercriminal, we continue to successfully disrupt their activities by seizing millions of ill-gotten dollars from cybercriminals and return those funds to their rightful owner. We have entered into numerous Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties (MLATs) alongside the Department of Justice's Office of International Affairs to enforce our international warrants and subpoenas. We have also successfully served foreign nationals in places like India, China, and Africa.

One example of our success is the issuance of an Arrest Warrant for Nigerian national, Sunday Adebola. Under false pretenses wherein he pretended to be a member of the United States military, Adebola entered a romantic relationship with



the victim and then lied to her for his own financial gain. Adebola successfully convinced the unsuspecting victim to transfer \$20,990 in purchases of bitcoin as well as other gift card purchases. Our Unit froze this defendant's wallet and seized it back to the State of Florida's custody and control. Not only will our Floridian victim get her stolen funds returned, but our Unit has partnered with foreign governments around the world to include the National Police of Nigeria and their Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. Even if Mr. Adebola does not enter this country to face our charges, he now has local charges in Nigeria arising out of our investigation



There are numerous examples of success within our novel Statewide Crypto Asset Forfeiture process, but another notable example arises of North Port, Florida. Arrest warrants have been issued for two Indian nationals who engaged in a targeted scheme against an elderly couple by pretending to be their cryptocurrency exchange helpline. The victims unknowingly called an impersonation helpline, where they were instructed to install malware on their computer in order for the scammers to "assist them." This allowed our Indian defendants full access to the victims' desktop, including their personal virtual currency wallet. The cybercriminals transferred the entirety of our North Port victims' wallet to their own cryptocurrency wallets. Once again, our Unit issued freezes on the target wallets that received the illicit funds, and successfully seized it. We have won the Final Forfeiture Order proceedings, and the totality of the elderly victims' funds are being returned to them as this report is being issued.

We also specialize in disrupting other cybercrimes outside of crypto crime. After a Florida victim contacted the Cyber Fraud Enforcement Unit about a concerning social media scam, we uncovered a cyber impersonator who designed an account using the Floridian victim's face, real name, and photos to draw online sexual encounters in exchange for money. In this case, a direct link in the biography section brought visitors to a pornographic website using the victim's likeness. These sexual videos omitted faces, leaving users to imply that the victim performed explicit acts. Working with law enforcement and partners at Meta, this Unit tracked down the creator and found that the fraudster duplicated this process with dozens of victims. All the fake victim accounts are now shut down permanently. The fraudulent user associated with the accounts is permanently banned from all Meta platforms, helping prevent future victims.

PREVENT

Another priority for the Cyber fraud Enforcement Unit this year was to educate the public to prevent these cybercrimes from having success. Our Unit participated in numerous training courses all over the State of Florida that educated local law enforcement agencies on what to look for, how to successfully investigate cybercrimes, and what to advise their local communities to beware. Our newest Unit member, John Paul, also assisted the Florida Office of Financial Regulation in drafting legislation pertaining to virtual currency kiosks that will require warning screens that users must acknowledge before they transfer their life's savings to an unknown perpetrator. This bill is currently in Committee proceedings in Tallahassee and is receiving favorable support.

CONCLUSION

Cyber Fraud Prosecution is becoming more important each day, as more criminals are choosing to destroy finances, steal identities, and ruin lives from the comfort of their computer and dark web forums designed to obfuscate identities of the bad actors at every turn. This Unit has developed innovative and novel multiagency policies to combat cybercrime and has gained recognition as a pioneer of fighting cybercrime across the State and the United States. As Chief of this Unit, I am very proud of what each member of this Unit has accomplished, but I am even more excited about the successes that lie ahead this coming year for our team.

- Whitney Mackay, Chief Assistant Statewide Prosecutor



“The investigation resulted in law enforcement seizing more than \$1.2 million dollars’ worth of stolen merchandise that Markell intended to sell on Amazon...”



ORGANIZED RETAIL THEFT

2023 was a busy year for the Office of Statewide Prosecution (OSP) and the Florida Organized Retail Crime Exchange (FORCE). Cases charging Organized Retail Theft, Racketeering, and associated crimes rose in 2023. The collaboration between prosecutors, law enforcement and the retail industry has resulted in increased awareness and prosecution of this crime.

