IN THE SUPREME COURT OF FLORIDA

CASE NO. _____

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MATTER OF INCREASING THE AVAILABILITY OF LEGAL SERVICES FOR THE POOR AND PROVIDING GREATER ACCESS TO THE COURTS

PETITION OF OVER 50 ACTIVE MEMBERS OF THE FLORIDA BAR TO AMEND THE RULES REGULATING THE FLORIDA BAR REGARDING MEMBERSHIP FEES

Pursuant to Rule 1-12.1 of the Rules Regulating The Florida Bar (the "Rules"), the undersigned fifty or more active members of The Florida Bar move for the entry of an Order modifying Rule 1-7.3(a) ("Membership Fees Requirement") to increase The Florida Bar's annual membership fee cap by \$100 to provide greater availability of civil legal services to the poor and to provide greater access to the courts. In support of this petition, we state as follows:

INTRODUCTION

1. Florida's delivery of legal services to the poor is in crisis. Although the need is great, funding from all sources for legal assistance to Florida's poor has dropped to unsustainable levels. Much of this decline in funding is attributable to the collapse in revenue from the Interest on Trust Accounts ("IOTA") program benefitting The Florida Bar Foundation. Since 2008, revenue from the IOTA program has *fallen 88 percent* due to a drastic decrease in interest rates. While individuals admitted to the practice of law in Florida have a responsibility to account for this shortfall by providing competent legal services for all persons, including those unable to pay for such services, these contributions have come nowhere close to filling the gap and meeting the increasing needs of Florida's poor. Studies show that as much as 80% of the legal needs of the poor go unfulfilled.

2. Worsening the problem, many providers of legal services are drastically cutting staff as a result of decreased financial support, resulting in fewer services for fewer clients. The Bar Foundation is projecting cuts of 76% of its legal aid grants by the 2015-16 grant year, and current estimates for the near future project one legal aid attorney for every 10,700 Floridians living in poverty. The result is that "equal justice under law" is rapidly becoming a hollow phrase as the poor are denied access to Florida's courts.

3. This Petition seeks to amend Rule 1-7.3(a) governing the Membership Fees Requirement to help meet the need for civil legal services for the poor. The proposed amendment would authorize the board of governors to increase The Florida Bar membership dues by \$100 and propose that be used to provide legal services to the poor.

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LEGAL AUTHORITY TO MODIFY RULES

4. Pursuant to Florida statute, "[a]dmissions of attorneys and counselors to practice law in the state is . . . a judicial function." § 454.021(1), Fla. Stat. (2013). Furthermore, "[t]he Supreme Court of Florida, being the highest court of said state, is the proper court to govern and regulate admissions of attorneys and counselors to practice law in said state." § 454.021(2), Fla. Stat. (2013). Indeed, the Florida Supreme Court has exclusive jurisdiction to regulate admission to the practice of law and the discipline of those admitted. Art. V, § 15, Fla. Const.

5. This Court promulgates the Rules and establishes the authority and responsibilities of The Florida Bar, an official arm of the Court. *The Fla. Bar re Schwarz*, 552 So. 2d 1094, 1094 (Fla. 1989) ("As a creation of this Court, The Florida Bar is under our supervision and subject to our regulation."); R. Regulating Fla. Bar Ch. 1, Gen. Intro. All active members of The Florida Bar must pay annual membership dues in an amount set by the board of governors in the budget. R. Regulating Fla. Bar 1-7.3. Currently, Rule 1-7.3 sets the membership fees at \$265 per year. *Id. See also* R. Regulating Fla. Bar 1-3.2 (establishing membership classifications).

6. This Court has recognized its authority to adopt and amend the Rules, and also highlighted the responsibility of both the Court and Florida lawyers to ensure that the poor have access to Florida's courts:

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[T] his Court, as the administrative head of the judicial branch, has the responsibility to ensure that access to the courts is provided for all segments of our society. Given the number of reports presented to this Court that document the legal needs of the poor, we find it necessary to implement the attached rules. Justice is not truly justice if only the rich can afford counsel and gain access to the courts. Consequently, these rules are being implemented in the hopes that they will act as a motivating force for the provision of legal services to the poor by the members of this state's legal profession. . . . There is no more effective way to gauge the success of lawyers in meeting their obligation to represent the poor - an obligation every member of the Bar swears to undertake. Lawyers have been granted a special boon by the State of Florida – they in effect have a monopoly on the public justice system. In return, lawyers are ethically bound to help the State's poor gain access to that system.

Amendments to Rule 4-6.1 of the Rules Regulating The Fla. Bar-Pro Bono Pub.

Serv., 696 So. 2d 734, 735 (Fla. 1997) (internal citations omitted).

PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO THE RULES

7. The Petitioners propose the following amendment to Rule 1.7.3(a):

RULE 1-7.3 MEMBERSHIP FEES

(a) Membership Fees Requirement. On or before July 1 of each year, every member of The Florida Bar, except those members who have retired, resigned, been disbarred, or been classified as inactive members pursuant to rule 3-7.13, must pay annual membership fees to The Florida Bar in the amount of \$265 per annum. Every member of the Florida Bar must pay the membership fee and concurrently file a fee statement with any information the board of governors requires. The board of governors may increase the membership fees by \$ 100 per annum provided any increase in the membership fees set by the board of governors shall be

used as additional funding for the Legal Aid to the Poor Program of The Florida Bar Foundation.

ANALYSIS

The Growing Unmet Need for Legal Services to Florida's Poor

8. From 2000 to 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau calculated that the number of people in Florida living below the poverty line increased 4.3 percent to more than 3.2 million. Alemayehu Bishaw, *Poverty: 2000 to 2012, American Community Survey Briefs*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, at 5, Table 2 (September 2013), attached hereto at A. 7.¹ More than one out of every 330 homes in Florida is in foreclosure—approximately three times the national average. *See* FLORIDA REAL ESTATE STATISTICS AND FORECLOSURE TRENDS SUMMARY – REALTYTRAC REAL ESTATE, http://www.realtytrac.com/statsandtrends/foreclosuretrends/fl (last visited December 11, 2013), attached hereto at A. 22-23.

