



## THE FLORIDA SENATE

### SPECIAL MASTER ON CLAIM BILLS

**Location**

302 Senate Office Building

**Mailing Address**

404 South Monroe Street  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1100  
(850) 487-5237

| DATE     | COMM | ACTION                  |
|----------|------|-------------------------|
| 10/26/15 | SM   | Favorable               |
| 01/22/16 | JU   | Favorable               |
| 02/16/16 | AHS  | Recommend:<br>Favorable |
|          | AP   |                         |

November 17, 2015

The Honorable Andy Gardiner  
President, The Florida Senate  
Suite 409, The Capitol  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1100

Re: **SB 26** – Senator Negrón  
**HB 3531** – Representative Mike Miller  
Relief of L.T., a minor, by the Department of Children and Families

### SPECIAL MASTER'S FINAL REPORT

THIS IS AN UNCONTESTED EQUITABLE CLAIM FOR \$800,000 FROM GENERAL REVENUE BASED ON A SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE LEGAL GUARDIAN OF L.T. AND THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FOR THE SEXUAL ABUSE SUFFERED BY L.T. WHEN SHE WAS LEFT BY THE DEPARTMENT IN THE FOSTER CARE OF A REGISTERED SEX OFFENDER

#### CURRENT STATUS:

On December 14, 2010, an administrative law judge from the Division of Administrative Hearings, serving as a Senate special master, held a de novo hearing on a previous version of this bill, SB 18 (2012). After the hearing, the judge issued a report containing findings of fact and conclusions of law and recommended that the bill be reported favorably with an amendment to correct an erroneous claim amount. (The 2012 bill failed to account for the \$200,000 that DCF had already paid; therefore, the proper claim amount was \$800,000 rather than \$1,000,000.) The 2012 report is attached as an addendum to this report. The amount claimed in SB 26 (2016) on the date of this report is \$800,000.

Due to the passage of time since the hearing, the Senate President reassigned the claim to me, Mary K. Kraemer. My responsibilities were to review the records relating to the claim bill, be available for questions from the members, and determine whether any changes have occurred since the hearing, which if known at the hearing, might have significantly altered the findings or recommendation in the previous report.

The provisions of SB 26 (2016) address and update the circumstances (with additional detail) upon which the claim for relief is based. It should be noted that the prior claim bill, SB 18 (2012), evaluated by the then-Senate special master, sought relief of the claimant **as a minor**. The record reflects that the claimant is now over the age of eighteen. SB 26 now references payment to a special needs trust for the exclusive use and benefit of the claimant. (Section 3, lines 127-138). Further, administration of the trust will be handled by an institutional trustee selected by the claimant, until the trust is terminated upon the claimant's 30th birthday. In case of the claimant's death prior to termination of the trust, any remaining trust funds will belong to her heirs, beneficiaries, or estate.)

The position of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) on the settlement of the case by payment as described in the bill is unchanged. Counsel for DCF stated in a letter dated September 30, 2015 that "DCF needs to continue to have claim bills funded from General Revenue. DCF is operating at minimal trust fund reserves that are essential to meeting cash flow and Department program needs. Any appropriation from a trust fund could have an effect on DCF operations and its ability to meet future related obligations."

In an update letter dated October 14, 2015, claimant's counsel stated that the claimant:

1. Is now married and lives with her husband and daughter in Jacksonville, where her husband, a hospital corpsman, is stationed at the Naval Air Station.
2. Is in her third year of studies, majoring in Applied Psychology at Florida State College at Jacksonville. Her career goal is to become a child psychologist, specializing in the treatment of children who have suffered trauma; and

3. Continues to undergo therapy, as she still suffers from the effects of her trauma.

SB 26 (2016) includes language similar to the above (lines 97-102), and further indicates that the claimant is employed part-time.

ATTORNEYS FEES:

The bill provides that the total amount paid for attorney fees, lobbying fees, costs, and other similar expenses related to the claim may not exceed 25 percent of the award (i.e., not exceeding \$200,000 of the proposed \$800,000 payment to the special needs trust).

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That SB 26 be reported FAVORABLY, based on the conclusions on page 3 of the 2012 report (attached hereto) reached by the administrative law judge from the Division of Administrative Hearings, that:

DCF has a duty to exercise reasonable care when it places foster children and to protect them from known dangers, and that DCF knew or should have known [of the] serious risk of harm to L.T. These breaches of duty were the proximate cause of the injuries that L.T. suffered.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary K. Kraemer  
Senate Special Master

cc: Secretary of the Senate



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402 Senate Office Building

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|         | COMM | ACTION          |
|---------|------|-----------------|
| 12/1/11 | SM   | Fav/1 amendment |
|         |      |                 |
|         |      |                 |

December 1, 2011

The Honorable Mike Haridopolos  
President, The Florida Senate Suite  
409, The Capitol Tallahassee, Florida  
32399-110

Re: **SB 18 (2012)** Senator Jeremy Ring  
Relief of L.T., a Minor

SPECIAL MASTER'S FINAL REPORT

THIS IS AN UNCONTESTED EQUITABLE CLAIM FOR \$800,000 FROM GENERAL REVENUE BASED ON A SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE LEGAL GUARDIAN OF L.T. AND THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FOR THE SEXUAL ABUSE SUFFERED BY L.T. WHEN SHE WAS LEFT BY THE DEPARTMENT IN THE FOSTER CARE OF A REGISTERED SEX OFFENDER.