In 2023, OSP’s team of Organized Retail Theft prosecutors assisted with the investigation and prosecution of numerous felonies across the State. Assistant Statewide Prosecutor Darryl Torres participated in a panel discussing Organized Retail Theft at The Florida Office of the Attorney General Crime Prevention Summit. Along with retail partners, the panel discussed topics that included the Florida Office of the Attorney General’s utilization of FORCE’s website as our office continues to combat and prosecute organized retail theft rings, trends of organized retail theft, and The Florida Office of the Attorney General’s utilization of the Organized Retail Theft Statute, F. S. 812.015.



This year, Assistant Statewide Prosecutor Chris Olowin filed several charges, including counts of Racketeering, Organized Retail Theft, and Dealing in Stolen Property, against an organized theft ring comprised of fourteen individuals. The criminal enterprise operated in at least nine judicial circuits and caused more than \$20 million in losses to over 20 different retailers across Florida—including Walgreens, CVS, Publix, Winn Dixie, Walmart, Target, Home Depot, and Lowes. The stolen items ranged from over-the-counter medications and cosmetics to tools, electronics, Legos, and other household items.

The criminal enterprise consisted of numerous serial retail theft boosters who brought their stolen items to a first level fence, Arland Cata. Cata purchased this stolen merchandise from the boosters and paid them a mere five to ten percent of retail value. Cata then sold those stolen items to a second level fence, Joshua Markell. Markell owned an Amazon storefront, Hollywoodseller, which he used to sell the items to unsuspecting consumers across the country. From January 2023 to September 2023, the Hollywoodseller Amazon storefront made more than \$5 million dollars in sales. Markell paid Cata approximately \$1.2 million for the stolen merchandise during this period. Markell and Cata also employed several individuals that assisted with the inventory and transport of the stolen items to Amazon.

The investigation resulted in law enforcement seizing more than \$1.2 million dollars’ worth of stolen merchandise that Markell intended to sell on Amazon—more than 4,800 stolen items. Markell shipped more than 100,000 items to Amazon for the Hollywoodseller storefront in 2023.

This year, Assistant Statewide Prosecutor Darryl Torres also filed charges against an organized retail theft ring that targeted Ulta Beauty. The group is responsible for stealing more than \$220,000 in products from Ulta Beauty with stores spanning Broward, Palm Beach, and Miami-Dade counties, sometimes turning violent. The offenders stole fragrances and other items to sell on social media platforms at discounted rates. Ulta Beauty reported at least 55 instances of the theft. The ring leaders are charged with multiple counts of violations of the Organized Retail Theft Statute, F.S. 812.015, as well as the Anti-Fencing Statute, F.S. 812.019, and face up to 30 years in Florida State Prison.

- Christopher Olowin, Assistant Statewide Prosecutor
- Darryl Torres, Assistant Statewide Prosecutor



ORGANIZED FRAUD

Fraud comes in many forms but one common denominator in all fraud cases is that innocent people's lives are forever changed due to the financial loss caused by the defendant. A sampling of OSP cases from the past year underscores this unfortunate reality.

In a case worked by our Tampa Bureau, a defendant who operated through several different LLC's, including Investors Mentorship Club, put on free seminars offering to mentor attendees how to purchase single family residences and convert them into Assisted Living Facilities (ALF). He misrepresented by false statements, deceptive tactics, predatory influence, and failed promises that their investments would produce enough income to retire, and in so doing misappropriated approximately two (2) million dollars for his personal gain and benefit. Trust was secured from the victims by the defendant's representations that he had great success in real estate investments, had accumulated a net worth of millions and promised that he could help them attain a lifestyle equal to his own.

At the conclusion of trial, a Pasco County Jury convicted this fraudster of twenty-two counts to include: Racketeering, Conspiracy to Commit Racketeering, Grand Theft of a Victim Over 65, Exploitation of the Elderly, Mortgage Fraud, 13 counts of Grand Theft, Unlicensed Practice of Law, and Unlicensed Operation of an ALF. He is to be sentenced in early 2024.

In another Tampa case, a man engaged in a scam of more recent vintage: real estate fraud. He was posting houses for sale on Craigslist, however, he did not have the authority or permission to sell these houses.

The victims in this case were looking for a new house. A lot of them did not have good credit so they were not able to go the traditional financing route when buying a house.

