

OFFICE OF THE STATE ATTORNEY
4TH
4TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT • CLAY • DUVAL • NASSAU

2025 Annual Report

STATE ATTORNEY
MELISSA W. NELSON

SAO4TH.COM

OFFICE OF THE STATE ATTORNEY
4TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT • CLAY • DUVAL • NASSAU

PURSUE JUSTICE ALWAYS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Message to the Community 1

01. 2025 Office at a Glance 2

02. Protecting Our Community 3
- Gun Violence Offender Court 3
- Marked Safe from Sextortion 4
- Threats Have Consequences 5
- From the Courtroom to the Capitol 6

03. Our People, Our Legacy 8
- First Ladies of SAO4 8
- Three Decades of Dedication: Stephen Siegel 10
- 300 Trials and Counting: Brian Hughes 11
- Making Headlines 11
- Speaking of: Representative Sam Garrison 12

04. 2025 Cases in Focus 13

05. Connected to Our Community 18

06. Inside These Walls 22

07. Investing in the Next Generation 23

08. Training & Education 24

09. Celebrating Service & Achievement 25
- 2024 OLEO Awards 26
- 2024 SAO4 Employee Awards 28
- 2024 SAO4 Awards for Years of Service 30
- Employees' Accomplishments 31
- Assistant State Attorney Class of 2025 34
- Honoring Three-Year Commitments 35
- Interns Go Behind the Scenes 35

10. State Attorney Melissa Nelson 36

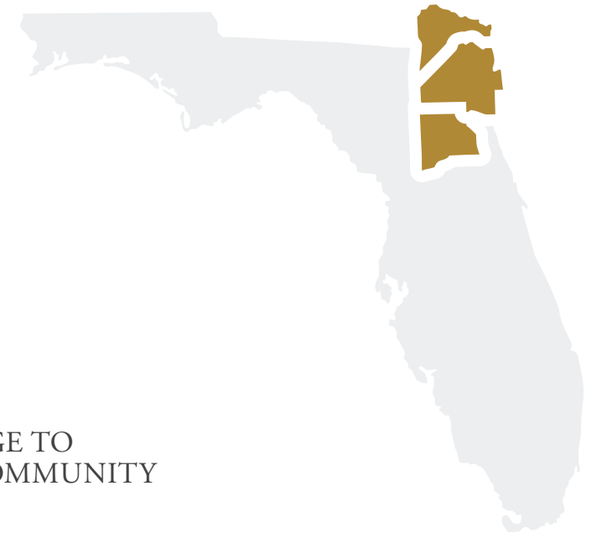
11. By the Numbers 37

SAO4TH.COM

Our duty to the people of Northeast Florida comprises two main tenets. The first is to keep people safe by prosecuting criminal offenders. The second is to do justice.

State Attorney Melissa Nelson





MESSAGE TO THE COMMUNITY

The world is rapidly changing, as are the ways people commit crimes and the ways we investigate, solve, and prosecute them.

In 2025, we witnessed the criminal landscape change with the surge of artificial intelligence. The criminal justice system, the court system, and the legislature grappled with the impacts and reach of these tools—how they are being used—both for good and for bad. By the time you read this Annual Report, we will have already experienced some of those impacts and seen how AI is affecting law enforcement and prosecution. It is rapidly evolving and we are learning and adapting daily.

The year kicked off with my travel to a conference to connect with the people at the forefront of investigating and prosecuting these criminal scams and enterprises. I learned a lot there and forged some important connections that have borne fruit in our office's efforts on these fronts.

In May 2025, our office convened a task force to jump-start an effort to educate the public about the dangers and reach of sextortion. We partnered with the Department of Homeland Security and convened our local, state, and federal law enforcement partners, cyber-crime experts, and non-profits to discuss how to educate the public, and how to investigate and prosecute these criminals. This convening aimed to break down silos and forge a cohesive front to combat this emerging cyber threat. The initiative will officially launch in 2027.

As crimes evolve, our laws must too. During 2025, we were part of legislative change to protect victims of generative AI and enhance penalties for offenders who use it to exploit and extort people.

I also began work on a national front. I was appointed to the Council on Criminal Justice AI Task Force. The group, chaired by former Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice Nathan Hecht, is comprised of 14 others spanning law enforcement, court officials, community organizations, and experts in the field of AI. Together, we are working to determine how AI can benefit the legal system and the safeguards recommended to criminal justice actors contemplating its safe use. The Task Force is an ongoing appointment, and I am honored to be at the forefront of the CCJ's recommendations on this issue.

While AI is a topic we are grappling with on many fronts, our office continued its work across the prosecutorial spectrum from juvenile diversion to death penalty litigation. We worked hard to improve our summer intern program, enhance our recruiting efforts, and ensure this is a stable and happy workplace.

I am so proud of this office and the integrity, passion, and skill of the talented men and women who comprise it. To our alumni, thank you for support of the office. Your work helped shape where we are today. We would love to showcase your successes as well. See page 11 on our new project and how you can get involved. I hope you enjoy this look back at the office's year in review for our 9th edition of the Annual Report.

Thank you,

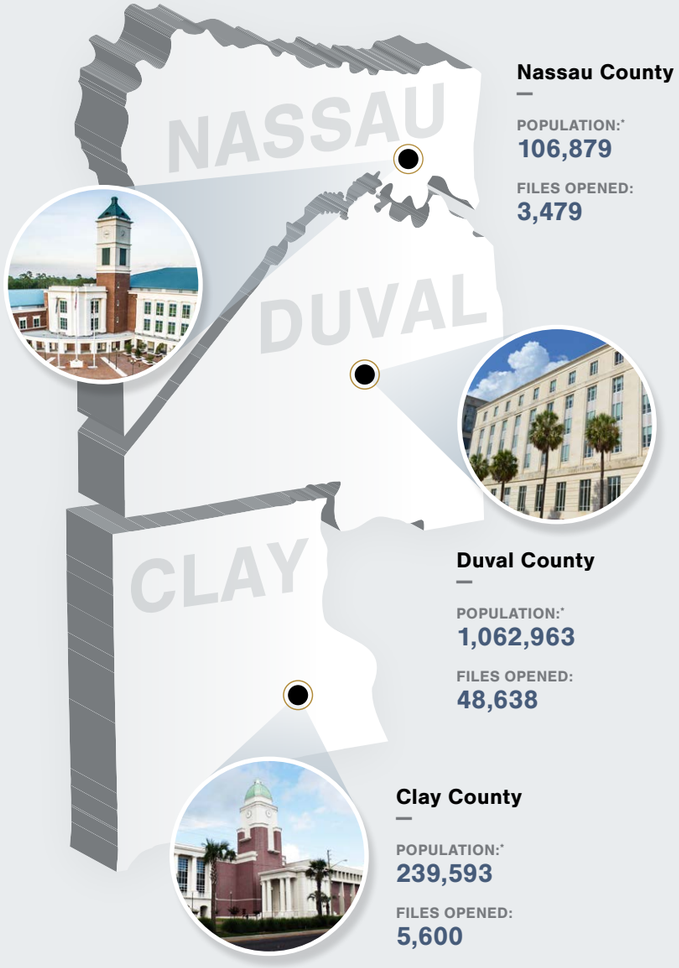
Melissa

Melissa W. Nelson
State Attorney for Florida's Fourth Judicial Circuit

01.

STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE FOR FLORIDA'S FOURTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

2025 Office at a Glance



Nassau County

POPULATION:*
106,879

FILES OPENED:
3,479

Duval County

POPULATION:*
1,062,963

FILES OPENED:
48,638

Clay County

POPULATION:*
239,593

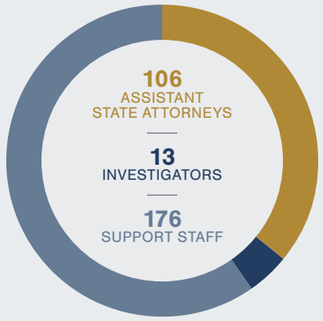
FILES OPENED:
5,600

STATE ATTORNEY:
Melissa W. Nelson

TOTAL POPULATION:
1,409,453

TOTAL FILES OPENED:
57,717

TOTAL EMPLOYEES:
295



NUMBER OF PUBLIC RECORDS REQUESTS OPENED:
2,701

NUMBER OF PUBLIC RECORDS REQUESTS CLOSED:
2,497

BUDGET:
$38,562,388

*** Florida Population Estimates by County and Municipality April 1, 2025, Source: Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research

02.

STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE FOR FLORIDA'S FOURTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

PROTECTING our Community

PARTNERSHIPS, PROSECUTION, & PREVENTION AT WORK.

In 2025, SAO4 worked beyond individual cases to address violent crime, emerging threats, and community safety through focused prosecution, prevention, partnerships, and legislative action.

IN THIS CHAPTER:

- Gun Violence Offender Court
- Marked Safe from Sextortion
- Threats Have Consequences
- From the Courtroom to the Capitol

Gun Violence Offender Court: *A Year of Results*

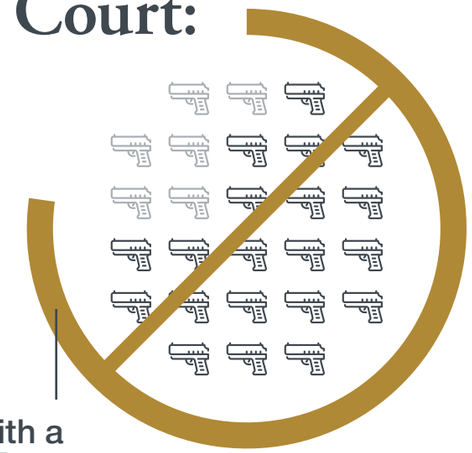
In a single courtroom in 2025, there was a trial every other week.

26 trials with a 77% conviction rate, focusing on the trigger-pullers and violent offenders in the community. These gun crime cases fall into the purview of GVOC: Gun Violence Offender Court and are some of the most difficult cases in our office.

