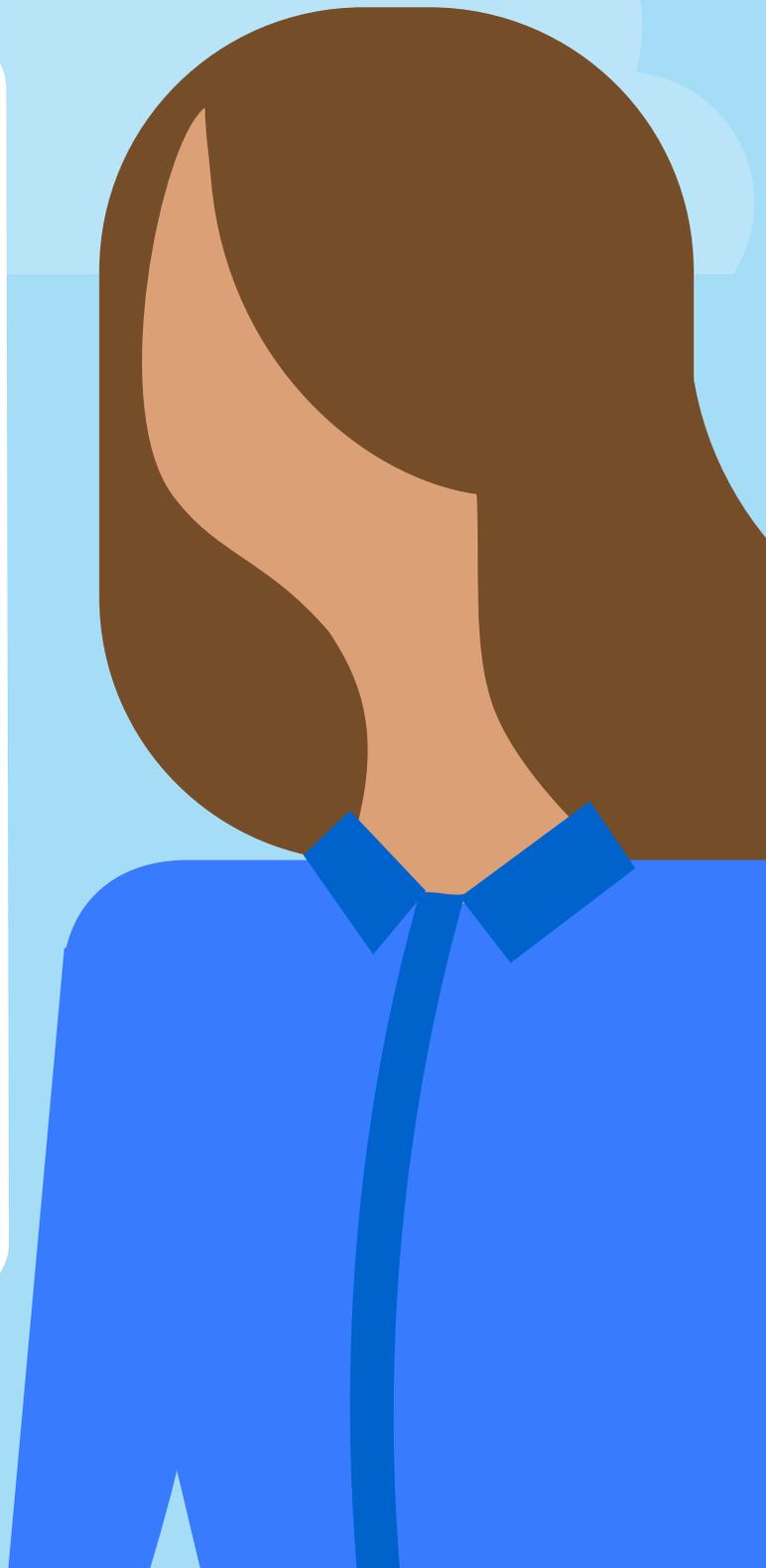


# Disability Rights Florida

## ANNUAL REPORT 2020





# LETTER FROM OUR LEADERSHIP

Like most organizations, we at Disability Rights Florida (DRF) were anticipating our 2020 fiscal year with high expectations for a new decade and an ambitious platform of goals and priorities. But like so many, our staff pivoted without hesitation in response to a pandemic this country was not prepared to manage. While nearly every aspect of our daily lives has been affected by COVID-19, individuals with disabilities bore the brunt of the pandemic's wrath. Those responsible for responding to the pandemic overlooked our most vulnerable residents during a time where their safety should have been a top priority.

