Disability Rights Florida is a not-for-profit corporation founded in 1977 as the statewide protection and advocacy system for individuals with disabilities. Operating under eight federal grants, our mission is to advance the quality of life, dignity, equality, and self-determination of people with disabilities. Our services are free and confidential.

I would like to extend a thank you to Beth Piecora, who has served for four years as the Chair of our Board of Directors, guiding us through the transition of leadership. She will remain on the Board of Directors and continue her powerful advocacy for individuals with disabilities. The staff of Disability Rights Florida commend all the volunteers that serve as our Board of Directors and our PAIMI Advisory Council for their dedication to advancing the rights of individuals with disabilities.

— Maryellen McDonald, Executive Director

Beth Piecora
Immediate Past Chair of the Board of Directors
For over 29 years, Lee Demps has worked and lived in Miami, and like most people relies on his vehicle on a daily basis. Since Lee has T3 level paraplegia and uses a wheelchair, the van he uses requires modifications.

Lee contacted his Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) counselor to assist with the modifications of a new van. The rehab engineer for DVR suggested that Lee purchase a passenger van instead of a cargo van. Lee did not approve of this, mainly because a passenger van has features he does not need. When his counselor insisted that he follow the direction of the engineer, Lee turned to Disability Rights Florida for assistance.

Through successful negotiations with his counselor, we focused on Lee’s assistive technology needs and offered a different interpretation of policy than had been used by the rehabilitation engineer who was utilizing cost (the most inexpensive option) as the only criteria.

Florida has nearly 50 Greyhound bus stations throughout the state. Based on findings from a similar investigation into Amtrak stations, Disability Rights Florida became concerned with the level of physical accessibility at these bus stations.

Upon examination, we found Greyhound noncompliant with ADA regulations, resulting in an environment where customers with disabilities could not receive the same level of service as other customers. Of the five Greyhound stations evaluated, three had significant issues. In one instance, the ticket counters were too high for individuals that use wheelchairs. At another station, the wheelchair lift was broken with no plans to repair. In addition to these specific problems, three of the five stations inspected failed to provide adequate parking.

After assessment, Disability Rights Florida contacted Greyhound corporate offices and requested that they correct the accessibility obstacles. Greyhound ensured the requests would be taken care of in order to guarantee access for all individuals.

In 2016, Disability Rights Florida will continue to assess Greyhound stations throughout the state.
Betty Katke, a senior citizen living in Hernando County, came to Disability Rights Florida after her family filed for guardianship. Betty has age-onset dementia, causing her family to question her capabilities. However, Betty and her physician agree she is fully capable of maintaining an independent lifestyle. While guardianships are appropriate in some cases, Betty refused to lose her rights.

Betty’s private attorneys were able to pinpoint the inaccuracies of the opposing side and successfully set aside the original guardianship filing. However, the case was not over. While Betty’s family withdrew their request for guardianship, a second petition for guardianship was filed. Disability Rights Florida was then contacted to help with the case. Immediately taking action, we filed and ultimately won a writ of prohibition, forcing the termination of any guardianship attempts and allowing Betty to make her own decisions.

In late 2012, our investigators became aware of the tragic death of an inmate in the psychiatric unit at Dade Correctional Institution (Dade CI). This case was well documented in the press and led to our own investigation of the conditions at this prison. After numerous interviews with inmates and victims, we became aware of untold cases of abuse and neglect. A major aspect of the investigation was a thorough inspection of Dade CI’s mental health unit. Housing 160 inmates, the mental health unit is required to provide appropriate treatment, a safe environment, and proper nutrition. We discovered the opposite, with instances of suicide, food contamination, fights, and a serious lack of mental health treatment.

Disability Rights Florida, in partnership with Florida Institutional Legal Services, filed a complaint against the Florida Department of Corrections (DOC), as well as the privately contracted healthcare provider, Wexford Health Sources. After numerous negotiations, the case settled. The settlement strategically created a detailed plan requiring specialized trainings for DOC and Wexford staff, security enhancements including updates to video surveillance, and changes to the delivery system and quality of mental health services.

Months into the agreement, Disability Rights Florida, with the help of its partners and experts, continues to monitor inmate health and ensure all requirements are met and maintained.

25 YEARS OF THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT

July 26, 2015 marked the 25th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). For 25 years, the ADA has ensured – and continues to ensure – equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities for access to businesses, employment, transportation, state and local government programs and services, and telecommunications. State and nationwide events were held to celebrate.
In 1988, the Veterans Stand Down program was established in San Diego to provide veterans experiencing homelessness with a “hand up, not a handout.” Today, over 200 Stand Downs are held around the country each year to support these local veterans.

In North Florida alone, 300-400 veterans do not have homes. Many of them encounter unemployment, lack of health care, and substance abuse; veterans experiencing homelessness may also struggle with combat-related factors such as physical disabilities and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For the past three years, the North Florida Homeless Veterans Stand Down has encouraged local businesses and non-profits to provide resources for the participants, such as IDs, medical care, job and educational opportunities, haircuts, clothing, and more.