9. Legal aid programs handle basic needs for low-income and disadvantaged Floridians. In 2012, Florida's legal aid programs handled 89,720 cases, as follows:

- Family (29.6%)
- Housing (29.3%)
- Individual Rights (10.3%)
- Consumer (8.6%)
- Income Maintenance (7.0%)

¹ Petitioners have attached a paginated appendix that includes most of the referenced internet resources for the Court's convenience. Citations to that appendix appear as "A." followed by the page number for the referenced material.

- Employment (3.6%)
- Juvenile (2.8%)
- Other (8.8%).

THE FLORIDA BAR FOUNDATION, 2012-2013 ANNUAL REPORT, 5, attached hereto at A. 136; ANNUAL REPORT OF THE FLORIDA BAR FOUNDATION'S LEGAL ASSISTANCE FOR THE POOR GRANT PROGRAM 2012, 1-4, attached hereto at A. 162-65. Despite the work of these programs, studies suggest that as much as 80 percent of the legal needs of the poor are not met. *See* LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION, REPORT OF THE PRO BONO TASK FORCE, 2 & n.10 (Oct. 2012), attached hereto at A. 47. Because of reductions in funding, however, Florida's legal aid programs handled about 10 percent fewer cases in 2012 than in 2011: 100,769 cases were closed in 2011 versus only 89,720 cases closed in 2012. *Compare* THE FLORIDA BAR FOUNDATION, 2012-2013 ANNUAL REPORT, 5, attached hereto at A. 136 *with* THE FLORIDA BAR FOUNDATION, 2011-12 ANNUAL REPORT, 6, attached hereto at A. 117.

10. Funding for legal services is countercyclical: The need increases when the economy stagnates and resources decrease. Despite the generosity of Florida's lawyers, the capacity of legal aid and *pro bono* programs to meet the needs of Florida's poor has fallen due to increased costs and declining funding. *See Trial Lawyers and Family Law sections each give \$75,000 to alleviate cuts to*

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children's legal services programs, THE FLORIDA BAR FOUNDATION (Spring 2012), attached hereto at A. 178-79.

11. There are only 410 full-time legal aid lawyers in Florida and 120 of those positions are in jeopardy. *Id. See also Lack of Legal Aid Leaves Poor in Dire Straits*, DAYTONA BEACH NEWS JOURNAL (Sept. 19, 2012), attached hereto at A. 36. With the growth in Florida's poverty population since the recession, such reductions would result in only one legal aid attorney for every 10,700 Floridians living in poverty. *See Facing devastating cuts to legal aid, Foundation turns to lawyers*, THE FLORIDA BAR NEWS (March 1, 2012), attached hereto at A. 20. And as legal aid programs exhaust their reserves, staffing reductions are occurring. For example, although the number of cases handled by its staff attorneys rose sharply, Legal Services of Greater Miami had to cut five attorneys (from 35 to 30 full-time attorneys). Nabanita Pal, *Cuts Threaten Civil Legal Aid*, BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE (April 22, 2011), attached hereto at A. 83.

12. Revenue from the IOTA program—a significant source of support for civil legal aid providers—has collapsed due to historically low interest rates, falling 88 percent since 2008. *See Facing devastating cuts to legal aid, Foundation turns to lawyers*, attached hereto at A. 20. *See also Lack of Legal Aid Leaves Poor in Dire Straits*, attached hereto at A. 36 (noting that the Florida Bar Foundation raised \$44 million in 2007, but only \$5.58 million during the 2012

fiscal year from IOTA funds); THE FLORIDA BAR FOUNDATION, 2012-2013 ANNUAL REPORT, 16, attached hereto at A. 147 (showing that IOTA revenue raised during the 2012-2013 fiscal year continued to decrease, reaching only \$5.53 million). The Florida Bar Foundation projects that by its 2015-16 fiscal year, it will cut 76% percent of its legal aid grants (as compared to its 2009-10 fiscal year). See Foundation grantees brace for cuts, THE FLORIDA BAR NEWS (April 30, 2013), attached hereto at A. 24. Given that the Federal Reserve announced in December 2012 that it will keep short-term interest rates near zero, IOTA revenue is not expected to increase anytime soon. *Id.* The sustained slump in IOTA revenue has had real world implications for legal services funding. From the 2011-2012 to 2012-2013 years, general support grants were reduced by 35%. THE FLORIDA BAR FOUNDATION, 2012-2013 ANNUAL REPORT, 4, attached hereto at A. 135. Despite generous gifts from the legal community, the Florida Bar Foundation still had to cut its Children's Legal Services grants by 31% from 2011-2012 to 2012-2013. THE FLORIDA BAR FOUNDATION, 2012-2013 ANNUAL REPORT, 6, attached hereto at A. 137. Without the services of legal aid programs, the poor and financially troubled clog the civil court system without representation.

13. Statewide and local efforts at private fundraising have been largely unsuccessful and certainly insufficient to fill the gaps in lost funding. For example, the urgent campaign at the beginning of 2012, the "NOW Campaign," led

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by the Presidents of The Florida Bar and The Florida Bar Foundation, which reached out to Florida's lawyers to respond to the legal aid funding crisis, resulted in only 355 donations for a total of approximately \$92,000. "*Now*" campaign brings in \$92,000, THE FLORIDA BAR FOUNDATION (Summer 2012), attached hereto at A. 88. As of 2010, about only half of Florida's attorneys reported performing any pro bono work. See Reporting of Pro Bono Service, AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, http://apps.americanbar.org/legalservices/probono/reporting/pb reporting.html#Florida (last visited December 4, 2013), attached hereto at A. 106.