During this fiscal year, our staff has worked tirelessly to ensure policymakers, healthcare providers, educators, and others prioritized the needs of people with disabilities during the pandemic. While working from their kitchen tables at home and juggling their children's distance learning like so many other Floridians, our staff advocated to ensure Florida's schools continued to provide a free and appropriate public education to all students. They fought for accessible COVID-19 testing, reasonable accommodations for essential caregivers, ensured continued access to community-based services and transportation, and challenged discrimination against individuals with disabilities in hospital crisis standards of care. We pressed prisons, jails, and institutions to adhere to CDC guidelines to mitigate the virus's rampant spread, and we sued Gov. Ron DeSantis for failing to provide American Sign Language interpreters during his coronavirus briefings.

While we were heavily involved with the protection and advocacy of rights related to COVID-19, DRF addressed other important issues in 2020. In the run up to an historic election, we monitored accessibility of polling places and launched an aggressive voter education and "get out the vote" campaign directed to individuals with disabilities. And, as the nation watched as years of frustration over long-term oppression poured out into our streets, Disability Rights Florida recognized the intersectionality of people with disabilities and police brutality and joined the calls for social justice reform and healing.

We also achieved the agency's original goals established prior to the pandemic. You'll read about DRF's second client who successfully ended his guardianship, regained his rights, and entered a Supported Decision-Making agreement; DRF's involvement with the Access the Vote Coalition which successfully advocated for fully accessible voting beginning in 2022; and our lawsuit against the Florida Department of Corrections to make programs and facilities more accessible to people with disabilities. And, we welcomed our new Executive Director Peter Sleasman and new Legal Director Ann Siegel.

We look forward to continuing to work with you to turn our advocacy into action and fulfill our mission to protect and advance the rights, dignity, equal opportunities, self-determination and choices for all people with disabilities.



**Alan Quiles**  
Board Chair



**Peter Sleasman**  
Executive Director



## Online Annual Report

Our 2020 Annual Report is also available online. Visit [www.disabilityrightsflorida.org/annualreport](http://www.disabilityrightsflorida.org/annualreport) or scan the QR code to the right to download a digital copy of the annual report, visit the web links referenced throughout, and download the publications listed below.



## Other Available Publications

- Disability Rights Florida Brochure
- Ten Steps to Effective Self-Advocacy
- Advocacy 101: Presenting Your Medicaid Case Before the Florida Office of Appeal Hearings or the Florida Division of Administrative Hearings
- Are You Prepared for an Emergency?
- Voting Brochure
- Obtain, Maintain, or Regain - Your Job or Career
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- An Exceptional Cause: Lawyers Helping Students Succeed at School

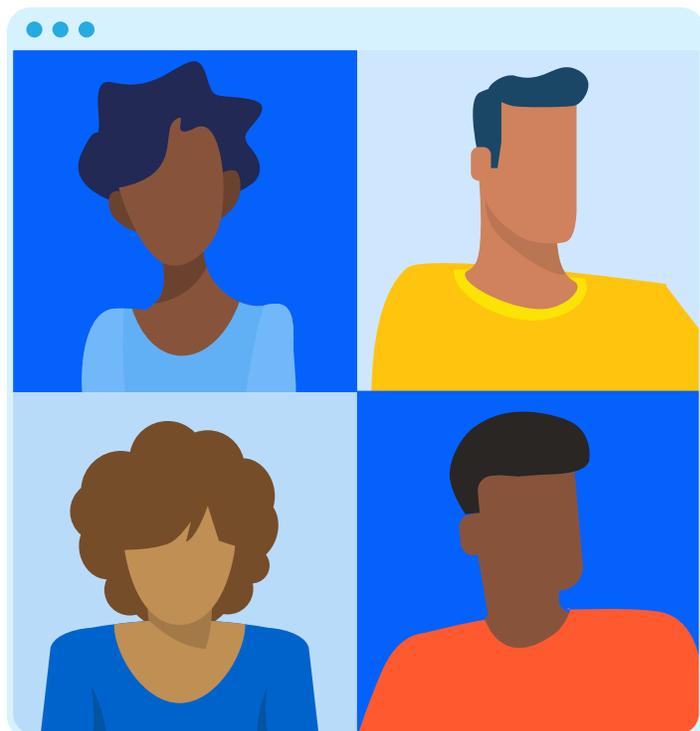
# ADA 30

1990 - 2020

## Americans with Disabilities Act

### 30th Anniversary of the ADA

July 26, 2020, marked the 30th anniversary of the groundbreaking legislation, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). While we should celebrate the advancements the ADA has made for people with disabilities, we must also acknowledge that people with disabilities still lack access to employment, reliable transportation, experience high rates of poverty, and are frequently denied personal autonomy. Florida ranks 31st out of the 50 states in accessibility, and we all collectively have work to do to protect the lives, wellness, and rights of Floridians with disabilities.