All twelve (12) victims had a very similar story – they met the defendant through a Craigslist ad for a house, a different house for each victim. The victims would call the number on the ad, speak to him and then he would show them the house.

In all instances, a down payment was requested – sometimes in the form of cash, sometimes check, sometimes a green dot money card that was sold at CVS (where a person puts money on the card and then gives the defendant the serial number of the card, who was then able to retrieve the money off of the card).

This individual sold himself as a "Mr. Do it All." He provided the victims with contracts for the purchase of the house as a realtor would do but he was also financing the purchase of the house for the buyer through his company – AWD Independent Financial Corp or Apple World Distributors, LLC.

Four (4) victims did actually get to move into a house and then later learned the sale of the house was not legitimate and that they had been scammed. All of the other victims would pay the down payment for the house that they thought they were buying. Once the defendant got their money then he would slowly disappear and the victims were unable to make contact with him.

By way of a resolution he pled to the Court the morning when the Jury Trial was set to begin. He pled as charged to Racketeering, Conspiracy to Commit Racketeering, Scheme to Defraud and Tampering with or Fabricating Physical Evidence. This resulted in a sentence of six (6) years in Florida State Prison followed by fifteen (15) years of probation.

While the mantra that 'the bad guys invent the crimes' remains as true as ever in the world of fraud, some stick to methods which remain stubbornly effective. In another case from the West coast of our state, one such individual used religion to gain the trust of numerous people. Once he gained their trust he was able to obtain their money for real estate investments. Once this occurred, they unfortunately became victims of a Ponzi Scheme totaling over six (6) million dollars.

This defendant co-hosted a radio program called "It's God's Money." He would talk about numerous topics on the programs but there were always three topics of conversation that would be discussed on every radio show: 1) Christianity;

“Fraud comes in many forms but one common denominator in all fraud cases is that innocent people’s lives are forever changed.”



2) Real Estate Investment Opportunities; and 3) The co-host's expertise as a Financial Advisor/Investor and how he has profited tremendously from his own real estate investments. He would meet with individuals usually at their home or his office so as to make his "pitch" about different real estate developments and how they could double or triple their investment amount. A part of the pitch, he would have brochures detailing what the real estate developments would look like when completed.

All told, thirty-three individuals were defrauded. The investment amounts ranged from \$10,000 to \$2,000,000.

The case also featured a co-defendant who was a licensed Certified Public Accountant (CPA). The CPA did not have many interactions with the victims, as his role was to handle some of the bank accounts associated with the victims' investments. He cooperated with the prosecution of the radio host and pled to Racketeering, Conspiracy to Engage in a Pattern of Racketeering Activity, Sale of an Unregistered Security, Sale of a Security by an Unregistered Dealer, Securities Fraud and Organized Fraud. He received a sentence of fifteen (15) years of probation and, importantly, forfeited his CPA license. The primary defendant pled to Racketeering, Conspiracy to Engage in a Pattern of Racketeering Activity, Sale of an Unregistered Security, Sale of a Security by an Unregistered Dealer, Securities Fraud and Organized Fraud. He was sentenced in early 2024 to five (5) years in prison followed by fifteen (15) years of probation.

Misuse of power is an unfortunate reality in some cases, as seen in some cases being handled by our Tallahassee Bureau. Two officials with the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence (FCADV) schemed to fraudulently award themselves personal time off by using grant-provided funds intended to assist in the operations of domestic violence centers across the state of Florida. The fraud amounted to approximately \$3.7 Million paid to them over a 7-year period of time. Charges were filed and are still pending against both of them.

Phishing scams are real and are potentially devastating to an employee and employer. An employee at the Department of State clicked on a phishing link. The sender then posed as the employee and directed an insurance company to send its statutorily required collateral into one of the target's many companies bank account. When the Target's bank placed a hold on the account the target indicated that a client of his was sponsored by the instance company. Target convinced the bank to release the funds to him. Target is a Brazilian national. Target was charged and is awaiting a plea that has been negotiated. In one more example from the panhandle, OSP participated in an investigation that has established that there is a network of people throughout the State of Florida actively involved in the selling and procurement of fraudulently obtained handicap parking placards through DHSMV resulting in 700 fraudulent parking placards being issued. The members of that network are using two-way communication devices (such as cell phones and social media) to further those crimes. A total profit of \$20,058 was made selling fraudulent parking placards.