The court was stood up in 2024, and 2025 was the first full year with the operation.

Beyond working current cases, GVOC attorneys are focused on speedy justice and moving cases through the system.

The unit is staffed with experienced prosecutors who handle about 200 pending cases.



26 Trials with a 77% Conviction Rate

& A FOCUS ON VIOLENT OFFENDERS DURING THE COURT'S FIRST FULL YEAR



THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN REPORTED OVER

100+

Sextortion Reports Per Day in 2024

Dozens of U.S. teens have died by suicide

OVER FEARS OF INTIMATE PHOTOS BEING EXPOSED.

Marked Safe From

SEXTORTION

Formed in spring of 2025, the Sextortion Initiative combines the strengths and knowledge of law enforcement, experts, and nonprofits to tackle the rising issue of sextortion.

With the accessibility of social media and open-source AI, criminals are targeting American youth. Scammers form a quick, flirtatious connection online with teens, presenting themselves as someone they are not. Relationships form and then they solicit victims for intimate photos; once they get what they need, the conversation turns to threats and extortion.

The scam is so successful that online groups share how to blackmail and extort American teens using a format and script. In 2024, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children received more than **100 reports of sextortion per day.**

Dozens of teens in America have taken their lives out of fear of having their photos exposed. These stories shocked State Attorney Melissa Nelson, mom of three teenagers.

She convened the Initiative as a collaborative effort to further prevent harm to our children. In 2025, Nelson enlisted the help of cybercrime expert Paul Raffile for office-wide training, media interviews, and to keep the Initiative members informed on the realities of the crime at hand. The Initiative is focused on awareness and prevention. When knowledge is power, it can save a life.



The Initiative will officially launch in 2027 with public resources and a partnership with the Department of Homeland Security's Know2Protect.

The office is collaborating with local school districts to disseminate information to the thousands of students in the Fourth Circuit and beyond.





Thank you to our partners: INTERCEPT Task Force, Department of Homeland Security Know2Protect, Federal Bureau of Investigations, United States Secret Service, Here Tomorrow, Paul Raffile, and Stephen Gavin.

know2 protect

PROSECUTION

Threats Have *Consequences*

The 2024-2025 school year kicked off with a slew of school threats. The office opened about 60 cases of school and safety threats made by juveniles in just the fall semester. State Attorney Melissa Nelson teamed up with Jacksonville Sheriff T.K. Waters for a message directly to students that aired at the start of the 2025 spring semester.

They reiterated what we hope our children already know:

If you make a threat toward students or schools, YOU WILL BE ARRESTED.

The office teamed up with local public and private schools to share the video with students and parents. Scan the QR code to watch.

DURING THE 2025 FALL SEMESTER ALONE,

60 Juvenile School & Safety Threat Cases Were Opened

You might think it's a joke. You might think it's just a prank, but it's not. Students and teachers across the country have been killed in school shootings. So if you make a threat to our schools, we will not give you the benefit of the doubt... it is a felony. Be a leader in your school, not the kid being led out in handcuffs.

Excerpt from State Attorney Melissa Nelson and Sheriff T.K. Water's video message.



LEGISLATIVE IMPACT

From the Courtroom TO THE CAPITOL

Courtroom cases don't end when the gavel falls—they spill beyond the courthouse, reshaping the lives of families, communities, and public conscience. In some instances, the human stories behind those cases ignite legislative change, turning personal loss and hard-fought justice into new laws to protect all Floridians.

In 2025, the office was involved in the creation of three Florida laws that increased penalties for repeat offenders convicted of DUI Manslaughter or Vehicular Homicide, protected innocent people from AI-generated sexual images, and expanded the list of aggravating factors in death penalty cases.

PREVENTION



Brooke's Law Protects Against **Artificial Intelligence**

With Brooke's Law, Florida lawmakers looked to rein in social media platforms and ensure victims of Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated images can remove those images from the internet. The emerging issue took the name of Brooke's Law after Brooke Curry *(pictured above right)*, daughter of former Jacksonville Mayor Lenny Curry, became a victim herself.

A teenager used Brooke's face to create an AI-generated nude photo. Curry attempted numerous ways to have the photo removed from the platforms where the image was shared but repeatedly ran into roadblocks.

Assistant State Attorney Kristen Liesch prosecuted Brooke's case, and the Currys looked into what more could be done to protect other victims. Representative Wyman Duggan and Senator Alexis Calatayud, along with aid from the office's experienced prosecutors in AI crimes, worked hand-in-glove to pass Brooke's Law.

In Florida, social media platforms are now required to post their process of removal and, within 48 hours of receiving a request for removal, take down the image and make the effort of removing copies as well.

The act took effect on June 10, 2025, upon being signed into law.

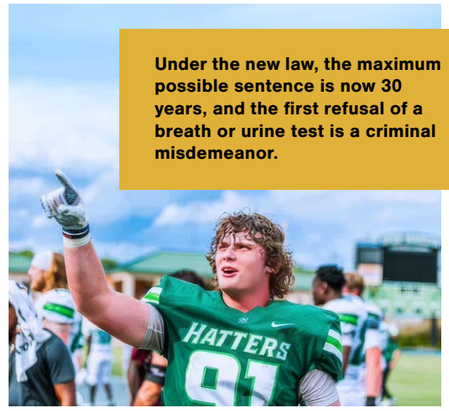
Brooke's Law is not just about me, it's about all of us. It's about accountability, dignity, and hope for every person who has been exploited or violated.

Brooke Curry

Trenton's Law Strengthens **DUI Penalties**

Effective October 1, 2025, Trenton's Law increased penalties for repeat offenders convicted of DUI Manslaughter or Vehicular Homicide.

The law is named after 18-year-old Trenton Stewart *(pictured)* who was killed by an impaired wrong-way driver in Jacksonville in 2023. That same driver had previously served prison time for a fatal crash in 2001 that killed a teen. Assistant State Attorney John Kalinowski prosecuted Trenton's case, and the driver was sentenced to 15 years, which was the maximum under the statute at the time.



Under the new law, the maximum possible sentence is now 30 years, and the first refusal of a breath or urine test is a criminal misdemeanor.

Representative Kim Kendall, Representative Rachel Saunders Plakon, and Senator Tom Wright sponsored the bill.

Additional Aggravating Factor Established for **Death Penalty Cases**

Homicide Division Director Dan Skinner's *(pictured)* expertise in capital cases was utilized in the writing of Florida's new Aggravating Factors amendment.

Sponsored by Senator Joe Gruters and Representative Mike Redonda as a response to the Parkland school shooting, the law created an additional aggravating factor for the jury and the court to consider in a death penalty case.

If a victim was congregated for a school activity, religious activity, or a public government meeting when he or she was killed, that can be considered an aggravating factor.



The law took effect October 1, 2025.

STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE FOR FLORIDA'S FOURTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

Our People, OUR LEGACY

CELEBRATING THE PEOPLE AND STORIES THAT SHAPED SAO4.

Behind the work of the office are people whose careers, milestones, and contributions have shaped SAO4—past, present, and future.

IN THIS CHAPTER:

- First Ladies of SAO4
- Three Decades of Dedication
- 300 Trials and Counting
- Making Headlines
- Representative Sam Garrison



First Ladies OF SAO4

"We've never hired a girl before."

"And you still haven't," Mary Coxe replied.

She wasn't a girl—she was a grown woman with a law degree from Duke. In 1975, Coxe became an Assistant State Attorney, one of the first three women to hold the position.

Ed Austin, who served as State Attorney from 1969 to 1972 and again from 1974 to 1991, made history by hiring the office's first three female attorneys: the Honorable Susan Black, Dorothy "Dot" Pate, and Coxe.

"Ed was wonderful because you always knew he had your back," Coxe said.

Pate and Black would soon make history again for women— Black as the first woman appointed to both county and circuit courts, and Pate as the first woman elected judge in the Fourth Circuit. Black's trailblazing career continued as she became the first female federal judge in Florida in 1979.

In 1992, she was appointed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, where she continues to serve.

Black joined the State Attorney's Office in 1969 as the first woman assistant state attorney in the state of Florida. The legal landscape was beginning to shift as more women graduated from law school. **"Women were not really given the opportunity to enter the courtroom because they were stereotyped,"** Black said. **"That changed quickly."** Given the freedom to choose her cases, she immediately took on felonies and went on to try capital cases during her three years as a prosecutor. **"They needed help,"** she said with a laugh.

Within a few years, more women joined the office, Coxe being one of them. Coxe admits she didn't fully grasp how groundbreaking those early hires were.



Back row, left to right: George C. Carr, John Alton Reed Jr., **Susan H. Black**, Howell W. Melton. *Front:* Benjamin Krentzman, George C. Young, Chief Judge William Terrell Hodges

JUDGE SUSAN BLACK:
A Legacy of Firsts

The first woman in Florida to serve as:

- **1969** — Assistant State Attorney
- **1973** — County Court Judge
- **1975** — Circuit Court Judge
- **1979** — Federal Judge, U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida

"I was just doing what I wanted to do," she said. Black agreed: **"You don't think about it when you're doing it."**

In retrospect, that lack of awareness may have been an advantage, allowing them to focus on building their careers and finding mentors—most of whom were men at the time.

For Black, an influential figure in her journey was her father, a B-17 pilot who was shot down and held as a prisoner of war. After returning home, he urged his daughters to pursue careers and not depend on marriage after he saw so many of his friends die on the battlefield. He supported Black's ambitions from an early age, even introducing her to the dean of the University of Florida's law school when she was just 14. She would go on to earn her law degree there in 1967.

During Coxe's five years at the State Attorney's Office, she too handled felony cases even serving as second chair on two first-degree murder trials. In one case, a key witness was a little girl named Stephanie. As the only woman on the trial team, Coxe was tasked with supporting her.

Coxe left the office in 1980 and went into insurance defense, spent 10 years away from law to raise her children, and then returned to specialize in criminal defense, family, and appellate law. In 2025, Coxe put away her files for good and officially retired after a storied 50-year career.