Disability Rights Florida has proudly supported the North Florida Stand Down each year. This year, we looked for useful and practical items to give to the veterans. Our staff began collecting travel-size samples of shampoo, soap, toothbrushes, and other toiletries. Once supplies were gathered, care packages were made and provided to veterans at the Stand Down. Disability Rights Florida plans to create even more packages, and branch out to other Stand Downs across the state.

Throughout her four years at St. Petersburg College, Shelby Nurse refused to let cerebral palsy and a visual disability keep her from having a memorable and successful college experience.

Shelby is like any dedicated student: she maintains an impressive GPA, is involved in the community, and is well on her way to completing a four-year degree. After such success in her studies, Shelby hoped to continue her education by pursuing a master’s degree.

Division of Blind Services (DBS) and Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) provided Shelby with personal care and financial assistance for tuition and fees throughout her undergraduate studies. When both agencies denied graduate school support, Shelby contacted Disability Rights Florida.

Disability Rights Florida investigated Shelby’s contracts with both DBS and DVR and found that she should receive full assistance toward achieving a post-secondary education. After numerous consultations with DBS, DVR, and Shelby, both agencies agreed to support her vocational goals and master’s degree aspirations.

While our primary goal of helping Shelby was met, this case also led to improved coordination between DBS and DVR, providing better options for other students with disabilities in Florida.
The Extended School Year (ESY) program provides students with disabilities education beyond the normal school day. The program is meant to allow children to access the Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) guaranteed by law. However, Disability Rights Florida observed districts throughout the state improperly conducting the ESY program by telling parents that their child’s disability was not “severe enough” to warrant ESY services, or by stating that a student was not entitled to services if they would not regress over the summer. Disability Rights Florida also observed school districts limiting services to as little as a few hours a day, a few times a week, for a pre-determined and limited part of the summer, without considering whether a student might need more services in order to receive FAPE.

On behalf of students with disabilities, we filed a state complaint based on these observations. The complaint resulted in an investigation by the Florida Department of Education’s (DOE) Bureau of Exceptional Student Education (ESE). The investigation found five school districts noncompliant with ESY laws. After requiring these districts to take corrective actions, the Bureau outlined steps it would take to clear up confusion about determining and providing ESY services. As part of the corrective actions ordered by DOE, Disability Rights Florida conducted trainings for all 67 school districts. Additionally, the Bureau plans to provide ESE directors with professional development and revise guidance documents related to ESY services.

Kayla Hilliard, a bright and lively nine year old with cerebral palsy, is dedicated to her home exercise program. For the program, Kayla uses a stander, a tool that promotes mobility, while providing balance. After outgrowing her current stander, Kayla needed a new one to continue her progress. Kayla’s parents are devoted to providing the best care, and after being denied for a new stander, they requested assistance from Disability Rights Florida.

In order to demonstrate Kayla’s need for the new stander, we encouraged Kayla’s mom to create home videos as evidence of the unsuitable equipment. The videos showed a poorly designed walker which provided little stability and no straps. With her parent’s dedication and our support, Medicaid was better able to understand that Kayla was an active young lady who needed a larger stander. Kayla quickly received her new stander and continues to make progress in her home exercise program.
FINANCIALS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistive Technology - PAAT</td>
<td>$210,625</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beneficiaries of Social Security - PABSS</td>
<td>$313,520</td>
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<tr>
<td>Client Assistance Program - CAP</td>
<td>$528,038</td>
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<td>Developmental Disabilities - PADD</td>
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<td>Individual Rights - PAIR</td>
<td>$1,036,891</td>
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<td>Individuals with Mental Illness - PAIMI</td>
<td>$1,436,850</td>
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<td>Traumatic Brain Injury - PATBI</td>
<td>$86,078</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voting Access - PAVA</td>
<td>$169,718</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Grants, Donations, and Program Income</td>
<td>$330,186</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Revenues and Support</strong></td>
<td><strong>$5,916,019</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
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PROGRAM VS. GENERAL & ADMINISTRATIVE

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tr>
<td>General and Admin</td>
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<td>Program Services</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Expenses</strong></td>
<td><strong>$5,818,964</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
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BY THE NUMBERS

- Total callers: 7,215
- Client’s reason for contacting us:
  - Abuse and Neglect: 13%
  - Community Integration: 33%
  - Education: 5%
  - Employment: 16%
  - Individual Rights: 33%
- Media mentions: 29
- Events/trainings attended: 92
- Rep payee site reviews: 55
- Social media followers: 32,641
- Website page views: 207,819

Disability Rights Florida is a non-profit organization funded by a variety of sources. For a complete list of funders, go to www.disabilityrightsflorida.org/funders
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