In Orlando, a defendant pled to Racketeering charges and received a seven year prison sentence for being the lead player in another tried and true scam which is commonly used against retailers: label switching. This individual would create false price barcodes and affix them to products in large retail stores, then directed his drug-addled cohorts to the places in the store where he had relocated the items. These secondary participants, desperate as they were for money to fuel their addictions, would then follow orders to go to the oldest female cashier on the theory that such person would be least likely to catch the price discrepancies due to not being one who stocked the shelves. This serves as a reminder that in these larger fraud cases, the wrongdoers prepare for their crimes and pay close attention to details, making their eventual capture that much more challenging.

Returning to the theme of newer real estate frauds, a case was opened in the West Palm Beach Bureau in which an elderly victim's own home was used as the conduit to enrich criminals. Based on false representations made regarding the supposed need for large repairs to her home, the victim twice signed blank invoices under the belief that she would be assisted by a government program which provides financing for home improvement projects to low-income homeowners. Instead, the victim was saddled with over \$80,000.00 in finance charges assessed to her property tax bill, while the scammers were enriched by thousands of dollars. This matter remains an active case but, regrettably, no longer a novel one.

As might be expected, the epicenter of fraud instances exists in the banking and credit industries, and it is here that the attorneys of OSP and our law enforcement partners look for both enduring and new methods of operation. Common scenarios from the past year include simple mail theft, which leads to check washing and ultimately misdirected funds. Skimmers remain a problem, as sophisticated criminals can brazenly install card chip readers into the machines while utilizing almost undetectable cameras—which they also install—to monitor unwitting customers as they enter their PIN numbers while conducting a transaction. So too is the frequency of phony calls to accountholders from someone purporting to be, for example, a bank or credit repair representative. Fortunately, the legislature responded to this expanding problem years ago by adding language to F.S. 817.568 which provides for enhanced penalties in these situations. Finally, financial institutions encounter a veritable blizzard of fraudulent documents—the counterfeit currency of yesteryear has now morphed into illegitimate loan paperwork, bond certificates, and other negotiable instruments. Our vigilance in this arena is driven by the desire to continually work with law enforcement and private industry to keep ahead of the proverbial criminal curve in this ever-evolving criminal segment.

- Robert Finkbeiner, Chief Assistant Statewide Prosecutor
- Luis Aguila, Senior Assistant Statewide Prosecutor





CONSUMER CRIMES

2023 saw OSP investigate and continue to prosecute numerous crimes victimizing Florida consumers and homeowners.

Assistant Statewide Prosecutors in both the Tallahassee, Tampa, and West Palm Beach Bureaus have all had their hands full dealing with swimming pool contractor fraud cases. In 2022, OSP WPB obtained guilty jury verdicts against Brian Washburn, one of the owners of Amore Pools in Indian River County. Washburn and his wife collected millions of dollars from homeowners for pools that were never built, then laundered customer money through a check cashing store. Along the way they committed identity theft and workers compensation fraud. Washburn was sentenced to 30 years prison and ordered to pay \$3.1 million in restitution. His wife's case is still pending and will go to trial in 2024. OSP Tallahassee is currently set for trial on a pool contractor fraud case against Tracy McClain, the owner of Blue Water Pools. McClain victimized homeowners in Franklin and Gulf Counties by demanding payments of up to 90% of the contract price without fulfilling a single contract to completion. Victim losses were approximately \$400,000 over only a six-month period. McClain is charged with Aggravated White-Collar Crime, Organized Scheme to Defraud, and Money Laundering.

OSP Tampa worked with FDLE to make an arrest on a similar case in August 2023. James Staten, owner of Olympus Pools, was charged with stealing \$1.5 million from his customers and using that money to fund a high-roller lifestyle, spending between \$50,000 and \$70,000 every month, and even spending \$50,000 on Super Bowl tickets. Staten is being held on a \$2.8 million bond in Pasco County jail. The case is being prosecuted by ASP Stephanie Bergen in Pasco County.

OSP Tampa also recently assisted in filing charges against the owner of a roofing company for systematically intentionally damaging roofing on customers' homes in order to defraud insurance companies and homeowners. Citizens Property Insurance became suspicious when they noticed a pattern of claims filed by Castle Roofing and later obtained video footage of Castle employees damaging roofs that were later presented as wind damage. Paul Vatour, Robert Lusk Jr., and Robert Lusk Sr., principals of Castle Roofing, were all arrested and charged with various crimes including identity theft and aggravated white collar crime.