Her legacy lives on not only in the barriers she broke, but in the next generation she inspired—all of her children are now lawyers.

Today, Coxe remains connected to the State Attorney's Office in a new role: therapy dog facilitator. Her five-year-old Doodle, Cooper, offers comfort to children navigating the legal system. **"He's very sensitive to little kids,"** Coxe said.



Cooper assists prosecutors by supporting young victims and witnesses during depositions and trials. Reflecting on her early career, Coxe remembers the young witness she once helped.

"I think back to poor little Stephanie... they threw me at her," she said. **"We sure could've used a dog."**

Now, when Coxe and Black *(right)* walk through the Ed Austin Building—named for their former boss and mentor—they pass offices led by women at every level: State Attorney, Chief of Staff, Chief Assistant, and General Counsel, among others.



There are no *"girls"* here, but there are many, accomplished women continuing the legacy forged by the first ladies of the SAO4.

IN MEMORIAM:
Dorothy Pate

Dorothy "Dot" Pate was a pioneering figure in Florida's legal community and one of the first women hired as an Assistant State Attorney in Jacksonville's Fourth Judicial Circuit. Pate helped break through barriers and made history again by becoming the first woman elected as a judge in the Fourth Circuit, marking a significant milestone for female representation on the bench.

Pate not only built a distinguished career of her own but also helped pave the way for future generations of women when she co-founded Pace Center for Girls, now a national program. She passed away on March 16, 2014.

In 2008, Judge Pate was featured in the Jacksonville Daily Record. **Scan the QR code to read her story.**

Three Decades of **Dedication**

It's his self-described Eras Tour, and Stephen Siegel is in his Executive Director era. That's how he structures his 30 years spent at the State Attorney's Office: eras. *"I've seen it all,"* said Siegel.

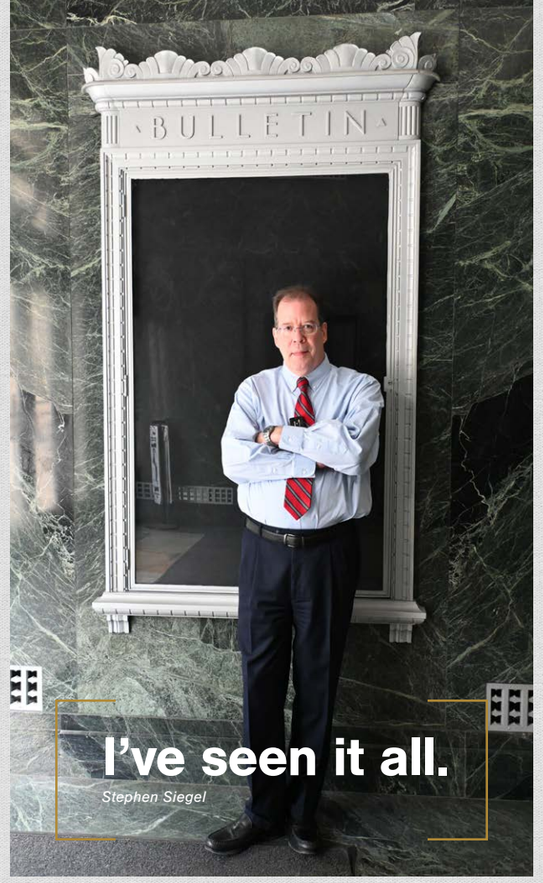
After 14 months in county court and five months in circuit court, Siegel spent 12 years in Special Prosecution, where he learned how to build and try a case from start to finish. He then became a Division Chief in county court for three years, followed by four years leading the Nassau County office. In 2017, when State Attorney Melissa Nelson took office, Siegel joined the executive leadership as First Assistant. In 2025, he became Executive Director.

His dedication to the office and his community make him a local at heart, but his roots are in the Bluegrass state. His parents took the first steps in leaving Kentucky behind to retire in sunny Florida, and Siegel followed them to Jacksonville. He began as a Judicial Staff Attorney for the Fourth Judicial Circuit and then interviewed for the job of Assistant State Attorney under State Attorney Harry Shorstein.

Siegel said his core value has remained the same since he took on the role of prosecutor in 1995: **"Do the right thing for the right reason. I think that generally should be—every time we make a decision—what we are looking at."**

Over the past three decades, Siegel has worked every type of case, and year after year, watched as young attorneys begin their careers just like he did.

"They are the future of the State Attorney's Office," Siegel said. **"You try to think 'what will those people be?... Who are the future leaders of the office?'"**



I've seen it all.

Stephen Siegel

Siegel looks down at the photo of himself from the start of his career: a Polaroid that captures a moment in time. He's dubious whether his classmates considered he might move up the ranks of leadership and still be with the same office 30 years later, but he says he can only hope that he made the right decisions along the way and earned the respect of his peers.

"I would tell this young man it is going to be okay. What you put into your career is what you get out of your career."

SIEGEL'S WORDS OF WISDOM:

"Be punctual, be prepared, and be polite, and you can practice in any courtroom in Florida."

Steve has dedicated his career to making the community a safer and better place to live. I am thankful for his service, leadership, and expertise.

State Attorney Melissa Nelson



FUN SIEGEL FACTS:

CURRENTLY WATCHING:
Dark Winds

TAKES HIS COFFEE:
Black

FAVORITE QUOTE:
"To whom much is given, much is expected."



300 TRIALS *and Counting*

There's no trial too small for Brian Hughes.

Over his decades of service as a paralegal in the State Attorney's Office, every trial was a notch in his belt, an experience to learn from, and a push to pursue justice always. In 2025, Brian surpassed 300 trials, a feat, and undoubtedly, an office record that will long live as unsurpassed.

Brian recalled his first trial was with John Kalinowski for a robbery and kidnapping case. Serendipitously, his 300th trial was also with Kalinowski as they secured a guilty verdict for a DUI Manslaughter case where an elderly couple was killed.

Since 2003, Hughes has worked with recognizable local figures who started their legal careers as prosecutors in the Fourth Circuit. Seven of them are now judges and one a member of the Florida House of Representatives and elected Speaker of the House. As for who had the pleasure of having Brian on their trial team most frequently, Chief Assistant Mark Caliel wins that one with 39 trials. Coming in second, Jeff Moody (28), and the Honorable London Kite a close third (27).

Brian is no stranger to the ins and outs of trials and no task is too small for him to lend a helping hand, like setting up an evidence display of a fence that took up the entirety of the county court conference table or grabbing a prosecutor's lip gloss moments before trial.

Brian is the ultimate team player. ***Here's to the next 300.***

Brian has built a stellar reputation for outstanding work ethic, trial prep, and character. His stories about trials would make you laugh and drop your jaw.

State Attorney Melissa Nelson



Making Headlines

If the walls of the Ed Austin Building could talk… the long hours, hard work, and many triumphs achieved by the people of this office would tell a powerful story—one that deserves to be remembered.

Over the past year, State Attorney Melissa Nelson, Communications Director David Chapman, Communications Specialist Leah Drake, Trial Support Services Jim McMillan, and a slew of interns have worked to preserve the history of the office by collecting headline stories from local newspaper archives. It might come as a surprise, but after searching the Jacksonville Public Library's microfiche and digital archives for more than 50 major cases, only a handful ever made front-page news.

Those stories are now featured on the third-floor walkover from the office building to the courthouse.

As attorneys head to court, they are reminded of the great lawyers who came before them, the cases that created a legacy, and the verdicts that made history.

The headlines are more than clippings—they are reminders of the impact of public service and the quiet, meaningful work that often goes unseen.

Calling all SAO4 alum: We are looking to fill the rest of our walls with your stories and successes. For more information on sharing your stories with the office, email Communications Specialist Leah Drake at **LeahD@coj.net**.

The Florida Times-Union

Phillips guilty of murder in Maddie Clifton case


NEWS LEADER

Warlick guilty of murder


The Florida Times-Union

'JUSTICE CAN BE SERVED'





Photo credit:
The Tallahassee Democrat

Speaker Designee Garrison sat down with our Communications Team on camera for an interview about his career and priorities as Speaker. **Scan the QR code to watch.**

Speaking of… Representative Sam Garrison

From "Sam" to "Speaker," the State Attorney's Office takes pride in being the place where Speaker Designee Sam Garrison's career first began. From 2001 to 2011, he served as an Assistant State Attorney. Reflecting on those years, Garrison said, *"That was probably, to this day, the greatest couple of years of my professional life."*

In October 2025, Garrison was unanimously selected by House Republicans as Speaker Designee during a designation ceremony, positioning him to become Florida's 91st Speaker of the House following the November 2026 election—a role of significant influence across the state.

An Illinois native and the first attorney in his family, Garrison came to Clay County through his wife's local ties. His wife, Gayle, grew up in a Navy family—her mother served as a victim advocate with the office, and her father, a retired Navy captain, worked for the Jacksonville Port Authority when Garrison began searching for a job after law school.

"I knew I wanted to make Clay County my home, another great decision that I didn't know would bear fruit at the time," he said.

What began as a three-year commitment turned into a decade dedicated to pursuing justice. Garrison prosecuted sex crimes and later became a Division Chief in the Clay County office, under then Clay County Director Dan Skinner, and left a lasting impact on victims of sexual abuse and assault, particularly children.

"At the time, we didn't have a (Child Protective Team) presence in Clay County," said Garrison. **"If you were a rape victim in Green Cove Springs or Keystone Heights, you had to get in the back of a patrol car and drive to downtown Jacksonville."** Garrison credits Skinner for encouraging him to pursue the issue and advocate for a rape crisis center in Clay. Together, with detectives and other stakeholders, they made it happen.