## DRF Taking the Lead on Supported Decision-Making in Florida

In October 2019, Disability Rights Florida (DRF) began a pilot program in partnership with an Equal Justice Fellow sponsored by the Florida Bar Foundation in Miami-Dade County to expand awareness and implementation of Supported Decision-Making (SDM) through simultaneous litigation, education, policy advocacy, and coalition-building. Supported Decision-Making is a less restrictive alternative to guardianship and allows people with disabilities to keep their rights and make their own decisions with the support of people they trust.

DRF has been the leading expert on SDM in Florida since our victory assisting Michael Lincoln-McCreight, the first person in Florida to restore his rights using Supported Decision-Making in 2016. During the 2019-2020 Fiscal Year, Disability Rights Florida provided free legal advice and representation to 66 people with disabilities interested in using SDM to avoid or terminate a guardianship.

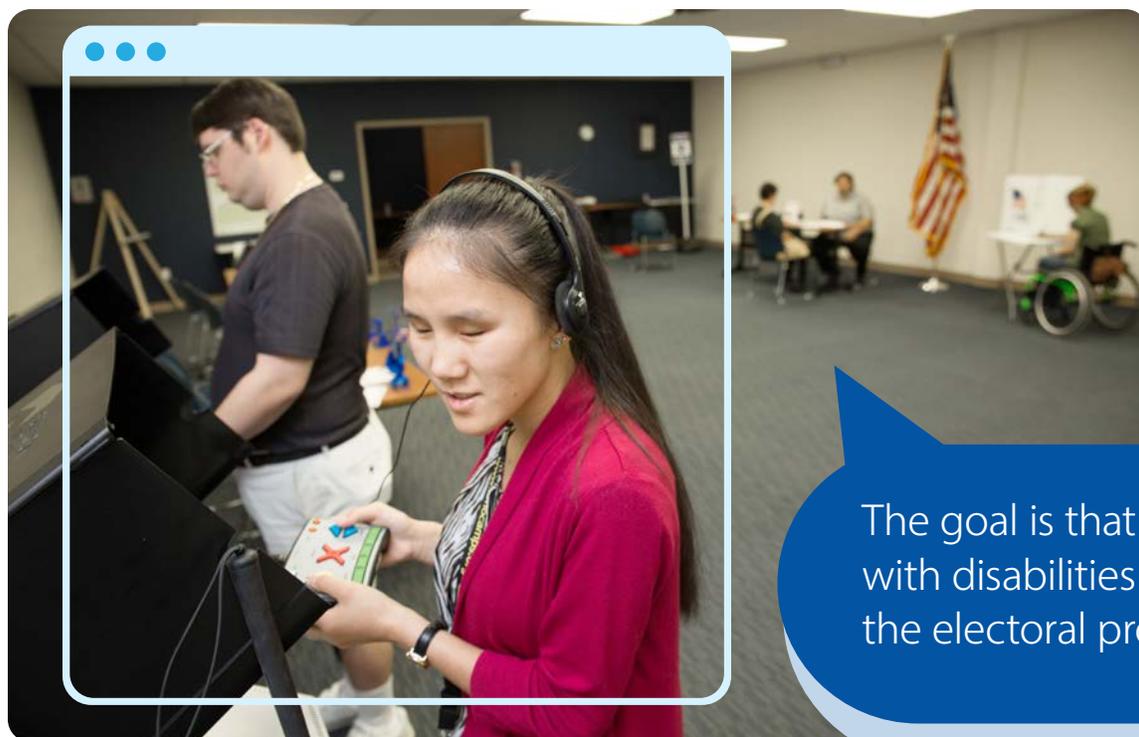
This work included preparing SDM agreements and additional supporting legal documents – such as powers of attorney and health care surrogate designations – for clients wishing to use SDM. We celebrated the signing of our first four clients' SDM agreements with signing ceremonies.

In addition, DRF recruited over 20 disability advocacy organizations and individuals currently using Supported Decision-Making agreements to form a coalition called SDM4FL. The coalition developed the "I Decide" campaign to draft and present an SDM bill to the Florida Legislature. The proposed bill will require judges to consider SDM before ordering a guardianship, provide guidance on how to use SDM, and require third parties like doctors and banks to recognize SDM.