14. Furthermore, between 2000 and 2009, Florida's legal services providers reported a 30% decline in the number of lawyers providing *pro bono* services through their organizations. *See* Kim MacQueen, *Pro bono goes stagnant*, THE FLORIDA BAR NEWS (January 1, 2009), attached hereto at A. 30. Successful *pro bono* programs are largely contingent on a strong legal aid infrastructure. Most *pro bono* programs are run by full-time legal services employees who conduct case intake, identify legal issues, conduct trainings, supply pleadings, and refer *pro bono* cases to the private bar volunteer attorneys. Without adequate funding for legal aid programs with a *pro bono* component, the individual effort of *pro bono* lawyers will be far more difficult, if not impossible, extremely inefficient, and much less effective.

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Other States Facing Similar Crises in the Provision of Legal Services Have Adopted Mandatory <u>Increases In Bar Fees to Provide Legal Services to the Poor</u>

15. Throughout the nation, a number of state supreme courts and bar associations already have increased annual fees or dues to help fund free legal assistance for its indigent residents. These include:

Illinois	Members pay \$95 towards the Lawyers' Trust Fund, which is the largest state-level funder of civil legal aid for the poor in Illinois. ²
Missouri	Starting in 2014, members will pay \$30 to fund legal services. ³
New York	Members pay \$50 towards the Indigent Legal Services Fund and \$25 towards the Legal Services Assistance Fund. ⁴
Pennsylvania	Members pay \$25 towards IOLTA program to fund legal services for the poor. ⁵
Texas	Members pay \$65 split evenly between civil legal aid and innovative criminal indigent defense projects. ⁶

² Illinois Supreme Court Increases Registration Fees for Attorneys to Help Fund Legal Services for Poor, SUPREME COURT OF ILLINOIS (June 5, 2012), attached hereto at A. 25.

³ Order dated November 8, 2013, re: Rules 6.01 and 6.07, Supreme Court of Missouri (en banc), attached hereto at A. 90-91.

⁴ *The Legal Profession – Attorney Registration: Registration FAQS, New York State Courts*, http://nycourts.gov/attorneys/registration/faqs.shtml#open (select link for registration requirements for attorneys) (last visited Dec. 6, 2013), attached hereto at A. 176.

⁵ News Release, *Annual Registration Fee for Lawyers to Increase*, ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF PENNSYLVANIA COURTS (Apr. 2, 2009), attached hereto at A. 86.

⁶ Tex. Gov't Code Ann. § 81.054 (2013).

Wisconsin Members pay \$50 towards Public Interest Legal Services Fund⁷

16. Other states, such as Georgia, are currently considering increasing bar fees to better fund indigent representation. *See* Kathleen Baydala Joyner, *State Bar Task Force Mulls Increase in Fees*, DAILY REPORT (Oct. 16, 2013), attached hereto at A. 28-29.

17. Still other states have addressed the decreased funding for legal aid in

other ways:

Colorado	In May 2011, the Colorado Supreme Court voted unanimously to transfer \$750,000 in 2012 and 2013 from the Court's attorney registration fund to Colorado Legal Services to provide pro bono services to Colorado's indigent population. ⁸
Hawaii	Members may opt out of a \$75 contribution to Volunteer Legal Services Hawaii, a non-profit entity founded to provide legal services to low-income individuals through pro bono volunteer lawyers. ⁹

⁷ Wis. SCR § 13.045 (2008).

⁸ Colorado Supreme Court authorizes transfer of surplus attorney registration funds to Colorado Legal Services, COLORADO JUDICIAL BRANCH, (May 11, 2012), attached hereto at A. 19

⁹ 2013 Mandatory Licensing Fee Schedule, HAWAII BAR ASSOCIATION, attached hereto at A. 1.

Minnesota	The Minnesota Supreme Court approved a temporary increase in annual registration fees, allocating \$75 of the increase to the Board of Public Defense to provide additional funding for legal representation of its clients and \$25 to the Legal Services Advisory Committee to be distributed by the Committee for civil legal services for low income and disadvantaged Minnesotans. ¹⁰
South Carolina	Members may opt out of \$30 assessment to meet the civil legal needs of indigents. ¹¹
Alaska	Active members who provide 400 or more hours of pro bono service each calendar year may pay reduced annual membership fees for the year immediately following the year the pro bono hours were provided. ¹²

18. Florida's annual bar fees have not been raised since 2001. If indexed to inflation over the past 12 years, Florida's bar fees would have risen by at least \$84. Inflation Calculator, See CPI BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS. http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm (input \$265 and select 2001 as the year, resulting in \$265 in 2001 having the same buying power as \$348.75 in 2013, or an approximate \$84 difference). Furthermore, Florida's bar fees are relatively low compared with other states. Florida Bar members pay annual fees of \$265, while members of other state Bars must pay annual fees ranging from \$300 to \$660: Alabama (\$300), Alaska (\$660), California (\$410), Kentucky (\$350),

¹⁰ Order Extending Increase in Lawyer Registration Fees, State of Minnesota Supreme Court, ADM10-8002 (formerly C9-81-1206) (March 2, 2011), attached hereto at A. 92-95.

¹¹ S.C. Bar Rule 410 (2013).

¹² Art. III, sec. 1, 2013-2014 Bylaws of the Alaska Bar Association.

Missouri (\$305), Nebraska (\$335), Nevada (\$450), New Hampshire (\$520), North Dakota (\$380), Oregon (\$522), South Dakota (\$415), Utah (\$425), Washington (\$325), Wisconsin (\$460) and Wyoming (\$355).

Explanation of Requested Modification

19. The requested modification would authorize the board of governors the raise the annual active membership fees by \$100 and require that any membership fee in excess of the current fee be allocated to provide greater access to legal services for Florida's poor through the Legal Aid to the Poor Program of The Florida Bar Foundation. The Florida Bar Foundation has established and trained staff to properly administer and account for funds created by this proposed rule change.

