17TH
JUDICIAL
CIRCUIT

COURT NEWS

APRIL 2026

2026

SPRING ISSUE

Chief Judge Carol-Lisa Phillips Speaks Out:

The 17th Judicial Circuit is off to a strong and promising start this year. We have had the pleasure of welcoming hundreds of students from across Broward County into our courthouses – an effort that reflects our shared commitment to education, transparency, and community engagement.

We attended many events and celebrated Black History Month, Women's History Month, and the investiture of Judge Pascale Achille. My sincere thanks to all who have generously given their time to volunteer and participate in these meaningful outreach events.

We are also proud to welcome Judge James R. Harris and Judge Jeremy I. Franker to the 17th Judicial Circuit. We look forward to their contributions and the experience they bring to our bench.

In addition, we are excited to launch the new Family Court Services Pilot Program – an important step forward in strengthening the support and services available to the families we serve.

Our communications committee has published several op-eds to engage and inform our residents about different areas of the law and what to expect if summoned for jury duty.

Thank you to each of you for your continued hard work, professionalism, and dedication. It is because of your efforts that the 17th Judicial Circuit continues to set a standard of excellence.

A Message from Trial Court Administrator Joe D'Amico:

The 2026 state legislative session has come and gone, and yet there continues to be uncertainty surrounding next year's budget. As you all are likely aware, the State Legislature adjourned without approving a budget for next year.

Legislators are expected to return to Tallahassee in May and finalize the budget.

On another note, we recently finalized and submitted to the County Commission our budget proposals for next year, which includes a request for continued funding for our newly minted Family Court Services program. The program has seen great progress and success since its inception earlier this year, attributed to the perseverance and dedication of the four individuals
who comprise the unit.

Since our last newsletter, we have welcomed three new judges: Circuit Judge Pascale Achille and Circuit Judge James R. Harris, both of whom preside in the family division, and County Judge Jeremy I. Franker who handles criminal and civil cases at the South Regional Courthouse in Hollywood.

Congratulations to all and welcome to the 17th Circuit Court family!

We will also see one more new circuit court judge this year as Judge Carlos Rebollo prepares to retire in April.

Congratulations! Thank you for your many years of dedicated public service!

As I close, I want to express my immense gratitude for the work everyone does daily to ensure the administration of justice.

Black History Month: New Mount Olive Baptist Church

A big shoutout to the dozen judges and magistrates from the 17th Judicial Circuit who packed the pews in an impressive show of solidarity and support at the Black History Month celebration at the iconic New Mount Olive Baptist Church in Fort Lauderdale.

Featured speakers included our very own Judge Michael A. Robinson and Judge Keathan B. Frink.

The keynote address was delivered by Lucien Metellus Jr., 37th General President of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. The memorial celebration featured inspiring speeches, video tributes, and powerful choral performances by the church's male chorus. Also in attendance was Miami-Dade Circuit Court Judge Daryl Trawick, President of the BBL Chapter.

The event was a beautiful tribute to the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Investiture of Judge Pascale Achille

JUDGE PASCALE ACHILLE

Welcome to the 17th Judicial Circuit Judge Pascale Achille! We are delighted to have you on our team. Judge Achille presides in the Family Division.

Governor Ron DeSantis appointed Judge Achille on Dec. 8, 2025 to fill the vacancy created by the August 15 resignation of Judge Gary M. Farmer Jr.

Judge Achille worked as an Assistant State Attorney at the Broward SAO for 12 years where she was a member of the homicide trial until since 2018. She was previously assigned to the sexual battery and criminal units.
Earlier in her career, she spent eight years as a civil attorney handling federal and state matters, drafting appellate briefs and arguing before the Second and Fifth District Court of Appeal.

Welcome Aboard Judge James R. Harris

JUDGE JAMES R. HARRIS

Newly appointed Judge James R. Harris was sworn into office on March 6th, becoming the newest Circuit Court judge in the Family Court Division. His investiture was April 24th.

Judge Harris was appointed to the bench on Feb. 25 by Governor Ron DeSantis and will preside in the Circuit's Family Division. He fills the vacancy created when Judge Jonathan D. Lott was appointed to the Fourth District Court of Appeal on Oct. 30, 2025.

Previously a senior assistant statewide prosecutor with the Office of the Attorney General, Judge Harris served as a legal advisor to the 22nd Statewide Grand Jury and prosecuted complex cases involving RICO, drug trafficking and organized fraud. His work involved close collaboration with Homeland Security, the DEA, FDLE and local law enforcement agencies.

Fun Fact: Judge Harris and his wife had a side gig working together as wedding photographers. Now his wife works solo.

Meet Judge Jeremy I. Franker

WELCOME TO THE BENCH

We have a new judge in the South Regional Courthouse!