Around 2010, ready for a new challenge, Garrison ran for judge. **"I lost that race. Best thing that ever happened to me,"** he said. **"That sparked my interest in the political side of things."**

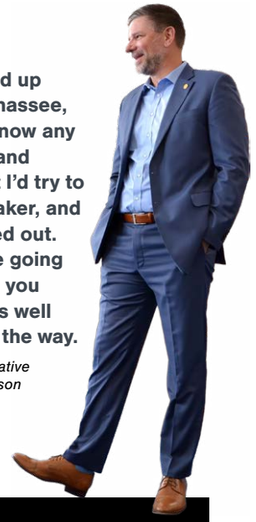
A year later, he entered private practice with former prosecutor Rob Bradley, and the two remained law partners for more than a decade. Bradley, who served in the Florida Senate, introduced Garrison to the world of Tallahassee politics, where new opportunities began to take shape.

In 2020, when an open seat became available, Garrison faced no Republican opposition. He won the race and immediately began working toward a future speakership. Today, signatures of support from his Republican colleagues are framed on the wall of his Clay County office.

He credits the residents of Clay County—the community he now calls home—for making his career in public service possible.

I showed up in Tallahassee, didn't know any better, and thought I'd try to be Speaker, and it worked out. If you're going to do it, you might as well do it all the way.

Representative Sam Garrison



FUN GARRISON FACTS:

 # OF COFFEES / DAY:
5 or 6 while in Tallahassee

TAKES HIS COFFEE:
Black

FAVORITE TALLAHASSEE RESTAURANT:
Chuck's Fish

FAVORITE CLAY COUNTY RESTAURANT:
Grumpy's

2025 Cases in Focus

From misdemeanors to murders, the office tried an average of three cases a week. Fourth Circuit prosecutors brought 161 cases to trials in 2025—126 felony trials and 35 misdemeanor trials.

The stories that follow offer a snapshot of the lives and communities impacted by their work in 2025. These cases are highlighted because of their strong community connections, significant public interest, or the wishes of victims' families who wanted their stories shared.

126 Felony Trials

35 Misdemeanor Trials



Assistant State Attorney Joel Cooper during opening statements in the McCormick murder trial.

A CASE IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Gang members sentenced to life for murder of **Charles "Lil Buck" McCormick Jr.**

Thousands of people across the country watched live as the jury delivered their verdicts: guilty as charged. Hakeem Robinson, known as Ksoo, and Leroy Whitaker were found guilty of First-Degree Murder in the January 2020 killing of Charles McCormick. Whitaker was also found guilty of Burglary with Assault or Battery. The verdict came with mandatory life sentences for the two men.

The murder was enmeshed in the notorious Jacksonville rap beef between two groups. McCormick's murder was retaliation for his rap song which disparaged Robinson's dead family member.

On the morning of January 15, 2020, Robinson, Whitaker, and Dominique Barner stalked McCormick from his home to an employment center on Merrill Road. When McCormick left the center, Robinson gunned him down in broad daylight. Robinson jumped back into the getaway car with Barner and Whitaker. An officer heard the gunfire from the parking lot and chased the driver into a nearby neighborhood where Barner crashed the car; Robinson ran one way, Whitaker and Barner ran another. Whitaker and Barner broke into a woman's house, held her captive, took her phone, and stole her husband's clothes to disguise themselves.

The men got away that day, ***but they couldn't evade justice.***

Five years ago, Hakeem Robinson and Leroy Whitaker stalked a man and gunned him down in broad daylight because of disputes and drill rap. A jury held them accountable for their brazen crimes. This was an incredible effort by law enforcement and our team that takes two killers off our streets.

State Attorney Melissa Nelson





The five years of work leading up to trial was one feat; the massive media attention during trial was a beast of its own. This was the first case of the office where court watchers from across the country were speculating and commenting in real time on the trial. This new challenge required law enforcement surveillance and monitoring for assessment of threats in real time. The Honorable Judge Tatiana Salvador sentenced both men to life in prison.

The case was investigated by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and prosecuted by Assistant State Attorneys Joel Cooper and Alan Mizrahi.

Assistant State Attorney Alan Mizrahi gives closing arguments in McCormick murder trial.



JUSTICE AFTER UNIMAGINABLE LOSS

Woman convicted of killing her **boyfriend, his brother**, then kidnapping **their mom** at gunpoint

In the early morning hours of October 18, 2023, an elderly mother called 911; she had been taken hostage by Iris Williams who shot and killed both her sons the night before. At the home, officers found Charles Watkins sitting in a chair with a single gunshot to the head, and Thomas Harris dead in his bedroom with multiple gunshot wounds. Watkins was treated at the scene but died at the hospital shortly after.

The night before, the elderly woman went to her room around 9 p.m. Not long after, she heard gunshots and went into the hall to find Harris shot. His last words to his mother were "She shot me," referring to Williams, the longtime girlfriend of Watkins. Williams then fired another shot while Harris lay in his bed, pointed the gun at his mother, and said, "We got to go." Williams forced her to drive to a motel and held her captive for hours. During the drive there, Williams revealed that she also shot Watkins and threatened to shoot her if she attracted police attention on the road.

On May 7, 2025, a Duval County jury found Iris Williams guilty of two counts of Second-Degree Murder; Kidnapping with a Firearm; Tampering with Evidence; and Possession of a Firearm by a Convicted Felon.

The Honorable Anthony Salem sentenced Williams to life in prison.

The case was investigated by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and prosecuted by First Assistant Jay Plotkin ***(left)*** **and Assistant State Attorney Crystal Ganpath-Freed.**

HONORING A YOUNG LIFE

Ball found guilty of killing teen **Inandi Wyche** during targeted gang shooting

It was a 48-hour gang-related shooting spree in 2020 that tragically took the life of an innocent teen. 17-year-old Inandi Wyche was a Ribault High cheerleader remembered for her aspirations and her smile.

On March 18, 2020, Roland Ball and other gunmen shot into a vehicle on Portsmouth Avenue with four people inside. The next day, they went back to the same spot with their target in mind. That target was the man in the passenger seat of Inandi's car. Around 7 p.m. on March 19, 2020, the teen pulled up to a stop sign on Portsmouth Avenue, Ball pulled the trigger, his target ran, but Inandi did not survive.

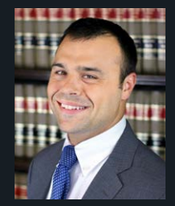
In 2025, a Duval County jury found Roland Ball II guilty of First-Degree Murder; four counts of Attempted First-Degree Murder; one count of Attempted Second-Degree Murder; two counts of Shooting or Throwing Deadly Missiles; and one count of Harassing a Witness, Victim, or Informant. Judge Meredith Charbula sentenced him to life in prison.

The case was investigated by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and prosecuted by Assistant State Attorneys Joe Licandro, Alan Mizrahi, and Giovanna Rivera.

To know her was to love her. *Monique Wyche, Inandi's mother*



ASAs Alan Mizrahi (above), Joe Licandro, and Giovanna Rivera prosecuted the Wyche case.







THE LASTING IMPACT OF LOSS

Jury convicts Jones of 2023 triple murder of **grandparents and family friend**

On January 15, 2023, 18-year-old Jadarrius Jones shot and killed his grandparents, Gregory Merritt and Uneeda Hardy, and their friend, Luther Williams, at their home on the Westside of Jacksonville. Jones then walked into a neighbor's home with bloody shoes on. The neighbor confronted him, and Jones ran but was quickly arrested and confessed to the murders.

"This has truly scarred me for life," said Yolanda Murphy, Uneeda's daughter, at Jones' sentencing hearing. *"I hate holidays. Everything reminds me of my mom. We used to talk about everything, even death… the one way she didn't want to die, she did."*

In about an hour, the jury found Jones guilty of three counts of First-Degree Murder, carrying a mandatory life sentence.

Not a day goes by that I do not think of him. Never in all my life would I have ever thought that my son would lose his life in such a way as this.

Beatrice Darden, Luther William's mother



The case was investigated by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and prosecuted by Assistant State Attorneys Brooke Milo *(top)* **and Sheila Loizos** *(above)*.

JUSTICE NEARLY A DECADE AFTER TRAGEDY

Whipple pleads guilty, sentenced to life for murder of **Carol Demmons**

On October 12, 2016, Darryle Whipple went to his ex-girlfriend, 56-year-old Carol Demmons' place of work to attack her. He found Demmons inside the restaurant and set her on fire. Demmons was taken to the hospital where she fought for her life for a month before she died from her injuries.

Demmons was a new grandmother remembered for her kindness. ***"We're missing Carol very much,"*** Demmon's aunt, Robin Sumpter said. ***"I don't think I personally will ever get over missing Carol. But with the closure of the case, I'm sure that will bring a greater relief to this family."***

Nearly 10 years later, and after the court deemed him competent to stand trial, Whipple pleaded guilty to First-Degree Murder.

The Honorable Jeb Branham sentenced Whipple to life in prison without the possibility of parole.



The case was investigated by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and prosecuted by Assistant State Attorney Chris Huband *(right)*.



SURVIVAL AGAINST THE ODDS

Father convicted after attacking **adult children** and setting house on fire

In the early morning on May 14, 2018, Carlos Rivera poured gasoline around his home while his children and grandchildren were asleep. His daughter woke up to the smell of gasoline and opened her bedroom door to find Rivera standing there with a knife ready to attack. She fought for her life as her brother ran in the room to protect her. While her brother fought their dad off, she snuck her children out the bedroom window and called for help. After stabbing both his son and daughter repeatedly, Rivera lit part of the home on fire and ran off but was arrested shortly after.

A Duval County jury found him guilty of Attempted First-Degree Murder, Attempted Second-Degree Murder, and First-Degree Arson. The Honorable Mark Borello sentenced Rivera to life in prison.



The case was investigated by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and the State Fire Marshal's Office and prosecuted by Assistant State Attorneys William Grauel *(above)* **and Daley Pajcic** *(right)*.



CRIME GUN INTELLIGENCE CENTER

WHEN TECHNOLOGY BREAKS A CASE

CGIC Success: four murders solved and gunman serving life

It was the night of February 8, 2021, in a high-crime neighborhood of Jacksonville, when patrol officers were conducting routine surveillance. Shots rang out nearby, and officers saw a car speed away from the Moncrief neighborhood. A high-speed chase ensued and ended in the arrest of Owen Cosme and his soon-to-be co-defendants.