20. As discussed above, a \$100 increase in the annual active membership fee is reasonable considering Florida's legal aid funding crisis. The Florida Bar's members have an obligation to ensure that the poor have access to the courts. Far from mandating charitable contributions by Florida's lawyers, this increase would assist them in fulfilling the obligations of their membership in The Florida Bar. *See Amendments to Rule 4-6.1 of the Rules Regulating The Fla. Bar-Pro Bono Pub. Serv.*, 696 So. 2d at 735. There are currently more than 96,000 members of the Florida Bar; a \$100 increase in bar dues would raise about \$10 million for legal aid services for the poor.

Request for Expedited Consideration and Suggested Procedure

21. The Court is requested to expedite consideration of this matter. Petitioners have fully complied with Rule 1-12.1 before filing this petition. Petitioners suggest that interested persons be allowed 30 days from the date of this Petition within which to file written submissions with the Court, allowing Petitioners 10 days to respond, with oral argument set as soon thereafter as practicable.

CONCLUSION

Allowing a \$100 increase in The Florida Bar's membership fees offers immense benefit to the public with minimal inconvenience to Florida's lawyers. Lawyers have a professional obligation to assist in improving the administration of justice, and to provide legal services to those unable to pay for such services. The adoption of a \$100 fee increase would aid Florida lawyers in meeting that responsibility by providing needed funds for legal services to the poor. The Court is urged to adopt the requested amendment.

Respectfully submitted,

<u>/s/ Raoul G. Cantero</u> Raoul G. Cantero

Florida Bar No. 552356 WHITE & CASE LLP Southeast Financial Center 200 S. Biscayne Blvd., Suite 4900 Miami, Florida 33131 Tel: (305) 371-2700 Fax: (305) 358-5744 rcantero@whitecase.com

On behalf of the following 522 active members of The Florida Bar:

William Abbuehl Fla. Bar. No. 171594

Louie Adcock, Jr. Fla. Bar. No. 417

Wendi Adelson Fla. Bar. No. 29987

Shalini Goel Agarwal Fla. Bar. No. 90843

Maria Aguila Fla. Bar. No. 178934

Alejandra Aguilera Fla. Bar. No. 41865

Maria Alvarez Fla. Bar. No. 57141

LaVerne Andreasen Fla. Bar. No. 124321

Paolo Annino Fla. Bar. No. 379166

Rose Marie Archibald Fla. Bar. No. 31021

Teresa Ann Arington

Fla. Bar. No. 506591 Arturo Armand Fla. Bar. No. 51914

Paul Arnold Fla. Bar. No. 60799

Lynwood Arnold, Jr. Fla. Bar. No. 167428

Yesenia Arocha Fla. Bar. No. 58162

Tod Aronovitz Fla. Bar. No. 186430

Melissa Arrojas Fla. Bar. No. 83540

Margaret Atkins Fla. Bar. No. 16343

Adele Bagley Fla. Bar. No. 88543

Jeanne Baker Fla. Bar. No. 880700

Mark Balzli Fla. Bar. No. 928828 Michael Band Fla. Bar. No. 228338

Sarah Barker Fla. Bar. No. 55361

Matthew Bayard Fla. Bar. No. 32209

Maria J. Beguiristain Fla. Bar. No. 69851

Kenneth Bell Fla. Bar. No. 347035

Lisa Bennett Fla. Bar. No. 160529

Richard Bennett Fla. Bar. No. 150627

Gina Beovides Fla. Bar. No. 14973

Ward T. Berg Fla. Bar. No. 390690

Randall Berg Fla. Bar. No. 318371

Jill Nexon Berman

Sidney Bigham Fla. Bar. No. 76409

Garrett Biondo Fla. Bar. No. 193437

Christine Bird Fla. Bar. No. 971642

Deanna Blair Fla. Bar. No. 68245

Jena Blair Fla. Bar. No. 185337

Darryl Bloodworth Fla. Bar. No. 141258

Lauri Bloom Fla. Bar. No. 633763

Liesbeth Boots Fla. Bar. No. 959537

John Borland Fla. Bar. No. 21450

David Boyer Fla. Bar. No. 90917

Joseph Boyles Fla. Bar. No. 14188

D. Marcus Braswell Fla. Bar. No. 146160

Erin Brennan Fla. Bar. No. 99319

Pamela Bress

Fla. Bar. No. 818062

Crystal Broughan Fla. Bar. No. 863343

Mark Brown Fla. Bar. No. 296650

T. Robert Bulloch Fla. Bar. No. 633127

David Burke Fla. Bar. No. 350011

William Burns, Jr. Fla. Bar. No. 172385

Christopher Busch Fla. Bar. No. 92293

S. Sammy Cacciatore Fla. Bar. No. 96334

Sammy M. Cacciatore Fla. Bar. No. 56219

Katheryn Calvo Fla. Bar. No. 528153

Bruce Campbell Fla. Bar. No. 191163

Karla Campos-Anderson Fla. Bar. No. 793841

Carlos Canino Fla. Bar. No. 507172

Cassandra Capobianco Fla. Bar. No. 614734

Katie Carmon

Fla. Bar. No. 73467

Benjamin Carpenter Fla. Bar. No. 92301

Brian Carter Fla. Bar. No. 499481

Sharon Caserta Fla. Bar. No. 23117

Natalie Castellanos Fla. Bar. No. 95547

Liah Catanese Fla. Bar. No. 48017

Michael Celeste Fla. Bar. No. 606571

Juanita Cendan Fla. Bar. No. 754625

Pamela Chamberlin Fla. Bar. No. 444006

Vivian Chavez Fla. Bar. No. 148260

Tonya Sue Chavis Fla. Bar. No. 994464

Carrol Cherry Fla. Bar. No. 297940

Elizabeth Chifari Fla. Bar. No. 4472

Neil Chonin Fla. Bar. No. 13428

Bruce A. Christensen

Nancy Ciampa Fla. Bar. No. 118109

Kirsten Clanton Fla. Bar. No. 17179

Mary Clark Fla. Bar. No. 141482

Terry Coble Fla. Bar. No. 968250

Vanessa Coe Fla. Bar. No. 96788

Robert Cohen Fla. Bar. No. 347353

Jami Coleman Fla. Bar. No. 88983

Thomas Condon Fla. Bar. No. 217913

James Cook Fla. Bar. No. 966843

A. Hamilton Cooke Fla. Bar. No. 110757

J. Thomas Cookson Fla. Bar. No. 994472

James Coombs Fla. Bar. No. 649651

Joseph Corino Fla. Bar. No. 72567

Kelleen Corrigan

Fla. Bar. No. 31804

Sarah Cortvriend Fla. Bar. No. 718947

Andrea Costello Fla. Bar. No. 532991

James Crawford Fla. Bar. No. 69086

Sonia Crockett Fla. Bar. No. 304611

Jeffrey Crockett Fla. Bar. No. 347401

Carrie Vaughn Cromey Fla. Bar. No. 17491

David Cronin Fla. Bar. No. 185401

Roberto Cruz Fla. Bar. No. 18436

Daniel Cruz Fla. Bar. No. 25850

Michele Cummings Fla. Bar. No. 299464

John P. Cunningham Fla. Bar. No. 279481

Marcia Cypen Fla. Bar. No. 226890

Theresa Daniels Fla. Bar. No. 84113

Mary Ann David

Fla. Bar. No. 959723

Dolly Davis Fla. Bar. No. 694770

Kelly Davis Fla. Bar. No. 26461

Stephen Day Fla. Bar. No. 11095

Alison DeBelder Fla. Bar. No. 561223

Katherine DeBriere Fla. Bar. No. 58506

C. Popham Decunto Fla. Bar. No. 650021

Christina DelMarco Fla. Bar. No. 335370

Bryan DeMaggio Fla. Bar. No. 55712

Thomas DePeter Fla. Bar. No. 892718

Mary Anne DePetrillo Fla. Bar. No. 250996

Devang Desai Fla. Bar. No. 664421

V. James Dickson Fla. Bar. No. 310522

Dennis Diecidue Fla. Bar. No. 114676

Jason R. Domark

Paul Doyle Fla. Bar. No. 20388

Kristin Drecktrah Fla. Bar. No. 91026

John Dubrule Fla. Bar. No. 307221

Robert Dwyer Fla. Bar. No. 894257

Suzanne Edmunds Fla. Bar. No. 978752

Charles Elsesser Fla. Bar. No. 971162

Shahrzad Emami Fla. Bar. No. 32218

G. Mitch Evander Fla. Bar. No. 777854

D. Porpoise Evans Fla. Bar. No. 576883

Katherine Ezell Fla. Bar. No. 114771

Michael Faehner Fla. Bar. No. 23043

Fabienne Fahnestock Fla. Bar. No. 145483

Robert Feinson Fla. Bar. No. 553808

Cleveland Ferguson III

Fla. Bar. No. 143979

