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## **Gov. Scott Signs Legislation that Provides Attorneys for Dependent Children with Special Needs**

**TALLAHASSEE, Fla.** – Today, Governor Rick Scott announced he has signed House Bill 561, which requires the appointment of an attorney to represent dependent children who have special needs, unless a pro bono attorney represents the child.

Governor Rick Scott said, "I'm happy to sign this legislation today to ensure that children who have disabilities and are in the care of the state are guaranteed that advocate to represent them in legal matters. We must do everything to protect our children and this legislation provides greater support to those who need it most."

The bill states that an attorney shall be appointed for a dependent child with disabilities who meets one or more of the following criteria:

- Resides in a skilled nursing facility or is being considered for placement in a skilled nursing home;
- Is prescribed a psychotropic medication but declines assent to the medication;
- Has a diagnosis of a developmental disability as defined in law;
- Is being placed in a residential treatment center or being considered for placement in a residential treatment center; or
- Is a victim of human trafficking.

DCF Interim Secretary Mike Carroll said, "I am pleased to see this bill become law because it will ensure that children with special needs who have endured abuse or neglect have a strong voice in court."

Alan Abramowitz, Executive Director, Florida Guardian ad Litem Program said, "The GAL's 'best interest' attorneys, staff, and volunteers – working with attorneys created by this new legislation on these complex cases will be a formidable advocacy team to get children permanency. The addition of these skilled attorneys to advocate children's disability benefits, educational services, and a permanent family is a giant step forward in improving our state's child protection system. I passionately believe in the work we do for these children, and this legislation will not interfere with our representation of children or our ability to secure resources to have all children's 'best interest' represented in Florida's dependency system."

Gloria W. Fletcher, Vice President, Florida's Children First said, "It takes more than leadership to sign a bill that will help a constituency who cannot vote, has no money to donate to campaigns, and may never know the heroes who came to their aid. But that's the true definition of character. Governor Scott, and the legislators who backed the bill to provide counsel for the state's dependent children with special needs, epitomized leadership. The children who will be served by this legislation are Florida's most vulnerable and defenseless citizens. Children before this legislation had no voice. Now, they will during critical proceedings that decide their futures. This was done for all the right reasons by people who have proven their passion and concern for the most vulnerable children in the state's care. It stands as an example we can be proud of today, and it will be a lasting part of these leaders' legacies long after they've left public office."

Senator Bill Galvano, Senate bill sponsor said, "This is yet another piece of legislation that considers the priority needs of Florida's most vulnerable children. Like me, Governor Scott is a family man and I appreciate him supporting children and families by making this bill the law of Florida."

Senator Tom Lee said, "Governor Scott recognizes that children with disabilities deserve a voice to advocate for their position and it shows with his signing of House Bill 561 today."

Senator Joe Negron said, "I am pleased Governor Scott is highlighting his signing of this important legislation that ensures dependent children with disabilities have an attorney."

Senator Rob Bradley said, "Governor Scott's signing of HB 561 codifies what we know to be true: that he and the state care about putting what is in the best interest of children in the care and custody of the state first."

Representative Erik Fresen, House bill sponsor said, "I'm thankful Governor Scott signed HB 561. This bill outlines an avenue for the Department of Children and Families to work with the courts and the Statewide Guardian Ad Litem Office so dependent children with disabilities are provided an attorney."

Representative Dennis Baxley said, "Governor Scott is committed to supporting all Floridians who are vulnerable like the dependent children with disabilities who are specifically provided for in this law."

Representative Charles McBurney said, "I appreciate Governor Scott's support of this bill. It will make a difference in the lives of children with disabilities and who need a legal advocate."

Representative Larry Metz said, "By signing House Bill 561 into law, Governor Scott echoed his support for ensuring every child has a voice."

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