All in all, OSP is well equipped to investigate and prosecute consumer crime cases. Many of these cases originate with consumer complaints to local law enforcement, who are not aware of an extensive pattern of fraudulent activity occurring across jurisdictional lines. Evidence of a pattern of fraudulent activity is key to proving knowledge and intent in these types of cases and can transform what appears to be a contract dispute or a civil issue into a criminal case. OSP coordinates among the various agencies across jurisdictions to bring these consumer complaints under one roof and build a case from the ground up.

- Jonathan Bridges, Chief Assistant Statewide Prosecutor
- Panagiota Papakos, Senior Assistant Statewide Prosecutor

“2023 saw OSP investigate and continue to prosecute numerous crimes victimizing Florida consumers and homeowners.”





GAMING

2023 was a big year for the gaming unit of the Office of Statewide Prosecution. In the earlier part of the year, we began cultivating meaningful relationships with local and state law enforcement agencies. As part of those efforts, we collaborated with the Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office and Florida Gaming Control Commission (“FGCC”) which resulted in a sizeable takedown of a bicoastal illegal slot machine arcade operation and approximately \$3m worth of assets and United States currency. Additionally, seven individuals were charged with racketeering, money laundering, illegal operation of lotteries, illegal operation of gaming houses, and unlawful possession of approximately 300 slot machines. This achievement communicated the message across the state that illegal gaming activity will not be tolerated in the State of Florida.

We also partnered with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in support of the Kenneth City Police Department to assist with the takedown and prosecution of an illegal slot machine arcade in Kenneth City. After an extensive investigation, we not only took down the arcade, but we uncovered a money laundering scheme worth over \$1m.

The gaming unit has connected with various local law enforcement agencies to inform them of our presence, availability, and willingness to assist them in their efforts to combat illegal gaming crime in their jurisdictions. The unit’s efforts have proven effective. We are now routinely receiving calls and invitations from law enforcement agencies across the state to participate in illegal gaming investigations with values ranging from small-scale operations to multimillion-dollar schemes involving the

unlawful operation of gaming houses, unlawful possession of slot machines, illegal poker tournaments, and illegal bookmaking.

We also compiled an extensive list of proposed legislative changes to FGCC to help us in our efforts to combat illegal gaming and have partnered with them in attempt to launch an attack against unauthorized internet sports betting businesses operating within the State of Florida.

Illegal gaming activity puts Floridians and the State of Florida at great risk of harm including increased threats of violence, increased risk of fraud, and a host of other public health and economic offenses. Prosecutors in the gaming unit take these concerns seriously and fight tirelessly to defend against these types of crimes from occurring within the state.

- Colleen Monroe, Assistant Statewide Prosecutor

“Illegal gaming activity puts Floridians and the State of Florida at great risk of harm including increased threats of violence...”

ELECTIONS

In 2022, the Florida Legislature and Governor DeSantis tasked the OSP with addressing violations of election laws. Since then, OSP has worked closely with key entities including the Florida Department of State - Office of Election Crimes and Security (OECS), Florida Department of Law Enforcement – Election Crime Unit (ECU), local law enforcement agencies and the 67 county Supervisors of Elections across the state to continue safeguarding the integrity of Florida elections through the investigation and prosecution of election-related crimes. These crimes encompass:

- Ineligible Felon Voters¹
- Third-Party Voter Registration Organization (3PVRO) Fraud
- Constitutional Initiative Petition Fraud
- Paid Petition Circulator Fraud
- Double Voters
- Campaign Finance Fraud / Ghost Candidates

OSP has achieved notable success in prosecuting these offenses, including:

- Securing a guilty verdict in a trial involving a convicted sexual predator who illegally registered to vote.
- Obtaining a guilty verdict after trial on all 14 charged counts involving a “ghost candidate” who engaged in illegal campaign finance practices.
- Receiving numerous guilty pleas resulting in probation sentences involving previously convicted murderers and sexual offenders who illegally registered to vote and subsequently voted.

This success can be attributed to the strong partnership forged between OSP, OECS and ECU. Through weekly meetings and joint training sessions, the enhanced coordination among state agencies has resulted in more focused investigations that have furthered the cause of election integrity. OSP values the excellent partnership it continues to cultivate with OECS and ECU.