CGIC SUBMITS EVIDENCE

NIBIN + IBIS

CRIMES SOLVED = CONVICTIONS

The investigation revealed a master plan by Cosme; he set up a getaway driver, armed himself with weapons, and headed to an apartment. As soon as the door opened, Cosme sprayed more than 20 rounds killing all three people inside.

Casings were collected from the scene and processed through the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) — a match. Not just for the crime scene they originated from, but from an unsolved homicide on July 23, 2020. The victim in the 2020 shooting was the maternal uncle of Cosme's child and was embroiled in a custody battle with Cosme when he was shot more than 20 times outside his apartment. With the NIBIN hit, the case was linked back to Cosme as the killer.

Cosme pleaded guilty to all charges against him, and on June 26, 2025, four families felt justice when the Honorable Jeb Branham sentenced Cosme to four life sentences for three counts of Second-Degree Murder with a Weapon; Armed Burglary with Assault or Battery; and Conspiracy to Commit Armed Robbery for the 2021 triple murder and a concurrent 25 years in prison for Second-Degree Murder for the 2020 deadly shooting.

The case was investigated by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and prosecuted by Assistant State Attorney Trey Atkinson.



This case is exactly why we fought to bring NIBIN and IBIS technology to Jacksonville. We knew it would help investigators connect cases that might otherwise remain unsolved, generate critical leads, and identify violent offenders faster. This successful prosecution demonstrates the real-world impact of investing in proven technology to help solve violent crime.

State Attorney Melissa Nelson

05.

STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE FOR FLORIDA'S FOURTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

Connected to OUR COMMUNITY

SAO4's work extends beyond the courtroom through partnerships, advocacy, education and service across the Fourth Circuit. Throughout 2025, team members connected with organizations, professionals, and residents to share knowledge, support victims, and strengthen the communities we serve.





Making Headlines

Public Safety in the Media

Chief Assistant Adair Newman went on *First Coast Connect* to highlight the office's prosecution of sexual assault cold cases. She explained how DNA plays an important role and highlighted the office's cleared backlog of sexual assault examination kits.

On *This Week in Jacksonville,* **State Attorney Melissa Nelson** sat down with host Kent Justice to discuss the dangers of the Senior Assassins game and other crime and public safety issues in the Fourth Circuit.



Clay Office Stands with Survivors During SA Awareness Month

During Sexual Assault Awareness Month, the Clay County office proudly joined Quigley House to show its support for survivors. Quigley House is the only dual-certified center for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in Clay County.

FIRST-EVER Victim Impact Panel for Duval Veterans Court

The first-ever Victim Impact Panel for Duval County's Veterans Treatment Court was a success.

Hosted by MADD Northeast Florida, the program included victims, survivors, and offenders sharing the impact that driving under the influence has had on their lives and the lives of others. **Smart Justice Division Chief Coral Messina** *(second from right below)* organized the panel with the Honorable Judge Mose Floyd, MADD's Judy Cotton, Veterans Treatment Court mentors and participants, and victim advocate Arielle Holder.

A special thank you to the victim's mother, who shared her story of loss.

MADD IMPAIRED DRIVING ENDS HERE.



Clay Day: Representing Clay County at the Capitol

Clay County Director Pam Hazel and **Chief Assistant Mark Caliel** traveled to the Capitol to meet with lawmakers and leaders, including Clay County Sheriff Michelle Cook, to discuss issues that impact Clay County. This annual meetup is dubbed Clay Day.





Striding for Hubbard House

Our team was proud to stand up and stride for Hubbard House alongside hundreds of supporters in downtown Jacksonville for its annual fundraiser. Hubbard House responds to domestic violence crises 24/7 in Duval and Baker counties.

Hubbard House

National Victims Rights Week

Special Victims Unit Director Khary Gaynor represented the office during National Crime Victims' Rights Week to remind survivors of the office's dedication to pursuing justice.



CONNECTED TO OUR COMMUNITY (CONTINUED)



A Story of Citizenship & Perseverance

An immigrant herself, former **Assistant State Attorney Crystal Ganpath-Freed** shared her inspiring story of overcoming a violent childhood to becoming a successful American attorney to a crowd of newly naturalized citizens.

Hear her story by scanning the QR code.

A Career in Public Service—Adair Newman at UF Law

Adair Newman, the office's first female Chief Assistant, spoke alongside an esteemed group of panelists at the University of Florida Levin College of Law to discuss her career in public service.

UF UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA LEVIN COLLEGE *of* LAW

Celebrating Second Chances at the MHOP Graduation

Congrats grads! The Mental Health Offender Program celebrated nine new graduates in 2025. Upon graduation, **Executive Director Stephen Siegel** presented each with an official letter stating their charges were dropped and their case is now closed.

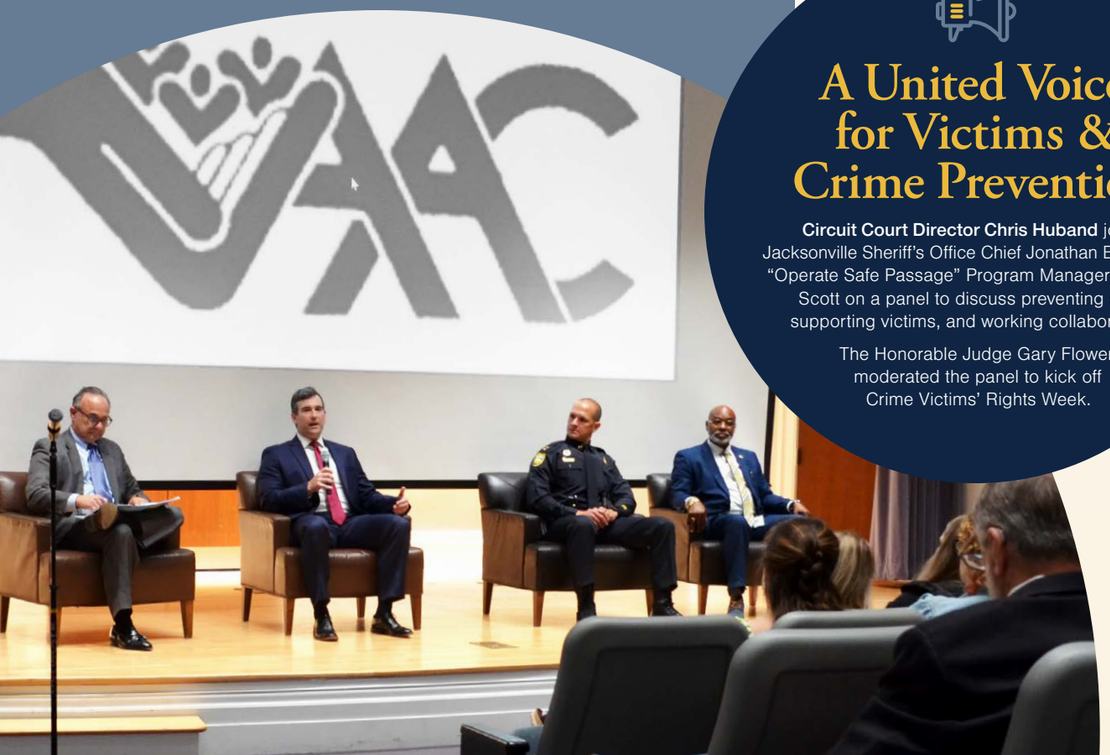
This was the 7th graduation since MHOP was founded in 2021.



A United Voice for Victims & Crime Prevention

Circuit Court Director Chris Huband joined Jacksonville Sheriff's Office Chief Jonathan Barrier and "Operate Safe Passage" Program Manager Garland Scott on a panel to discuss preventing crime, supporting victims, and working collaboratively.

The Honorable Judge Gary Flower moderated the panel to kick off Crime Victims' Rights Week.





Remembering THE MISSING

During the 15th Annual Florida Missing Adults' Day, **Homicide Division Director Alan Mizrahi** *(right)* joined the City of Jacksonville, Project: Cold Case, local victim services, and law enforcement agencies to stand with families still searching for their loved ones.





Learning from Gang Crime Experts

Assistant State Attorneys Christina Stifler, Crystal Ganpath-Freed, and Corie Posey Powell attended the National Gang Crime Research Center Conference in Chicago where they learned about the prosecution of national criminal gangs through investigative tactics and digital forensics.





Cooking Up Some Competition at the JBA Chili Cookoff

Assistant state attorneys made a well-seasoned argument for why you should vote for the SAO4 at the annual Jacksonville Bar Young Lawyers Section Chili Cookoff.

JBA



Women in Law—Jacksonville University

Assistant State Attorneys Ashley Terry and Jamie Cona held an open discussion with aspiring lawyers from the Jacksonville Women's Law Student Association at Jacksonville University College of Law about their careers as prosecutors, finding their passion in law school, and their experiences as women in the legal field.

JACKSONVILLE UNIVERSITY 1934 College of Law

Inside These WALLS

Some of SAO4's strongest community connections happen right inside its doors. Throughout 2025, the office welcomed students, law enforcement partners, and a few four-legged visitors, while making time for traditions that bring the team together.



FSU Shadows SAO4

Twelve Florida State University students spent the day learning about career opportunities in the office and the court system, from Trial Support Services to in the courtroom with the Honorable Tatiana Salvador and a meet and greet with State Attorney Melissa Nelson.



JSO Mounted Unit Visit on Donut Day

We are not horsing around about National Donut Day! Jacksonville Sheriff's Office's Mounted Unit stopped by the office while staff enjoyed some sweet treats.