Pamela Fields Fla. Bar. No. 37015

Christa Figgins Fla. Bar. No. 167861

Michael Figgins Fla. Bar. No. 491071

Janet Findling Fla. Bar. No. 748481

Robert Fiore Fla. Bar. No. 606863

Tracey Foglia Fla. Bar. No. 102617

Jose Fons Fla. Bar. No. 19275

Lisa Magill Foran Fla. Bar. No. 798347

Berbeth Foster Fla. Bar. No. 83375

Sally Bussell Fox Fla. Bar. No. 379360

Donald Freeman Fla. Bar. No. 290327

Anna Frusciante Fla. Bar. No. 41028

Tania Galloni Fla. Bar. No. 619221

Armando Garcia

Fla. Bar. No. 243973

Glen Gifford Fla. Bar. No. 664261

Michael Gillman Fla. Bar. No. 105932

Champagne Girten Fla. Bar. No. 38101

Nicole Giuliano Fla. Bar. No. 71067

Joshua Glickman Fla. Bar. No. 43994

Allison Glickman Fla. Bar. No. 62488

Gerard Glynn Fla. Bar. No. 915660

Lisa Gayle Goldberg Fla. Bar. No. 437964

Odelia Goldberg Fla. Bar. No. 89543

K. Stuart Goldberg Fla. Bar. No. 454745

Alan Goldfarb Fla. Bar. No. 146924

Robert Goldman Fla. Bar. No. 229407

Leslie Goller Fla. Bar. No. 393932

Ely Gonzalez

Lizel Gonzalez Fla. Bar. No. 115940

Alina Gonzalez-Dockery Fla. Bar. No. 94099

Karen M. Gottlieb Fla. Bar. No. 199303

Manoj Govindaiah Fla. Bar. No. 98510

Jonathan Graessle Fla. Bar. No. 102640

James Green Fla. Bar. No. 229466

Jesse Green Fla. Bar. No. 95591

Valory Greenfield Fla. Bar. No. 202584

Alana Greer Fla. Bar. No. 92423

Carol Gregg Fla. Bar. No. 181515

Lee T. Griffin Fla. Bar. No. 389765

Stephen Grimes Fla. Bar. No. 32005

Stephanie Grosman Fla. Bar. No. 23990

Merrick Gross

Fla. Bar. No. 716677

Edward Grunewald Fla. Bar. No. 612472

Kathy Grunewald Fla. Bar. No. 513090

Amy Guinan Fla. Bar. No. 146897

James Haggard Fla. Bar. No. 98525

Nancy Hale Fla. Bar. No. 109975

William Hall Fla. Bar. No. 67936

Sarah Halsell Fla. Bar. No. 674206

Douglas M. Halsey Fla. Bar. No. 288586

Sharon Hanlon Fla. Bar. No. 946620

Steve Hanlon Fla. Bar. No. 209430

Katherine Hanson Fla. Bar. No. 71933

Lance Harke Fla. Bar. No. 863599

Jennifer Thompson Harley Fla. Bar. No. 962821

Miriam Harmatz

Fla. Bar. No. 562017

Stephen Harper Fla. Bar. No. 464638

Linda Harradine Fla. Bar. No. 139645

William Haselden Fla. Bar. No. 72011

Miriam Haskell Fla. Bar. No. 69033

Cecilia Hassan Fla. Bar. No. 20733

Donald Hayden Fla. Bar. No. 97136

Jeff Hearne Fla. Bar. No. 512060

Shawn Heller Fla. Bar. No. 46346

Peter Helwig Fla. Bar. No. 588113

Pamela Hembree Fla. Bar. No. 99448

Yolande Henry Fla. Bar. No. 636231

Annie Hernandez Fla. Bar. No. 674605

Barbara Heyer Fla. Bar. No. 346991

Steve Hine

Donald Hinkle Fla. Bar. No. 301027

Meenakshi Hirani Fla. Bar. No. 168645

John Wayne Hogan Fla. Bar. No. 142460

Daniela Hogue Fla. Bar. No. 97956

Laura Holm Fla. Bar. No. 993646

Michelle Hopkins Fla. Bar. No. 107713

Luciana Hornung Fla. Bar. No. 98562

Lawrence Horsburgh Fla. Bar. No. 92776

Elizabeth Hubbart Fla. Bar. No. 87734

Cindy Huddleston Fla. Bar. No. 383041

Jamie Ibrahim Fla. Bar. No. 20985

Donald Isaac Fla. Bar. No. 394106

Robert Jack Fla. Bar. No. 85064

Kevin Jacobs

Fla. Bar. No. 169821

Steven Jaffe Fla. Bar. No. 390770

Meena Jagannath Fla. Bar. No. 102684

Jocelyn Jauregui Fla. Bar. No. 44264

Christopher Jenkins Fla. Bar. No. 95612

John Jenkins Fla. Bar. No. 435546

Jennifer Jerome Fla. Bar. No. 60873

Richard Johnson Fla. Bar. No. 858323

Greg Johnson Fla. Bar. No. 219320

Robert Johnson Fla. Bar. No. 969877

Michelle Holmes Johnson Fla. Bar. No. 59010

Lora Johnston Fla. Bar. No. 85076

Christopher Jones Fla. Bar. No. 994642

Robert Josefsberg Fla. Bar. No. 40856

Ashley Juchawski

Fla. Bar. No. 105271

Robert Julin Fla. Bar. No. 325376

Matthew Kachergus Fla. Bar. No. 503282

Anthony Karrat Fla. Bar. No. 192925

Maria Kayanan Fla. Bar. No. 305601

Deborah Kearney Fla. Bar. No. 334820

Katherine Kelly Fla. Bar. No. 96667

Scott Kennelly Fla. Bar. No. 59116

Colette Kienle Fla. Bar. No. 37108

Lewis Killian Fla. Bar. No. 219452

Heather Kilpatrick Fla. Bar. No. 573655

Charles Kline Fla. Bar. No. 137737

Kristine Knab Fla. Bar. No. 257125

Debra Koprowski Fla. Bar. No. 287539

Margaret Kosyk

James A. Kowalski, Jr. Fla. Bar. No. 852740

Jane Kreusler-Walsh Fla. Bar. No. 272371

William Krizner Fla. Bar. No. 185574

Donna Krusbe Fla. Bar. No. 975631

Benedict Kuehne Fla. Bar. No. 233293

Ira Kurzban Fla. Bar. No. 225517

Lissette Labrousse Fla. Bar. No. 512508

Karen Ladis Fla. Bar. No. 857475

Richard Lantinberg Fla. Bar. No. 956708

Magda Lanza Fla. Bar. No. 113565

Christine Larson Fla. Bar. No. 253413

Emma R. Larson Fla. Bar. No. 29153

Toni Latino Fla. Bar. No. 22715

Lisa Lauck

Fla. Bar. No. 14487

Noel G. Lawrence Fla. Bar. No. 844251

Tobi Lebowitz Fla. Bar. No. 21486

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Mara Levy Fla. Bar. No. 344280