DRF presented on Supported Decision-Making and how to use it to over 520 people, including people with disabilities and their parents, advisors and school staff, advocates, judges, and judicial staff. If your group is interested in a presentation or you would like more information, contact us at 800-342-0823 or learn more at [www.idecideflorida.org](http://www.idecideflorida.org).



Tyler Borjas, DRF's second client who successfully ended his guardianship and entered a Supported Decision-Making agreement.



The goal is that all individuals with disabilities can take part in the electoral process.

## DRF Election and Voting Advocacy

One of the more unique grants that Disability Rights Florida (DRF) receives is its voting access grant. The goal is that all individuals with disabilities can take part in the electoral process. This includes registering to vote, casting votes, and accessing polling sites.

One way we accomplish that is as a member of Access the Vote Florida (ATVFL), a coalition of other advocates and organizations. ATVFL wrote a letter to the state about the inaccessibility of vote-by-mail ballots. They also held an online Elections Accessibility Summit featuring state and national advocates. Finally, ATVFL sent a questionnaire about disability issues to all candidates for state legislative office. You can view the responses they received at [www.accessthevote.org](http://www.accessthevote.org).

DRF completed poll site accessibility surveys at almost 80% of the state's early voting locations. We made sure that residents of nursing homes knew they could cast private and independent ballots, despite the challenges created by

COVID-19. DRF also offered testimony to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights about suppression and disenfranchisement of voters with disabilities.

DRF staff were invited to speak about voting with a disability at various events. These events were hosted by the Florida League of Women Voters, the Florida ADA Coordinators, the Family Café, and the state National Federation of the Blind at their annual White Cane Awareness day. In October, DRF co-hosted an event with Disability Rights New York and the Trayvon Martin Foundation focusing on voting for marginalized populations and others experiencing barriers to voting.

Beginning in 2022, Florida will begin offering accessible, vote-by-mail balloting across the state. This will create a need for voter outreach and education efforts at the county-level. Contact us if you are interested in collaborating on DRF's and ATVFL's voting rights and elections accessibility activities.



## DRF Protects the Rights of People with Disabilities During COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 disproportionately impacted individuals with disabilities and despite having a higher-than-average occurrence of underlying medical conditions, they were largely left out of the coronavirus response from the first weeks of testing to a disappointingly lower prioritization in the governor's vaccine distribution plan. Disability Rights Florida (DRF) worked non-stop to advocate for people with disabilities while addressing numerous rights issues arising from the pandemic. While this is not an exhaustive list, these are some of the issue areas DRF legal and advocacy staff responded to.

### Advocating for Inclusive and Equal Crisis Standards of Care

As hospital Intensive Care Units became overwhelmed with coronavirus patients, the state of Florida refused to adopt equitable crisis standards of care to protect people with disabilities from discrimination and to ensure fairness in the distribution of scarce life-saving equipment. In a letter to Gov. Ron DeSantis, Disability Rights Florida expressed its urgent concerns: "If allocation of treatment and life-saving resources become necessary, the state has an obligation to ensure that prioritizations are administered ethically and in a way that respects the basic civil and constitutional rights of persons with disabilities." While the state has yet to implement and distribute a statewide Crisis Standards of Care policy to healthcare and emergency medical systems, DRF continues to advocate for these vital legal protections.

### Ensuring Students Receive a Free and Appropriate Education

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, DRF actively reached out to all Florida school districts to gather information about their school closures, distant learning plans, school re-opening plans, and instructional model options to ensure that each district continued to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities to afford a free appropriate public education (FAPE). With this information, we also provided technical assistance and developed a resource guide for students and families that contained this information. We actively monitored each district for any changes in their plans and updated the resource guide accordingly.

### Safeguarding Reasonable Accommodations

In reaction to the many unknowns associated with COVID-19 in the early months of the pandemic, the state of Florida imposed strict no-visitor policies in healthcare facilities, institutions, and other congregate settings that illegally deprived people with disabilities the support they needed to get equal access to treatment. Much of DRF's advocacy work involved reminding providers of their obligation to include reasonable accommodations in any visitation policy when in-person supports are required under federal disability laws. Individuals requiring communication support such as ASL or foreign language translation, or patients with intellectual or developmental disabilities that prevent accurate communication of information were eventually allowed these accommodations so essential caregivers could help coordinate their care.