Introducing County Court Judge Jeremy I. Franker, who was appointed to the bench on Feb. 25 by Governor Ron DeSantis. His investiture will be on June 12.

Judge Franker comes to the 17th Judicial Circuit from the U.S. Department of Justice where he served as Deputy Director of Joint Task Force Vulcan, leading a national prosecution team on foreign terrorist organizations that included Tren de Aragua (TdA) and MS-13.

Judge Franker served in the Department of Justice for seven years and prosecuted complex organized crime and racketeering cases for the Violent Crime and Racketeering Section.

In addition to Florida, Judge Franker has tried federal cases in Alaska, Missouri, and Washington DC.

Previously, Judge Franker worked for seven years as a Statewide Prosecutor for the Florida Attorney General and started his legal career as an Assistant State Attorney in Miami.

Best Wishes in Retirement Judge Carlos S. Rebollo!

After 18 years (and four months) on the bench, Judge Rebollo is finally calling it quits. Three years in dependency. Three years in criminal. And 12 years in juvenile.

His last day in court is April 30. Then he leaves immediately for Fort Myers where he bought a house.

Judge Rebollo was appointed to the bench in 2007 by Governor Charlie Crist, after working 19 years as a prosecutor.

He will miss his devoted staff the most.

“You deal with them everyday and if you have good people around you they make you look better,” he noted. “Fair” and “nice” are how he hopes he will be remembered.

Good luck Judge Rebollo. Enjoy your retirement. You will be missed!

Winding Down: Judge Michael G. Kaplan

The 17th Judicial Circuit will lose another veteran jurist in mid-December – this time from Domestic Violence - when Judge Michael G. Kaplan retires after 23 years on the bench. He was elected in 2002.

Judge Kaplan is the chair of domestic violence. During his tenure, domestic violence grew from one to three divisions. It's always busy.

For now his future plans include relaxing, traveling and eventually mediating. The rest? Anything is possible!

Judge Kaplan, we will miss you! Enjoy!

Gone Fishing ...

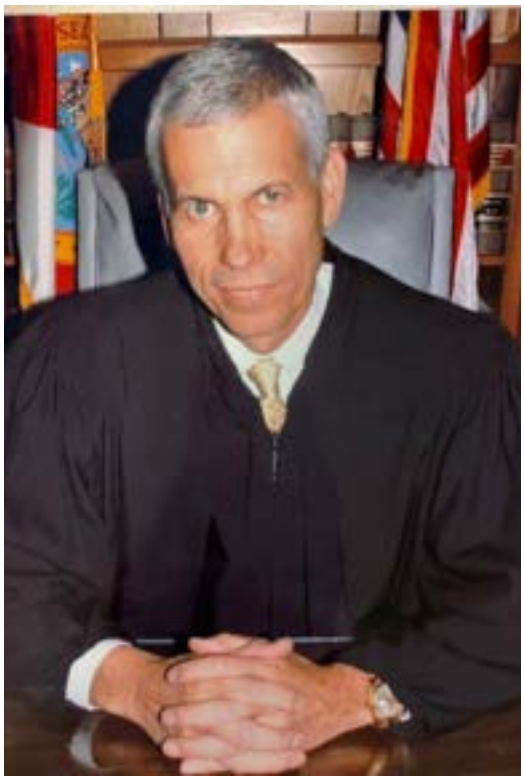
Best Wishes Judge William W. Haury Jr.

The 17th Judicial Circuit will lose another veteran jurist in mid-June – this time from Circuit Civil - when Judge William W. Haury Jr. retires after 18 years on the bench. He first took the bench in 2009.

Judge Haury's career as a judge began in 2008 when he was appointed by Governor Charlie Crist to fill a vacancy. He subsequently ran for office in 2010 and was elected.

Thank you Judge for your service. We will miss you!

Best of luck in retirement Judge Haury!



Congratulations on your Re-election!!

CONGRATULATIONS

to the 19 incumbent judges who won re-election unopposed!

Nineteen out of 19 incumbent judges won re-election unopposed! Congratulations to all, an affirmation of what a great job you are all doing!

Six more years! The qualification period closed on April 24th.

Judges who won re-election include (left to right, top to bottom)

Catalina Avalos, Jeffrey R. Levenson, Peter Holden, Kevin P. Tynan, Christopher Wigand, Andrew L. Siegel, Stacey Schulman, John B. Bowman, Marlon J. Weiss, Bernard I. Bober, George Odom Jr., Frank Ledee, Michael J. Orlando, Martin Bidwill, Hunter N. Davis, Ellen Feld, Michele M. Ricca, Allison Gilman & Phoebee Francois.

Congratulations all around. The 17th Judicial Circuit is fortunate to have you all on our team!