In 2023, OSP placed a greater emphasis on investigating and prosecuting organizations that engage in voter registration fraud and other criminal activity when collecting signatures for ballot initiatives/petitions. These crimes involve the theft, use and abuse of citizens’ personal identity information, which affect not only individual elections and candidates, but can also have lasting consequences on victims’ personal and financial lives. OSP continues to aggressively pursue organizations involved with election fraud with the ultimate goal of maintaining high voter confidence in the integrity of elections across the State of Florida.

- Nathaniel Bahill, Senior Assistant Statewide Prosecutor

1. Including felons convicted of homicide offenses, sexual offenses and those on active felony probation

“...OSP continues to aggressively pursue organizations involved with election fraud...”



HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human Trafficking (HT), a priority focus of Attorney General Moody, remained at the forefront of our prosecutors' efforts. Our assistant statewide prosecutors ("ASPs") continued to provide the necessary support and guidance to local, state, and federal law enforcement partners by sending out subpoenas, reviewing search warrants, arrest warrants, pen registers, wiretap applications, and tracking devices. We teamed with our prosecution partners in other circuits in a joint effort to combat HT. Such collaboration occurred in a prosecution involving Candi Holmes and Dourian Butler, who trafficked a juvenile victim across multiple counties. In April 2023, local prosecutors from the Fifth Judicial Circuit joined our ASPs to prosecute the traffickers, who currently face multiple charges, including human trafficking.

Law enforcement continued to call upon our prosecutors to assist in covert operations, where law enforcement used social media to track individuals who travel to purchase children for sexual activity. In January 2023, detectives encountered Bobby Barnes, who drove from his home in Pinellas County, to engage in this conduct. Instead, he met with an undercover detective and was arrested. Our prosecutors successfully secured a prison sentence for Bobby Barnes, and he was also labeled a Sexual Predator.

Other similar operations in 2023 resulted in the arrest of three other individuals who offered to buy sex with minors, negotiate the terms of the agreement, and discuss details of how they would exploit their children. These individuals ultimately traveled to meet with those who they believed were children. Fortunately, in each case, the defendants were met at their arrest by undercover officers who had posed as traffickers themselves, selling children. Daneal Lanier, Edgar Murillo Troncoso and Ricardo Quezada Perez all engaged in attempts to exploit minors for commercial sex. Edgar Murillo Troncoso ultimately plead guilty and, after his prison sentence, will serve sex offender probation as a labeled sex offender.

In March 2023, law enforcement officers with the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office conducted an operation to recover and rescue HT victims by responding to escort advertisements. During one such investigation, detectives observed that Roanill Fentress transported a victim to a Tampa Bay hotel, and after the victim got out and went into the hotel, Fentress remained in the car waiting, under constant observation of the law enforcement officers. The victim told the detectives of the violence she endured and her fear at the hands of the defendant. After she was rescued and taken to safety, the detectives arrested Roanill Fentress and recovered his cellular phone, which contained information corroborating the HT and led to the discovery and rescue of another victim who finally left the grip of a life of HT. Because of the advocacy of our ASPs, Roanill Fentress remains in jail, with no bond facing two separate HT prosecutions.

ASPs fight HT even outside the courtroom. From training law enforcement to hospitals, schools, and businesses to assisting state legislators in reviewing proposed changes to our laws, our ASPs are committed to eradicating the scourge of HT. We took an active role in providing training during the October 2023 Statewide Council on Human Trafficking's Annual Human Trafficking Summit, attended by hundreds of people around the country. Our diligence and commitment to taking these cases contributed to our success. At the Annual Human Trafficking Summit, one of our ASPs was recognized as the State of Florida's Human Trafficking Prosecutor of the Year. Our efforts, along with the steps taken by General Moody, guarantee that the State of Florida is the nation's leader in combatting HT.