### Protecting Residents in ALL Institutional and Congregate Settings

Much focus has been on the coronavirus outbreaks and deaths in nursing homes, but people with disabilities face increased risk in all institutional and congregate settings. The state's COVID-19 response strategy must address the risks in all settings, not just in nursing homes, and ensure effective compliance with CDC guidelines to protect the health and safety of patients, residents and detainees. DRF continues to fight for the inclusion of intermediate care facilities for individuals with intellectual disabilities, psychiatric hospitals, group homes, and other congregate settings including correctional centers in the state's planning. In July, DRF joined the ACLU in filing a class action lawsuit against the Broward Sheriff's Department for alarming coronavirus infection and death rates at the Broward County Jail.

### Supporting Housing Rights

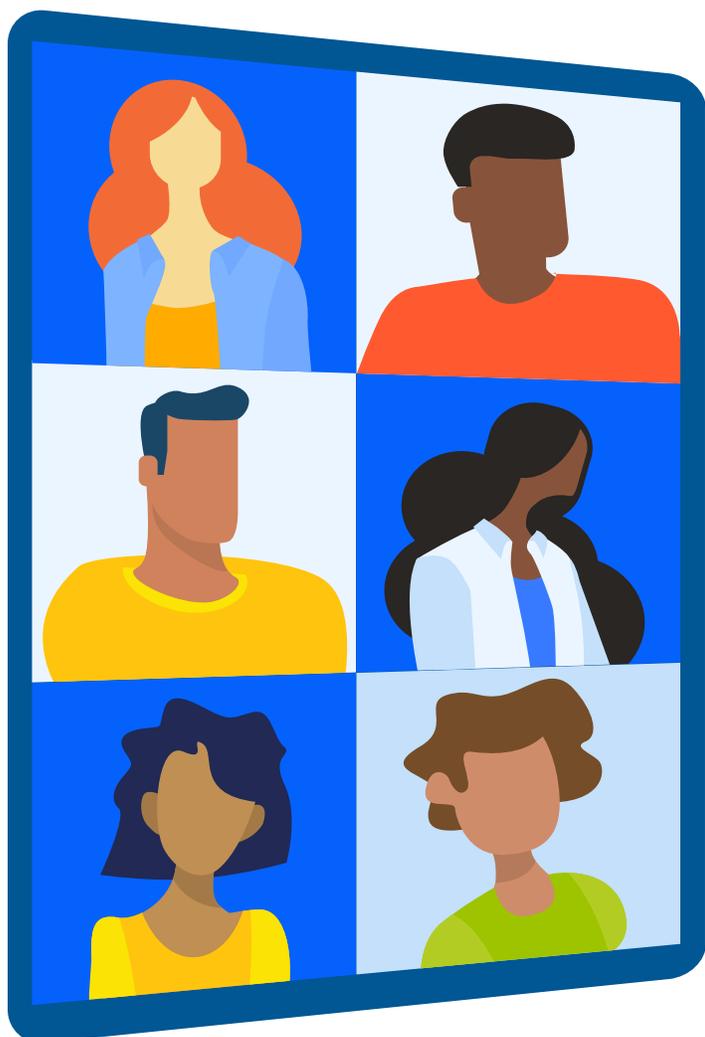
As housing became a central issue during the pandemic, DRF staff provided information about the CDC's eviction moratorium to tenants facing loss of housing as well as guidance about how to complete documents required to access legal protections. Our legal team also represented a woman with disabilities whose housing provider implemented COVID-related restrictions at her apartment complex that prevented her home health aides and grocery deliveries from accessing her unit.



## DRF Complaint Filed Against Governor DeSantis For Missing ASL Interpreters From COVID-19 Press Briefings

As we live through this historic pandemic, it is vital that all Americans have access to important government updates, COVID-related safety measures, and more. That has been denied to 800,000 d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing Floridians, as Gov. Ron DeSantis continues to hold COVID-19 press briefings without a sign language interpreter present. Not providing American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters is a lack of compliance under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. After repeated attempts requesting the governor to provide interpreters with no response, we filed a complaint against him in July. Disability Rights Florida's complaint shares the importance for accessible information related to testing, health precautions, school, and work, along with closures and re-openings.

The complaint also addressed the misconception that closed captioning is a reasonable alternative to ASL. ASL is a different language from English and Spanish, and those who know ASL may not know how to read either of these other languages used for closed captioning. Additionally, Ann Siegel, Legal Director at DRF, shares, "Closed captions are often produced in real-time by automated speech generation systems that repeatedly misspell words, omit words, and scroll too fast to read and comprehend." The lack of empathy and action from the governor and his administration does real harm to the d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities, and we demand that he act so that all Florida residents can access this life-saving information.