New Recruits, Meet SAO4—Orientation with Caliel

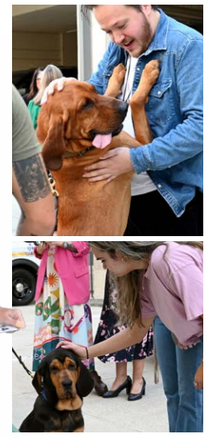
When the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office gets a new recruitment class, one of their first stops is at the State Attorney's Office. Chief Assistant Mark Caliel met with the newest local officers to explain how the office collaborates with law enforcement, day-to-day interactions, and how to strengthen their investigations.

Paws for a Cause with Dogs at Work

The dog days of summer were back in full swing with Bring Your Dog to Work Day, put on by the Dog Day Committee. The parade served as a fundraiser for First Coast No More Homeless Pets, collecting $750 and an SUV-full of donations from SAO4 employees.







K9s in the House

Thank you to whomever let the dogs out! Jacksonville Sheriff's Office K9s Patriot and Pepper took the morning off to say hello.



Investing in THE NEXT GENERATION

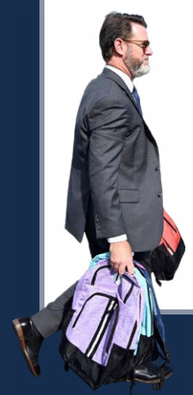
From introducing students to careers in law and public safety to supporting children and families in need, SAO4 invested time, resources and mentorship in the next generation throughout 2025.

Future Officers in the Making

Assistant State Attorney Octavius Holliday paired up with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office Teen Police Academy *(above)* to get face time with potential future officers. Holliday explained his role and how the office coordinates with law enforcement agencies.

Back-to-School Support Boost

The Nassau County office partnered with the Nassau County Sheriff's Office *(below)* to collect and distribute backpacks and school supplies for families in need. With the assistance of the Barnabas Center, the team helped put together more than 200 bundles for students.



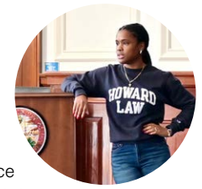




FDLE + Big Brothers Big Sisters

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northeast Florida partnered with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to learn more about careers in law enforcement. The teens met with our victim advocates, paralegals, and prosecutors who shared their experiences as well as the history of the office.

Future Lawyers in Focus



Raines and Ribault High School Future Lawyers visited the office to learn from their mentors, including Assistant State Attorney Jessica Russell, a prosecutor in our Special Victims Unit. Jessica shared her career path and what keeps her motivated to fight for justice.



High School Career Fairs

From communications to investigations, crews representing all career paths in the office met with Sandalwood and Raines High School students at their career fairs.

Nassau Angel Tree Giving

In collaboration with Micah's Place, the Nassau County office set up an Angel Tree, and the entire office fulfilled the wish lists of those experiencing domestic violence. Victim Specialist Renae Lewin proudly handed off the gifts to Micah's Place Community Engagement Director Lisa Rozier *(right)*.



08.

STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE FOR FLORIDA'S FOURTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

TRAINING & EDUCATION

Empowering Our Team with **Knowledge & Expertise**

Over the past year, our prosecutors received training from experienced prosecutors leading our office and local law enforcement. Here is just a sampling:



Triple Threat

Chief Assistants Mark Caliel (left) and **Adair Newman**, along with **General Counsel Sheila Loizos**, covered all the bases with their training on disposition statements and Supreme Court updates on case law.

Cross Examination with First Assistant Jay Plotkin



Learning from a pro, First Assistant Jay Plotkin lent his expertise to the office to train attorneys on the art of a cross examination.

AI & the Art of Adjudication



Mark Cheatham, Chief of Police at Acworth Police Department, is an expert in the evolving field of artificial intelligence. He presented an overview of the different categories of AI including its history, achievements, and applications in the judicial system.



Cell Site Training

Digital evidence is taking over trials, and our prosecutors are getting ahead of the curve with expert training from **FBI Special Agent Bobby Blythe** on cell site data.

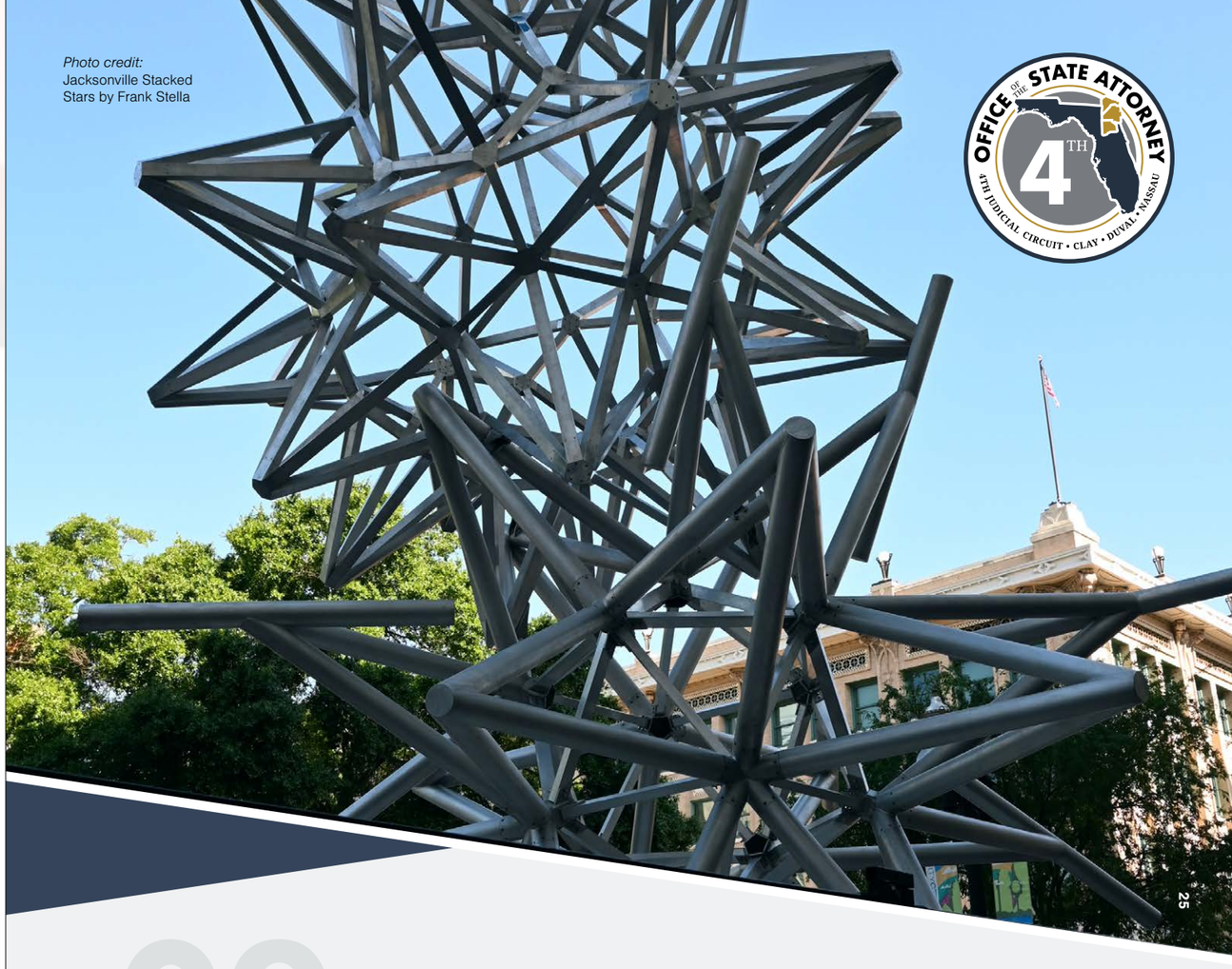


Photo credit:
Jacksonville Stacked Stars by Frank Stella

09.

STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE FOR FLORIDA'S FOURTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

Celebrating Service & ACHIEVEMENT

RECOGNITION, MILESTONES, & NEW BEGINNINGS ACROSS THE FOURTH CIRCUIT.

The work of justice is strengthened by people who bring dedication, experience, and purpose to their roles. Throughout 2025, SAO4 celebrated exceptional service and achievement, honored career milestones and retirements, recognized growth and advancement, and welcomed new attorneys and future professionals into the work.

IN THIS CHAPTER:

- 2024 OLEO Awards
- 2024 SAO4 Employee Awards
- 2024 SAO4 Awards for Years of Service
- Our Employees' Accomplishments
- Assistant State Attorney Class of 2025
- Honoring Three-Year Commitments
- Interns Go Behind the Scenes

HONORING OUR
LAW ENFORCEMENT

2024 OLEO Awards

We were honored to once again recognize exemplary service from our law enforcement partners in Clay, Duval, and Nassau counties at our annual Daniel E. Watts Outstanding Law Enforcement Officer (OLEO) awards in April. Partner agencies from across Northeast Florida were recognized for their work.