Stephen Lewis Fla. Bar. No. 884081

Corrine Lincoln Fla. Bar. No. 69589

Robert Link Fla. Bar. No. 200743

Cheryl Little Fla. Bar. No. 655678

John Little Fla. Bar. No. 578460

Evita Llaguno-Feria Fla. Bar. No. 30486

Carolina Lombardi

Fla. Bar. No. 241970

Donna Lonsberry Fla. Bar. No. 483915

Corali Lopez-Castro Fla. Bar. No. 863830

Mary Bland Love Fla. Bar. No. 263281

Cecille Lucero Fla. Bar. No. 96674

K. Beth Luna Fla. Bar. No. 244340

Ellen Lyons Fla. Bar. No. 57819

Theodore Mack Fla. Bar. No. 200840

Peter MacNamara Fla. Bar. No. 219843

Elyse MacNamara Fla. Bar. No. 107191

Donna MacRae Fla. Bar. No. 864730

Amelia Rea Maguire Fla. Bar. No. 655724

Stephen Maher Fla. Bar. No. 200859

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William Manikas

Scott Manion Fla. Bar. No. 791733

Jonathan L. Mann Fla. Bar. No. 99860

Desiree Marengo Fla. Bar. No. 99033

Lawrence Markell Fla. Bar. No. 729220

Randall Marshall Fla. Bar. No. 181765

Diana Martin Fla. Bar. No. 624489

Anadelle Martinez-Mullen Fla. Bar. No. 91843

M. Kimberly Martyn Fla. Bar. No. 883689

Robert Mason Fla. Bar. No. 844349

Sarah Mattern Fla. Bar. No. 92876

Jonathan Harrison Maurer Fla. Bar. No. 99544

Natalie Maxwell Fla. Bar. No. 16746

Katianna Mazard Fla. Bar. No. 916021

Wallace McCall

Fla. Bar. No. 157086

Molly Caroline McCrae Fla. Bar. No. 72164

Liam McGivern Fla. Bar. No. 98684

Margaret McMorrow Fla. Bar. No. 156000

Carrington Mead Fla. Bar. No. 711136

Greg Medalie Fla. Bar. No. 867871

Thomas Meeks Fla. Bar. No. 314323

Lesley Mendoza Fla. Bar. No. 572780

Alexandra Mesa Fla. Bar. No. 94282

Victoria Mesa-Estrada Fla. Bar. No. 76569

James Meyer Fla. Bar. No. 818216

Dionne Meyers Fla. Bar. No. 560881

Jimmy Midyette Fla. Bar. No. 495859

Cynthia Midyette Fla. Bar. No. 11323

Elizabeth Miller

Fla. Bar. No. 578411

Carol S. Miller Fla. Bar. No. 304050

James Fox Miller Fla. Bar. No. 95070

Jon L. Mills Fla. Bar. No. 148286

Mandy Mills Fla. Bar. No. 41654

Richard Milstein Fla. Bar. No. 175001

Linda Monaco Fla. Bar. No. 522341

Robert Moore Fla. Bar. No. 857971

David Morrison Fla. Bar. No. 436161

Anita Margot Moss Fla. Bar. No. 91870

Julie Anne Moxley Fla. Bar. No. 863912

John Mullen Fla. Bar. No. 32883

Michael Mullen Fla. Bar. No. 305731

Rene Murai Fla. Bar. No. 122154

Robert Murphy

Lisa Murray Fla. Bar. No. 488410

Robert Murray Fla. Bar. No. 961574

Jennifer Nackley Fla. Bar. No. 968552

David Naples, Jr. Fla. Bar. No. 99064

Joseph Nascimento Fla. Bar. No. 70096

Sabarish Neelakanta Fla. Bar. No. 26623

Carolina Neves Fla. Bar. No. 99069

JoNel Newman Fla. Bar. No. 112320

Mark Newman Fla. Bar. No. 277150

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Christopher Norris Fla. Bar. No. 886211