We are mindful, however, that our prosecutions can only be successful if our victims trust the process and our victim advocates are integral to that. These crimes often involve multiple victims who urgently require services and security. The workload is demanding, and our advocates must work with multiple service providers and safe homes to meet our victims' urgent needs. Because of the increasing demand, 2023 saw the addition of a victim advocate to our south Florida area, who is dedicated to helping human trafficking victims. Some of our advocates' work includes finding appropriate safe placement for the victims, ensuring they receive much needed services, including wrap around services, assisting in placing them in contact with agencies who will provide our victims with much needed help, employment, and often find them food and clothing, all on top of ensuring that our victims are supported as they navigate the criminal justice system. Our victim advocates, along with our ASPs, continued their involvement in the local task forces around the state to develop multidisciplinary approaches to combat HT.

"...our prosecutions can only be successful if our victims trust the process and our victim advocates are integral to that."



In addition to their many tasks, our victim advocates were crucial in developing a curriculum for all human trafficking advocates in the state, as mandated by law. In 2023, 79 victims were assisted by our victim advocates, with all of them receiving care and many receiving further referrals for much-needed intensive assistance. This represents an increase of over 30 victims since 2022. Our victims desperately need that relationship and OSP is fortunate to have two highly trained advocates dedicated to empowering the victims and helping place them on a road to recovery.

Our office continued to remain proactive in fighting HT. In 2023, General Moody initiated the Human Trafficking Strike Team (“Team”) led by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement Tampa Bureau and comprised of several law enforcement agencies. OSP serves as legal counsel and lead prosecutors for the Team. In its inaugural year, our office assisted in several investigations with the Team, and ultimately filed prosecutions. In April 2023, the Team was able to end the trafficking of a child at the hands of Randy Coffelt, who met the victim online and groomed her to participate in commercial sexual activity, including advertising her online. Because of the defendant’s actions, this young girl was further victimized by three other adults. Our prosecutors worked quickly to rescue her, ensure her safety, and arrest the four individuals who exploited this child.



While all cases of HT presented to the OSP in 2023 involved commercial sex trafficking, labor trafficking was still a topic of concern for our office. Our prosecutors attended multi-faceted training regarding the prevalence of labor trafficking in the state and gained useful tools to combat this crime. ASPs continue to see a vast array of coercion methods being used by traffickers. For example, in December 2023, Brandon Gutman was convicted of trafficking multiple victims using financial manipulation and physical force to get them to engage in commercial sexual activities. He was ultimately sentenced to 19 years in Florida State Prison.

Our prosecutors also worked to secure the conviction of Rudy Hinton, who was sent to Florida State Prison when he forced a victim to engage in commercial sexual activity, and sexually battered her as part of his use of force and control. His 15 years in prison will be followed by sex offender probation.

Despite the possibility of ending the pattern of trafficking, some victims are not able to fully participate in the prosecution of their trafficker for many reasons; notably, they are not psychologically ready to face difficult challenges. In these circumstances, our prosecutors endeavor to hold the defendants accountable, even with a lack of victim participation. Desha Turner was one such defendant who had repeatedly exploited a child over the course of time and throughout multiple counties in our state. Our ASPs assisted law enforcement in gathering evidence to successfully prove the crime without necessity of the victim testifying. Desha Turner was convicted of Human Trafficking and was sentenced to life in Florida State Prison. Furthermore, in April 2023, Piard Youance was also held accountable for victimizing two juveniles when a 13-year sentence was handed down, even though the juvenile victims were unable to testify against the trafficker.

HT also provides some evidentiary challenges that our prosecutors litigate to ensure that defendants are held accountable. This was the case of Kelvin Davis, who allowed a child to engage in commercial sexual activity. Despite an adverse ruling in a companion prosecution, Kelvin Davis was convicted in January 2023, sentenced to prison, and ultimately labeled a sexual offender.



Our work to combat HT will continue as law enforcement continues with its aggressive fight. OSP will maintain its commitment and dedication to our law enforcement partners and to our community by having an aggressive stance in these prosecutions so that our victims will be saved from the road of undeniably horrific exploitation. OSP willingly accepts the hurdles we face in these cases to ultimately win the war against HT.

~ Rita Peters, Special Counsel

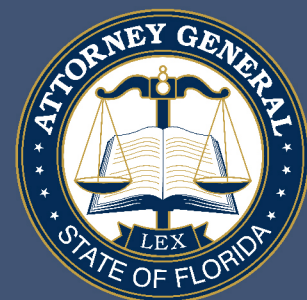
CLOSING

With a productive 2023, OSP looks forward to a successful 2024. We hope to maintain the momentum gained in 2023 and continue to fight for Floridians all over Florida.