MEDAL OF VALOR
Jacksonville Sheriff's Office Corrections: Brad McNew—*posthumously*

MERITORIOUS SERVICE AWARD
Jacksonville Sheriff's Office: James Tutwiler

PROSECUTORIAL AWARD
Federal Bureau of Investigations: Lauren Regucci & Emergency Response Team

LIFESAVING AWARD
Nassau County Sheriff's Office: Justin Haire

BRAVERY AWARD
Clay County Fire Rescue: Joseph Hutchins & Thomas Gill

INVESTIGATIVE EXCELLENCE
Clay County Sheriff's Office: Ryan Ellis

—

Jacksonville Sheriff's Office: Carl Whitt

—

Jacksonville Sheriff's Office: Jason Ingham & Diana McLennon

STATE ATTORNEY'S AWARD
Jacksonville Sheriff's Office Marine Unit: Tim Leathers & Charlie Mays

LEADERSHIP AWARD
Jacksonville Sheriff's Office: Malik Daricaud

K-9 VALOR AWARD
Jacksonville Sheriff's Office: K-9 Service Dog "Patriot"

—

Jacksonville Sheriff's Office: Anthony Yannuzzi

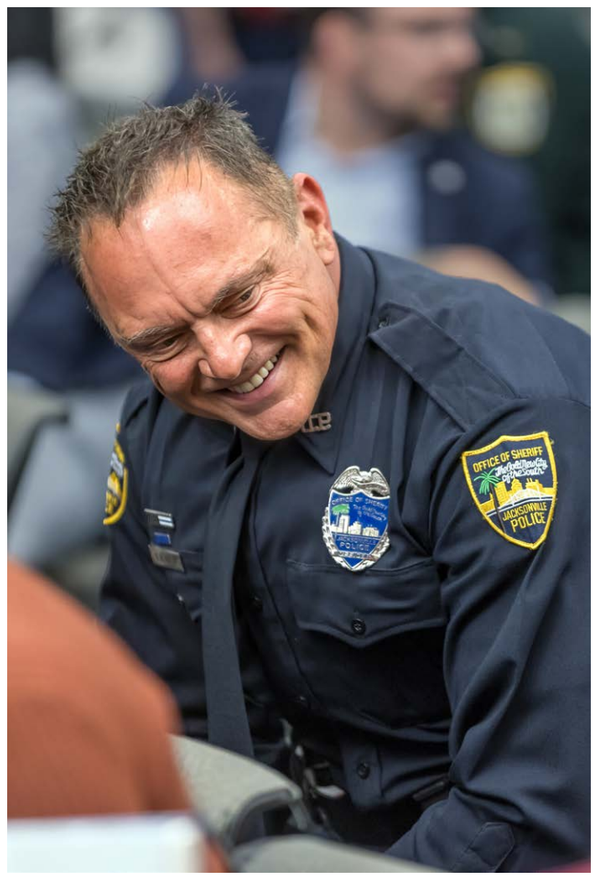
CITIZEN & VOLUNTEER PARTNERSHIP AWARD
Brooke Curry

The Fourth Circuit Outstanding Law Enforcement Officer awards ceremony is an annual event hosted by the State Attorney's Office, sponsored by Stellar, to recognize exceptional public safety efforts at the local, state, and federal levels.

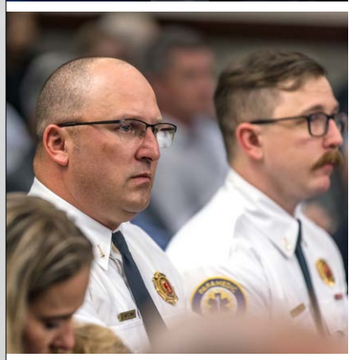












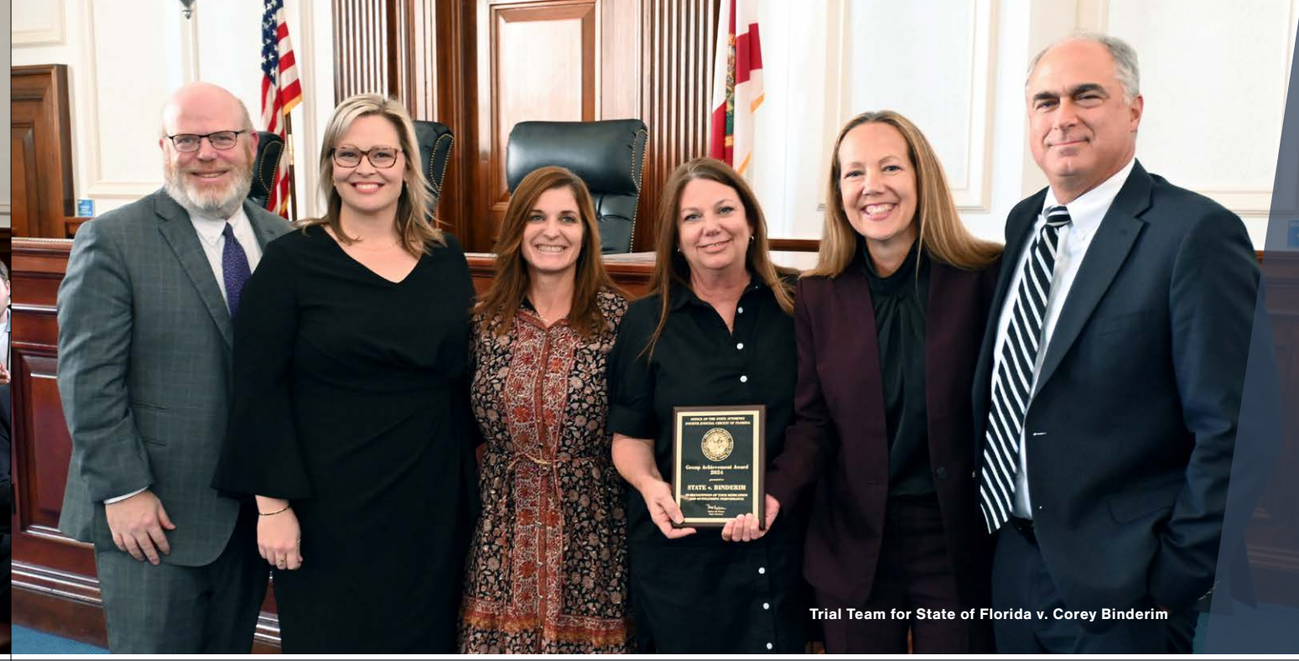






2024 SAO4 Employee Achievement Awards


Shaina Ruth


Trial Team for State of Florida v. Corey Binderim

Presented by State Attorney Melissa Nelson:

300 TRIALS
Brian Hughes

EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR
James Eckert

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE
Donna Thurson

STATE ATTORNEY'S AWARD
Lauren Anderson

MISSION VISION VALUES AWARD
Rich Giglio

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR
Shaina Ruth

TRIAL ADVOCACY
Joe Licandro

UNSUNG HERO
Marleigh Gulliford

Each year, the office gathers to celebrate its own and recognize significant achievements throughout the past year. Employees were applauded for both their contributions to the office and to the community, as well as for milestone anniversaries with the office.

The following were chosen by the awards committee:

GROUP ACHIEVEMENT AWARD
Trial Team for State of Florida v. Corey Binderim
- Pam Hazel
- Ashley Terry
- Dan Skinner
- Tammy Klaiber
- Brian Hughes
- Teresa Thomas
- Colin Markey
- Sonia Tavera Paredes
- Charlie Welch

SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENT
Kelli Shobe

COMMUNITY SERVICE
Misdemeanor Filing Division

LEADERSHIP
Teresa Thomas

OUTSTANDING INVESTIGATOR
William Jensen

OUTSTANDING TRIAL SUPPORT
Ronterious Williams

OUTSTANDING TEAM MEMBER, SUPPORT STAFF:
Malori Crowder

OUTSTANDING TEAM MEMBER, VICTIM ADVOCATE:
Arielle Holder


James Eckert


Donna Thurson


Brian Hughes


Lauren Anderson


Marleigh Gulliford


Kelly Shobe

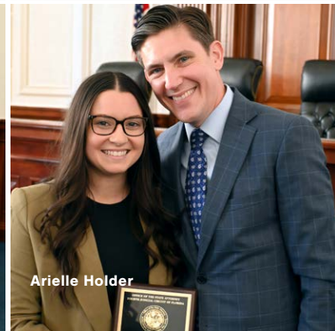

Misdemeanor Filing Division


Teresa Thomas


William Jensen


Ronterious Williams


Malori Crowder


Arielle Holder













2024 SAO4 Awards for Years of Service

40 YEARS

Sherri Shutt

35 YEARS

Donna Cornellier

30 YEARS

Stephen Sprunt
Jeanette Lee
Dawn Carter

25 YEARS

Catherine Stevenson
Jason Kelley
Rhonda Farnham
Alan Mizrahi

20 YEARS

Stacey Randolph
Royeller Joy
Lisa Lary
Nerresa Posey

15 YEARS

Ben Dulaj
Beverly Collins
Angelique Kelly
Elizabeth Anderson
Chris King

10 YEARS

Ollie Bowden
Zachary Webber
Monika Ragsdale
Elizabeth McEwan
Kelli Shobe
Cate Waugh
Korey Milo
James Eminisor
Samuel Rodriguez

5 YEARS

Alicia Cabrera-Thomas
Robin Waters
Melanie Carter
Jamie Cona
Ivette Roldan
Jodi Griffin
Deedee Daily



A Shout Out for Our **Employees' Accomplishments**

HOLLIDAY



JACKSONVILLE BAR ASSOCIATION

2025 Jacksonville Daily Record Lawyer of the Year

Assistant State Attorney Octavius Holliday *(pictured left)* was named the 2025 Jacksonville Daily Record Lawyer of the Year by the Jacksonville Bar Association.

The annual award recognizes an attorney *"who has demonstrated exceptional service to the community, exemplifying professionalism, integrity, and commitment beyond their daily legal practice"* — all attributes that fit Octavius to a T.

JACKSONVILLE BAR ASSOCIATION SINCE 1897

Through it all, he remains a tireless advocate for justice, equity, and opportunity. He stands as a bridge between the legal system and the community, a leader who listens, who shows up and who inspires the next generation to do the same.

Angie Campbell (pictured), former Daily Record Publisher, presented the award

DAUGUSTINIS & MURCIA BUSTOS





A NEW CHAPTER OF SERVICE

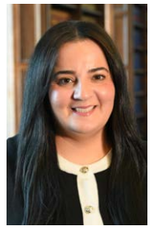
Taking the Bench

The Clay County office said farewell to two accomplished prosecutors who made their way to the bench in 2025.

The Honorable Randi Daugustinis was appointed to the bench in September 2025. She serves as a Circuit Court Judge in the 7th Judicial Circuit of Florida.

The Honorable Hector Murcia Bustos — named the FWC North Central Region's 2025 Prosecutor of the Year before taking the bench — was appointed in October and now serves Clay County as a County Court Judge in the Fourth Judicial Circuit.