A Visit from the White House

DRUG COURT SHINES

Judge Michael Davis' Adult Felony Drug Court made the national spotlight in March.

General Counsel for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) Dario Camacho visited Drug Court after Judge Davis reached out to the White House.

Our Drug Court was the first in the nation to be visited by ONDCP. Notably, Broward's Adult Felony Drug Court Program is one of only 10 in the nation to have received the designation of "mentor" court.

Camacho spoke with Drug Court staff to better understand their work with Drug Court participants and find out why the team has achieved so much success, then posed for pictures.

Drug Court's initiatives mesh with the goals of the ONDCP.

"The Office of National Drug Control Policy strongly believes in empowering local leaders and communities to fight the scourge of illicit drugs that has plagued our nation for far too long," Camacho said.

Congratulations Judge Davis! Amazing achievement.

SHINING STAR AWARD

CONGRATULATIONS

Govardhani Mandava

Govardhani is the recipient of the Court Administration Shining Star Award for the 1st quarter of 2026.

As a Senior Lead Engineer on the JIS team, she is responsible for maintaining CMS and designing new enhancements for the system.

When budget cuts precluded external support of CMS, she stepped forward to assume this added responsibility, ensuring the uninterrupted functionality of CMS that most of us rely on everyday.

It is employees like Govardhani who make the 17th great!

We are so fortunate to have you on our team!

Pompano Community Court

The City of Pompano Beach honored the judges of Community Court in January with a special celebration that included a formal cap-and-gown graduation for more than a dozen previously unhoused individuals who successfully completed the program with the support of these specialized courts.

Community Courts handle low-level misdemeanor cases and municipal ordinance violations by offering innovative alternatives such as community service, mental health counseling, and substance abuse treatment. The program helps individuals experiencing homelessness connect with services and achieve stability.

Kudos to Judges Betsy Benson, Florence Taylor Barner and Kathleen E. Angione who make these amazing courts the success that they are!

Judicial Accolades ...

Congratulations
Judge Fabienne E. Fahnestock &
Judge Jeffrey R. Levenson

2025 Jurist of the Year

President's Award

AMERICAN BOARD OF TRIAL ADVOCATES (ABOTA) HONOREES

Judge Fahnestock was recognized as 2025 Jurist of the Year for upholding the highest standards of civility and professionalism in her courtroom, both in her expectations of attorneys and through her own judicial demeanor.

Judge Levenson was selected for the President's Award in recognition of his extraordinary contributions and dedication to furthering the mission of ABOTA.

So proud to have you both on our team!

2026 Chief Judge Award for Excellence

JUDGE LAUREN M. ALPERSTEIN

Congratulations to Judge Lauren M. Alperstein, who has been selected as the 2026 recipient of the Chief Judge Award for Excellence in recognition of her dedication, leadership, innovation, and ongoing commitment to strengthening the 17th Judicial Circuit.

One of the most recent examples of Judge Alperstein's visionary leadership is the Circuit's new Family Court Services program, which ensures comprehensive support for families navigating the court system and facilitates access to services that foster stability, safety, and resolution. Judge Alperstein also consistently keeps the family bench informed of legal developments and best practices through updates on changes in the law, emerging issues and best practices.

Congrats! Chutzpah Girls!

Well-deserved

Judges Lauren M. Alperstein, Stacey Schulman, and Yael Gamm of the 17th Judicial Circuit were recently honored as "Chutzpah Girls" at the David Posnack JCC, celebrating their leadership, compassion, and dedication to making a meaningful difference in the lives of others while strengthening our community.

Who is a Chutzpah Girl? According to the JCC, a Chutzpah Girl is a woman who goes above and beyond - leading by example and lifting up those around her. She is compassionate, courageous, and unafraid to speak up when it matters. Chutzpah Girls are fearless and have the bold "nerve" to defy norms, pursue their goals, and fight injustice. They are trailblazing women who act with unwavering conviction, assertiveness, and courage to transform the world—not simply challenge it.

Meet the Communications Committee

Introducing the Communications Committee, the brainchild of Judge Shari Africk-Olefson, which established a set of checks and balances that would ensure anything written for publication complies with the Judicial Canons. Other members include Judges Jose Izquierdo, Kenneth L. Gillespie and Florence Taylor Barner.

The Committee created a list of possible topics and moved on from there. Anything written for publication goes through an extensive vetting and editing process that includes the Committee, Court Administration, the Chief Judge and Public Information. The system is a bit tedious.

But it's working. To date the Committee has successfully published four op Eds in the Sun Sentinel with more in the pipeline. And judges outside the Committee have begun to express interest in participating in this unique project. Published op Eds to date have focused on jury duty, DIY probate, small claims court and stalking.