### PAIMI Advisory Council Educates in Time of COVID

The Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness (PAIMI) grant requires DRF form a PAIMI Advisory Council (PAC) to advise the P&A on the policies and priorities to be carried out in protecting and advocating the rights of individuals with mental illness. In addition to its advisory role, the PAC also held two virtual community education outreach activities: A virtual presentation to members of NAMI of Broward County about PAIMI program services offered at DRF and a live webinar titled "Coping with COVID: Mental Health and Social Isolation in the time of COVID-19."



## Department of Corrections Failure to Meet Terms of DRF Agreement, New Lawsuit Filed

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In 2017, Disability Rights Florida (DRF) and the Florida Department of Corrections (FDC) signed a settlement agreement intending to protect people with disabilities and make the FDC compliant in a variety of federal laws protecting people with disabilities. Upon closer monitoring in the past few years, it is evident that the FDC has failed to meet the agreement, and in response, DRF sued the FDC for breaching the settlement agreement.

With the valuable input and stories shared by people with disabilities living in these facilities, it is clear that they are not receiving the necessary accommodations, care and services they deserve. The original settlement required that they remedy issues of accessibility and accommodations, such as providing American Sign Language interpreters and other aids during important appointments, disciplinary hearings, education programs, and communication with family and loved ones. In addition, it demanded that the FDC remove physical access barriers for incarcerated people with mobility disabilities.

Incarcerated people are protected under law from discrimination, and it is clear that the FDC is not meeting the deadlines and requirements from the original settlement agreement. As Peter Sleasman, Executive Director of DRF shares, “these protections are crucial for maintaining the independence and dignity of these individuals... it is long past time that the rights of individuals with disabilities are upheld in Florida’s prisons.” You can follow the developments of the case, *Disability Rights Florida v. Florida Department of Corrections*, filed in the Second Judicial Circuit Court in Leon County, Florida.

## DRF Selects 35-year Civil Rights Law Veteran as Executive Director

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Attorney Peter Sleasman was named Executive Director of Disability Rights Florida in June 2020. Previously, the agency’s legal director, he brings 35 years of experience in federal civil rights litigation and disability law, as well as a personal passion for equal justice and the attainment of basic human and civil rights. Although he joined the nonprofit in 2015, Sleasman collaborated with DRF for over 20 years. “Advocacy on behalf of individuals with disabilities, particularly for those confined in state institutions, has been the focus of my entire legal career,” he said. Sleasman received his bachelor’s degree from Centre College in Danville, KY and J.D. from the University of Florida Levin College of Law. He is a member of the Florida Bar, the United States District Court for the Northern, Middle, and Southern Districts of Florida, and the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit.



## DRF Names 25-year Disabilities Advocate & Attorney as Legal Director

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Disability Rights Florida promoted Advocacy, Education & Outreach Team Director Ann Siegel to Legal Director in October 2020. Siegel will act as General Counsel to the organization and will be responsible for leading DRF’s individual and systemic litigation. Located in DRF’s south Florida office, Siegel has been an advocate for individuals with disabilities for over 25 years – with a special interest in children. Previously with Broward Legal Services, Siegel received her J.D. from Nova Southeastern University Shepard Broad Law Center, is a member of the Florida Bar and is admitted to practice in the United States District Courts for the Southern, Middle and Northern Districts as well as in the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit.





## DRF and Social Justice

# STOP HATE FOR PROFIT



Police brutality is a disability justice issue; according to Ruderman, approximately 50% of people killed by the police are people with disabilities. With a lack of disability-centered training and supports, people with disabilities are often misunderstood and viewed as violent or non-compliant with law enforcement. This puts them in a dangerous position.

We mourn the many Black Floridians that have died this year including, but certainly not limited to, Tony McDade, Nevan Baker, and Oluwatoyin Salau, and we share in our statement on the death of George Floyd, "Disability Rights Florida believes our country will never truly heal and live in peace until ALL citizens enjoy a barrier-free, inclusive society devoid of intolerance, discrimination, marginalization and bigotry, and where all Americans—including those with disabilities—are valued and treated equally."

Additionally, we joined the #StopHateForProfit campaign protesting Facebook's lack of supervision and action to stop racist, violent, and verifiably false content on its platform. Joining over a hundred other socially conscious businesses and organizations, we abstained from using paid advertising on Facebook and Instagram to call attention to this issue. Hateful messages and themes shared on social media often target marginalized groups, including the disability community. As Florida's Protection and Advocacy organization, we were proud to join these efforts and call attention to the need to Stop Hate for Profit.