Stephanie Ockunzzi Fla. Bar. No. 859931

Karen Oehme

Fla. Bar. No. 699993

Maria O'Neill Fla. Bar. No. 55332

Samantha Alves Orender Fla. Bar. No. 56644

Gladys Andrea Ortega Fla. Bar. No. 97651

Michelle Ortiz Fla. Bar. No. 860271

Aidil Oscariz Fla. Bar. No. 63432

Charles Overman Fla. Bar. No. 164209

Jeffrey Pace Fla. Bar. No. 106560

Curtis Pajcic Fla. Bar. No. 68292

Michael Pajcic Fla. Bar. No. 56664

Patrice Paldino Fla. Bar. No. 147631

Peter Pancoast Fla. Bar. No. 138547

Katherine Bliss Para Fla. Bar. No. 484652

Benjamin Patterson Fla. Bar. No. 124377

Darrell Payne

Fla. Bar. No. 773300

Charles Peppler Fla. Bar. No. 239739

Jorge Perez Fla. Bar. No. 779334

Silvia Perez Fla. Bar. No. 505374

Bernard Perlmutter Fla. Bar. No. 455260

Nina Perry Fla. Bar. No. 79537

Roderick Petrey Fla. Bar. No. 128918

Sheldon A. Philp Fla. Bar. No. 20123

Serena Pines Fla. Bar. No. 48791

Juan Carlos Plata Fla. Bar. No. 106591

William Earl Ploss Fla. Bar. No. 261671

Elizabeth Pohm Fla. Bar. No. 107208

Leslie Powell Fla. Bar. No. 64386

Thomas Powell Fla. Bar. No. 233511

Barbara Prager

Misty Priest Fla. Bar. No. 89199

Kevin Probst Fla. Bar. No. 51422

Kathryn Pugh Fla. Bar. No. 182631

Daniel Rowinsky Quintian Fla. Bar. No. 105225

David Raben Fla. Bar. No. 308641

Jessica Rae Fla. Bar. No. 84593

Craig Rasile Fla. Bar. No. 613691

Casey Ratchford Fla. Bar. No. 727121

Louis Ray, Jr. Fla. Bar. No. 97641

Paul Regensdorf Fla. Bar. No. 152395

Laura Murray Reich Fla. Bar. No. 22792

Benjamine Reid Fla. Bar. No. 183522

Brittany Rhodaback Fla. Bar. No. 91975

Benjamin Richard

Fla. Bar. No. 13896

Monique Richardson Fla. Bar. No. 195596

R. Terry Rigsby Fla. Bar. No. 202045

James Rinaman, Jr. Fla. Bar. No. 66720

Marissa Rios Fla. Bar. No. 89212

William Ritchie Fla. Bar. No. 844667

Angela Rivera Fla. Bar. No. 98176

Nilsa Rivera-Lopez Fla. Bar. No. 86290

Linje Rivers Fla. Bar. No. 79063

Wendy Robbins Fla. Bar. No. 138665

Andrea Bryant Roberts Fla. Bar. No. 43422

Kara Lien Roberts Fla. Bar. No. 56915

James N. Robinson Fla. Bar. No. 68858

Kimberly Rodgers Fla. Bar. No. 160628

Domingo C. Rodriguez

Fla. Bar. No. 394645

John-Paul Rodriguez Fla. Bar. No. 73923

Bruce S. Rogow Fla. Bar. No. 67999

Robin Rosenberg Fla. Bar. No. 907332

Arthur Rosenberg Fla. Bar. No. 967580

Alan Rosenthal Fla. Bar. No. 220833

Stephen Rosenthal Fla. Bar. No. 131458

Jeanne Vagell Rowlee Fla. Bar. No. 160342

Sean Rowley Fla. Bar. No. 26935

Terrence Russell Fla. Bar. No. 116057

Lissie Salazar Fla. Bar. No. 866741

Scot Samis Fla. Bar. No. 651753

Natausha Samuels Fla. Bar. No. 694371

Lilly Ann Sanchez Fla. Bar. No. 195677

Ilenia Sanchez-Bryson

Katherine Sanoja Fla. Bar. No. 99137

Cristina Scarano Fla. Bar. No. 46258

Kara Schickowski Fla. Bar. No. 42156

Roger J. Schindler Fla. Bar. No. 124726

Sally Schmidt Fla. Bar. No. 455393

Kevin Schoeppel Fla. Bar. No. 973793

Arthur Schofield Fla. Bar. No. 984434

Rebecca Parsons Schram Fla. Bar. No. 84660

Thomas Schulte Fla. Bar. No. 29416

Adam A. Schwartzbaum Fla. Bar. No. 93014

Darby Kerrigan Scott Fla. Bar. No. 46848

Ana Segura Fla. Bar. No. 970610

Eric Seidmon Fla. Bar. No. 90569

Julia Seifer-Smith

Fla. Bar. No. 86567

Sheila Seig Fla. Bar. No. 352268

Jose Sepulveda Fla. Bar. No. 154490

Leah Shadle Fla. Bar. No. 52869

Rebecca Sharpless Fla. Bar. No. 131024

William Sheppard Fla. Bar. No. 109154

Harry Shorstein Fla. Bar. No. 93316

Jessica Shulruff Fla. Bar. No. 72806

Jodi Siegel Fla. Bar. No. 511617

Effie Silva Fla. Bar. No. 630535

Murray Silverstein Fla. Bar. No. 349216

Stuart Singer Fla. Bar. No. 377325

Thomas Slater Fla. Bar. No. 614114

Peter Sleasman Fla. Bar. No. 367931

Jocelyn Smith

Fla. Bar. No. 36554

Kymberlee Smith Fla. Bar. No. 22463

Rodney Quinn Smith Fla. Bar. No. 59523

Eric Sodhi Fla. Bar. No. 583871

Neal Sonnett Fla. Bar. No. 105986

Amanda Sorge Fla. Bar. No. 96329

Brian Sorrells Fla. Bar. No. 57390

Craig Spencer Fla. Bar. No. 12153

Marcellina Spigner Fla. Bar. No. 28502

Matthew Spohrer Fla. Bar. No. 62534

Robert Spohrer Fla. Bar. No. 184500

Wayne Sprague Fla. Bar. No. 333972

Kent Spriggs Fla. Bar. No. 106011

Kent Spuhler Fla. Bar. No. 152710

Rachael Stanger

Andrew Stanton Fla. Bar. No. 46779

Charles Stepter Fla. Bar. No. 165478

Kele Stewart Fla. Bar. No. 16294

Scott Stichter Fla. Bar. No. 710679

Robert Stober Fla. Bar. No. 104043

Thomas Stone Fla. Bar. No. 212490

Estelle Strickland Fla. Bar. No. 929050

Cheryl Stuart Fla. Bar. No. 622699

Sarah R. Sullivan Fla. Bar. No. 121592

William Sussmann Fla. Bar. No. 169784

Anne Swerlick Fla. Bar. No. 241040

Christopher Swift-Perez Fla. Bar. No. 100407

Marc Taps Fla. Bar. No. 268852

David Tarbert

Fla. Bar. No. 778461

Ray Taseff Fla. Bar. No. 352500

John C. Taylor, Jr. Fla. Bar. No. 125100

Daniel Thompson Fla. Bar. No. 195101

Robin Hassler Thompson Fla. Bar. No. 444324

Allison Thompson Fla. Bar. No. 188620

Angela Thompson Fla. Bar. No. 54320

Patricia Thompson Fla. Bar. No. 221783

Parker Thomson Fla. Bar. No. 81225

Adam Thoresen Fla. Bar. No. 57675

Charles Throckmorton Fla. Bar. No. 101203

Daniel Tilley Fla. Bar. No. 102882

Andrew Tramont Fla. Bar. No. 322830

Clovis Trevino Fla. Bar. No. 104110

Dante Trevisani

Fla. Bar. No. 72912

Kenneth Tworoger Fla. Bar. No. 113210

Justin Uhlemann Fla. Bar. No. 568872

Ryan Ulloa Fla. Bar. No. 84757

David Utter Fla. Bar. No. 92585

Lea Valdivia Fla. Bar. No. 84763

Rebecca Vargas Fla. Bar. No. 150037

Roberto Vargas Fla. Bar. No. 151106

M. Therese Vento Fla. Bar. No. 231746

Dana Viggiano Fla. Bar. No. 58472

Angela Vigil Fla. Bar. No. 38627

Monica Vigues-Pitan Fla. Bar. No. 685011

Kathleen Villacorta Fla. Bar. No. 231754

Megan Wall Fla. Bar. No. 938300

Jack Wallace

Edward Waller Fla. Bar. No. 106341

Gabriel Warren Fla. Bar. No. 84777

Thomas Warren Fla. Bar. No. 176730

Dustin Watkins Fla. Bar. No. 106783

Benjamin Waxman Fla. Bar. No. 403237

Victoria Weber Fla. Bar. No. 266426

Lance Weber Fla. Bar. No. 104550

Nikki Weisburd Fla. Bar. No. 940771

Susan Werth Fla. Bar. No. 167963 Susan Miles Whitaker Fla. Bar. No. 865095

W. Douglas White Fla. Bar. No. 706302

Bill White Fla. Bar. No. 188706

Elizabeth White Fla. Bar. No. 314560

Evian White Fla. Bar. No. 84790

Felicia A. Wilcox Fla. Bar. No. 88854

Harriet Williams Fla. Bar. No. 816558

Elizabeth Willis Fla. Bar. No. 746230

Karen Winston Fla. Bar. No. 88885

Chanel Winter

Fla. Bar. No. 107118

Jennifer Wioncek Fla. Bar. No. 31564

Steven Wisotsky Fla. Bar. No. 130838

Richard Woltmann Fla. Bar. No. 125335

Cynthia Woodward Fla. Bar. No. 442674

Nancy Wright Fla. Bar. No. 309419

Laurie Yadoff Fla. Bar. No. 113786

Carter Young Fla. Bar. No. 58034

Margaret Zehren Fla. Bar. No. 402680

Nina Zollo Fla. Bar. No. 779570