Stay tuned for more! The 17th Judicial Circuit has most certainly mastered the power of the pen.

Make Way for Family Court Services

The new Family Court Services program created to help families improve conflict resolution and assist families faster and more effeciently has alreadyserved more than 100 families.

INTRODUCING A NEW PROGRAM TO OFFER HELP

The 17th Judicial Circuit has a new way to help families involved in family litigation:

Introducing Family Court Services (FCS), a program designed to connect individuals in high-conflict family litigation with a wide range of therapeutic services.

The program was created to improve conflict resolution and provide support services to families, with particular sensitivity to the needs of children.

Court Administration personnel assigned to the unit assist litigants by linking families to community agencies or private providers for services such as counseling, parenting classes, substance abuse evaluation and treatment. They also conduct social investigations.

Spearheading the program? Judge Lauren M. Alperstein.

The program is maintained by Diane St. Amand-Scott.

Great work!

The FCS Team

Far left photo, left to right: Diane St. Amand-Scott, Ahnia Smith, Guilia D'Agostino and Andres Gironza

TAKE YOUR CHILD TO WORK DAY

Well Done!

Take Your Child to Work Day was a resounding success thanks to the planning magic of Marlene Ruiz, the many judges who offered their time, expertise and humor, Trial Court Administrator Joe D'Amico who ran a fierce (and sometimes contentious) Jeopardy! game, the pet therapy dog visits, the BSO SWAT vehicle & more!

Overheard on a Courthouse Tour

Invite a group of elementary students into a courtroom and they all want to know at least two things:

May I try on your robe?

Can I bang the “hammer”?

And sometimes, “Do judges wear underwear beneath their robes?”

Kids say the darndest things.

Judge Jackie Powell is especially adept with the tough questions.

When a third-grader wanted to know if judges make “big money” Judge Powell quickly followed up with a pertinent question of her own:

“What is ‘big money’?,” she asked.

Arms crossed, eyes narrowed, the student belted out his reply: “Two thousand dollars,” he shouted.

Her answer?

“Yes.”

If we haven’t been to your courtroom yet, get ready! We’re coming!

2026
COURTHOUSE
TOUR UPDATE

All Rise

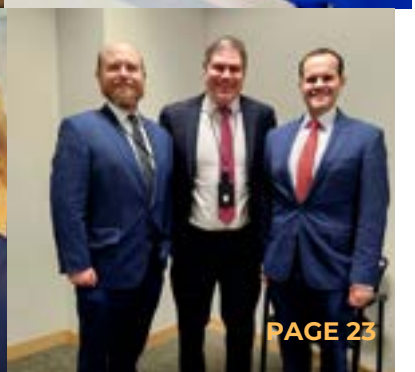
JUDGE
for a day!

Court is in Session

Vibes

Around Town

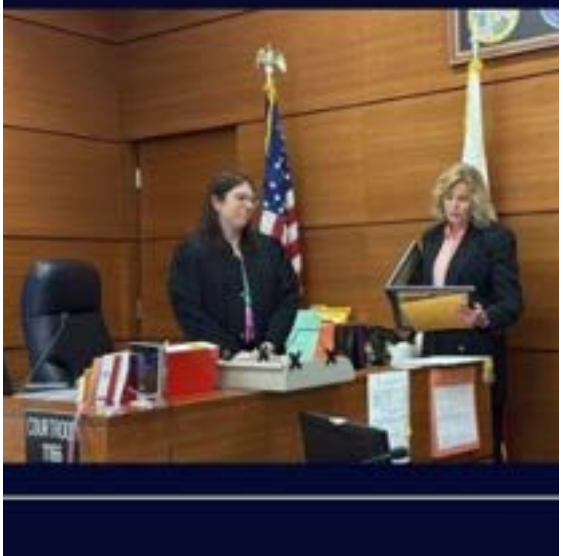
Judicial Happenings



Proactive

Community

Recognition



STEP CHALLENGE

And the winners are:

JAN. – ***Elizabeth Kamphaus***, winner; ***Dylan Sercy***, participation award

FEB. – ***Joshua Carrasco***, winner; ***Dylan Sercy***, participation award

MARCH – ***Janice Reres***, winner; ***Angela Salamon***, participation award

Walking, Walking, Walking

Get moving! That's what the Step Challenge is all about and competition for the top spot is fierce. Winners receive a Publix gift card courtesy of Court Administration.

The Rules of Engagement have changed: A participation award has been added while wins for second and third place have been eliminated. So if you submit your steps at the end of the month, you have a chance to win. If you don't play, you can't win. Join us!

17TH
JUDICIAL
CIRCUIT

COURT NEWS

APRIL 2026

2026

SPRING ISSUE