## DRF Recognized with National and Statewide Awards

**National Disability Rights Network's Annual Advocacy Award:** Protection of immigrant children with disabilities living in the Homestead Emergency Temporary Shelter for Unaccompanied Children in Homestead, FL.

**Goldstein – Van Nortwick Award for Excellence:** Florida Legal Services and co-counsel from Holland & Knight and Disability Rights Florida for challenging the systemic inadequacy of mental health treatment for thousands incarcerated in the Florida Department of Corrections' inpatient prison units.

**Goldstein – Van Nortwick Award for Excellence First Runner-Up:** Florida Health Justice Project, Jacksonville Area Legal Aid and special counsel Disability Rights Florida for using a medical-legal partnership and a multi-prong advocacy approach to attain relief for thousands by reforming Florida's flawed Medicaid "ex parte review" process.

**Florida Rehabilitation Council Stephen R. Wise Advocacy Award:** To Legal Director Ann Siegel which recognizes dedicated leaders and champions in the cause of helping persons with disabilities achieve independence and dignity through meaningful employment.

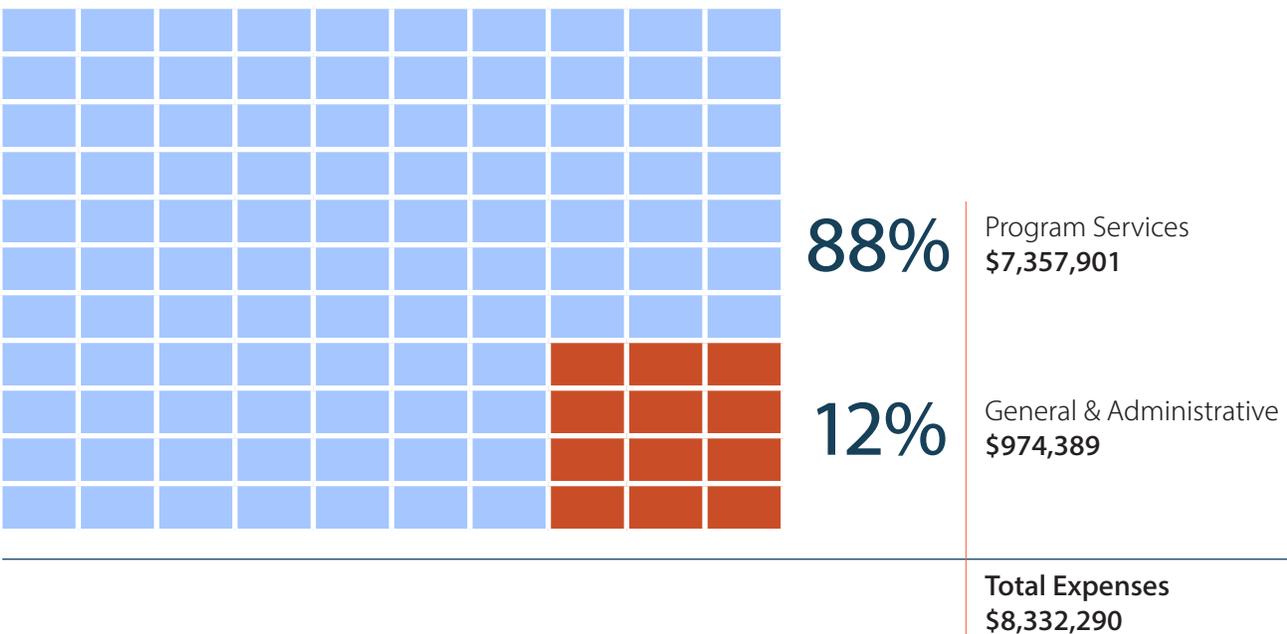