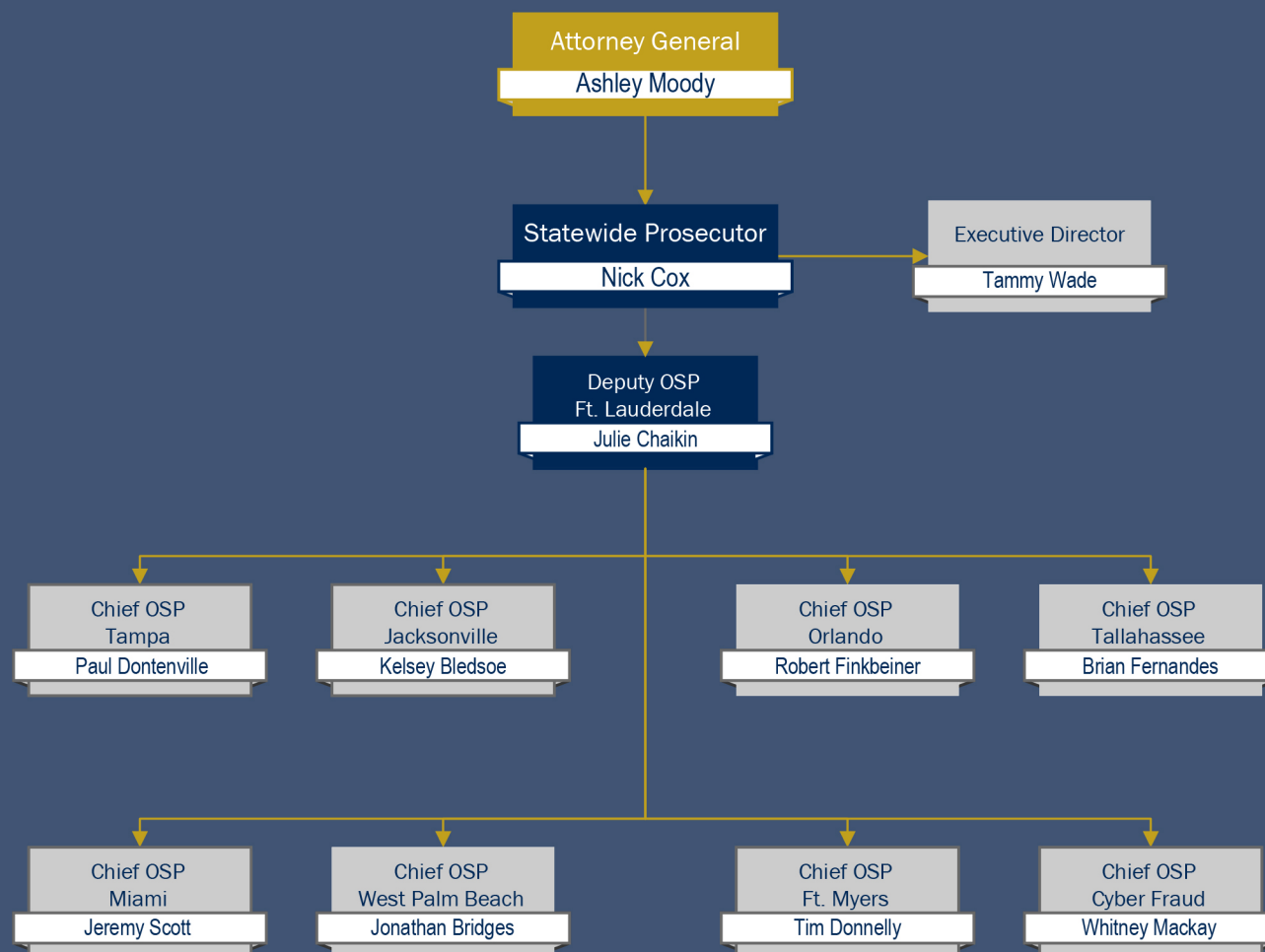
- Nick Cox, Statewide Prosecutor



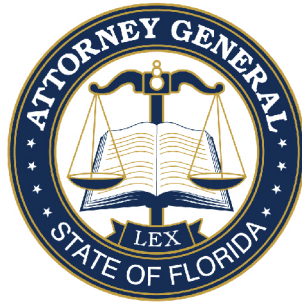
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