FINDINGS OF FACT:

In August 1995, when LT. was less than two years old, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) removed LT. and her brother from their mother and placed them in the foster care of their great uncle, Eddie Thomas, and his wife, who lived in Gadsden County. Less than a year after the placement, Thomas was charged with sexually molesting a 13-year-old girl. He plead no contest to lewd, lascivious, or indecent assault upon a child and was sentenced to five years' probation and required to receive sex abuse counseling. He was also registered as a sex offender.

Despite the fact that DCF was aware of Thomas' conviction and his registration as a sex offender, it decided

that the risk of harm to L.T. was low and did not remove L.T. from Thomas' care and custody. DCF also terminated protective supervision of L.T., meaning that a social worker no longer visited the Thomas home from time to time to see how L.T. was doing. Protective supervision is often terminated by DCF when a child is placed with a relative and DCF is satisfied that supervision is unnecessary.

In 2004, when L.T. was 10 years old, DCF placed an adolescent girl in the foster care of the Thomases. A few months after the placement, this minor girl ran away from the house in the middle of the night, claiming that Thomas had attempted to sexually molest her. DCF removed this girl from the Thomas home, but DCF did not re-evaluate the placement of LT. with Thomas.

In March 2005, when L.T. was 11 years old (and Thomas was 44), she ran away from home and told authorities that she had been repeatedly sexually abused by Thomas. She also said that Thomas and his wife used drugs. DCF then removed L.T. from the Thomas home.

It was later revealed by L.T. that she was roughly disciplined by the Thomases and that they were verbally abusive to her, frequently calling her derogatory names and telling her that she was worthless.

L.T. is now 17 years old and in a good foster home. However, as a result of the sexual abuse she endured while living with Thomas, L.T. suffers from post traumatic stress disorder, depression, and low self esteem. She has occasionally attempted suicide and for 10 months was a resident of Tampa Bay Academy, a mental health facility. She is receiving psychological counseling and will likely need counseling for many years. A trial consultant projected her future lost earnings as \$540,000. Her projected future medical expenses are \$760,000 to \$11,580,000, depending on the degree of psychological therapy and supervision she might need, the higher figure reflecting the costs of institutionalization. A conservative estimate of her total future economic losses is around \$2 million.

LITIGATION HISTORY:

In 2009, a lawsuit against DCF was filed in the Second Judicial Circuit by L.T.'s aunt and legal guardian. The case was successfully mediated and the parties entered into a

settlement agreement pursuant to which L.T. would receive \$1,000,000. The sovereign immunity limit of \$200,000 was paid and the balance of \$800,000 is sought through this claim bill. The court order approving the settlement agreement requires that the net proceeds to L.T. be placed in a special needs trust. After deducting legal fees and costs from the \$200,000, and accounting for a Medicaid lien, \$11,084 remained to be placed in a special needs trust for L.T.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

The claim bill hearing was a *de novo* proceeding for the purpose of determining, based on the evidence presented to the Special Master, whether DCF is liable in negligence for the injuries suffered by L.T., and, if so, whether the amount of the claim is reasonable.

DCF has a duty to exercise reasonable care when it places foster children and to protect them from known dangers. DCF breached that duty when it learned that Thomas had been convicted of a sexual offense on a child, but did not remove L.T. from the Thomas home. DCF acted negligently again when it did not remove L.T. following the charge of sexual abuse against Thomas made by another foster child in 2004. DCF knew or should have known that Thomas posed a serious risk of harm to L.T. These breaches of duty were the proximate cause of the injuries that L.T. suffered.

The amount of the claim is fair and reasonable.

ATTORNEY'S FEES:

In compliance with s. 768.28(8), Florida Statutes, LT.'s attorneys have agreed to limit their fees to 25 percent of any amount awarded by the Legislature.

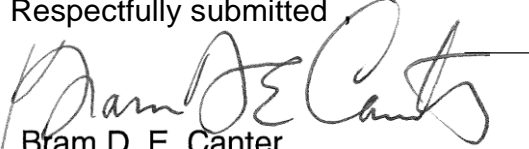
OTHER ISSUES:

The bill erroneously states that the claim is for \$1 million, failing to account for the \$200,000 that DCF has already paid. The bill should be amended to state that the claim is for \$800,000.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

For the reasons set forth above, I recommend that Senate Bill 18 (2012) be reported FAVORABLY, as amended.

Respectfully submitted



Bram D. E. Canter  
Senate Special Master

cc: Senator Ring  
Debbie Brown, Secretary of the Senate  
Counsel of Record