## Financial Information

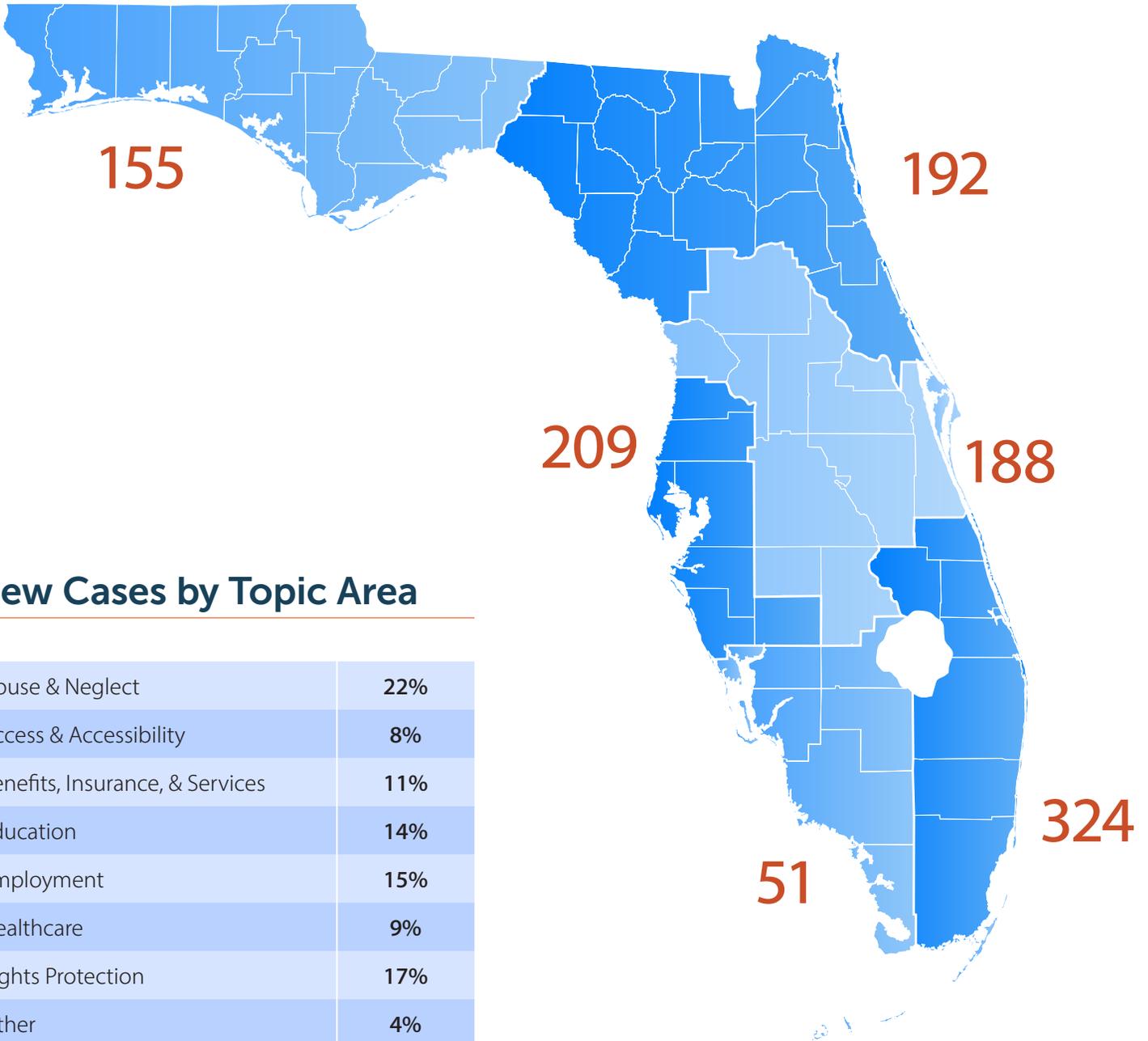
Assistive Technology - PAAT	\$218,684	3%	
Beneficiaries of Social Security - PABSS	\$199,915	2%	
Client Assistance Program - CAP	\$637,327	8%	
Developmental Disabilities - PADD	\$2,414,175	29%	
Individual Rights - PAIR	\$1,149,640	14%	
Individuals with Mental Illness - PAIMI	\$1,580,851	19%	
Traumatic Brain Injury - PATBI	\$288,973	4%	
Voting Access - PAVA	\$143,548	2%	
Social Security Rep Payee - SBSSB	\$1,493,568	18%	
Other Grants, Donations, and Program Income	\$106,897	1%	
<b>Total Revenues and Support</b>	<b>\$8,233,578</b>	<b>100%</b>	

## Program vs. General and Administrative





## New Cases by Region



## New Cases by Topic Area

Abuse & Neglect	22%
Access & Accessibility	8%
Benefits, Insurance, & Services	11%
Education	14%
Employment	15%
Healthcare	9%
Rights Protection	17%
Other	4%
<b>Total New Cases</b>	<b>1,130</b>

## Board of Directors

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Peter Sleasman  
**Executive Director**

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