JIAD



TRISTYN BAILEY FOUNDATION

Victim Advocate of the Year

Victim advocate Zina Jiad was recognized as Victim Advocate of the Year by the Tristyn Bailey Foundation for her compassionate work with victims of crime and their efforts in creating the "Jackets for Justice" clothing closets.

Started by Tristyn's parents, Forrest and Stacy, the foundation was created in the wake of their daughter's murder in 2019.



MADD
IMPAIRED DRIVING ENDS HERE.

MOTHERS AGAINST DRUNK DRIVING

Florida's 2025 Prosecutor of the Year

Director of County Court and Traffic Homicide divisions John Kalinowski *(left)* was named Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) Florida's Prosecutor of the Year for his work with victims and survivors of DUI cases and his prosecution of those cases.

Kalinowski specializes in complex cases of traffic homicides and has become an expert in the field sharing his knowledge by training and consulting law enforcement agencies on traffic laws.

KALINOWSKI

SAO4TH.COM



GAYNOR

UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE & JACKSONVILLE SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Operation Award

Director of the Special Victims Unit Khary Gaynor was recognized by the United States Secret Service and the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office for his prosecutorial success in Operation Ghostbusters. Gaynor was the lead prosecutor in the *State v. Jose Pinto-Florez,* where he would pose anonymously as "Ghost" and extort girls and women online by threatening to expose private photos. Pinot-Florez pleaded guilty to all charges and is serving 18 years.

MESSINA



EXCHANGE CLUB FAMILY CENTER

Award of Excellence

Smart Justice Division Chief Coral Messina was given the Award of Excellence for child abuse prevention from the Exchange Club Family Center. Coral was recognized for her work with truancy and her passion to tackle the rising issue of chronic absenteeism.



A Shout Out for Our **2025 Promotions**



Jay Plotkin
First Assistant



Rachel Allison
Division Chief



Cara Devlin
Division Chief



Kristen Liesch
Deputy Director



Elizabeth McEwan
Division Chief



Keith Nazworth
Assistant Director of Investigations



Lauren Randall
Division Chief



Kelli Shobe
Division Chief



Donna Thurson
Assistant State Attorney
35 YEARS OF SERVICE



Jeanette Lee
Victim Specialist
31 YEARS OF SERVICE

A Farewell to Our **Retirees**

Our milestone retirees represent decades of dedicated service in the pursuit of justice, leaving a lasting impact through their commitment, integrity, and leadership.

We honor their careers in public service and thank them for the contributions that bolster the safety of the community.

LEGACY RETIREMENTS









ASSISTANT STATE ATTORNEY

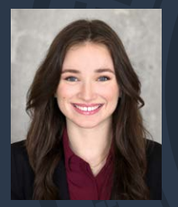
CLASS OF 2025

The office welcomed new Assistant State Attorneys in September. They were sworn into the Florida Bar during a ceremony by the Honorable Chief Judge Lance Day, and State Attorney Melissa Nelson delivered their Oath of Attorney.

Honoring **Three-Year Commitments**

In a special ceremony, State Attorney Melissa Nelson acknowledged the prosecutors who honored their commitment of service to the office.

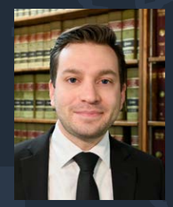
Nelson thanked them for their hard work, demonstrated their success to the incoming class of ASAs, and rewarded them with an exclusive challenge coin commemorating three years of service to the SAO4.



Lizzie Brown



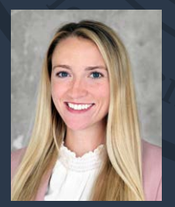
Mike Eckhart



David Gilbert



Kristen Huether



Clare Kelly



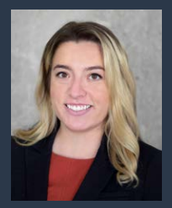
Loana Nardoni



Kevin Pollack



Shaina Ruth



Trinity Turinetti



Tucker Watters

Interns Go Behind the Scenes with SAO4 & JSO

The office hosted interns throughout the year, providing firsthand experiences across the criminal justice system. From courthouse visits and law enforcement tours to marine operations, K9 teams, and hands-on equipment demonstrations, interns had opportunities to see the work of justice and public safety from a variety of perspectives.







10.

STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE FOR FLORIDA'S FOURTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

State Attorney Melissa Nelson

In 2025, State Attorney Melissa Nelson was engaged in advancing public safety initiatives and strengthening community partnerships throughout the Fourth Judicial Circuit. She visited the Northeast Florida INTERCEPT Task Force, which combats child exploitation. After speaking to the Task Force about prosecuting their cases, Nelson dedicated an Assistant State Attorney as an on-site prosecutor to bolster their investigations.

Emerging community and technology concerns were at the forefront of discussions in 2025. Nelson was invited to join the Council on Criminal Justice's Task Force on Artificial Intelligence, diving into not only how criminals can manipulate AI to their advantage but also how it can be utilized in the criminal justice system to advance its operations more efficiently.

Throughout the year, State Attorney Nelson met with constituents all over the Fourth Circuit and appeared on local news, like *This Week in Jacksonville* with Kent Justice. Nelson's community outreach efforts reinforced the office's commitment to transparency and collaboration. Nelson met with community leaders and elected officials in Clay, Duval, and Nassau; spoke with civic groups in all three counties; and was highly involved in Clay County Courthouse's renovation plans which will improve the office space for our Clay County prosecutors and staff.

DEDICATION



Northeast Florida INTERCEPT Task Force



11.

STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE FOR FLORIDA'S FOURTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

BY THE NUMBERS:

$25 MILLION in 2025

In 2017, State Attorney Melissa Nelson brought 22 law enforcement and juvenile justice stakeholders together to sign an agreement to streamline the issuance of civil citations in Clay, Duval, and Nassau Counties. This program allows youth with no previous criminal history to avoid a criminal record. Instead of an arrest, law enforcement officers can issue a civil citation.

Juvenile Civil Citations

SAVINGS IN 2025:
$4.325 million[1]

SAVINGS SINCE 2017:
$25 million+[1]

AVERAGE PERCENTAGE OF CIVIL CITATIONS ISSUED TO ELIGIBLE YOUTH:[2]

79%—SAO4

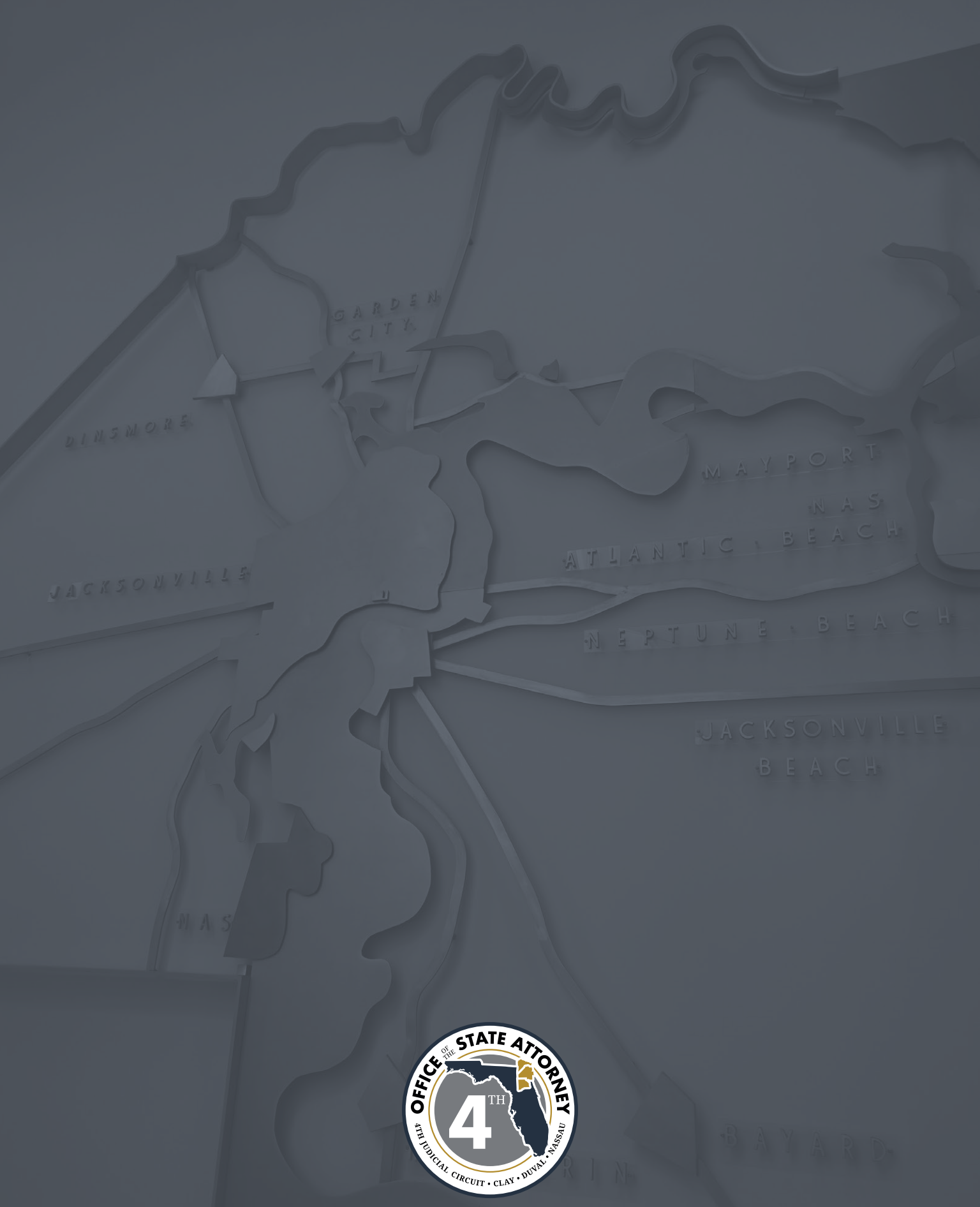
66%—Florida

CIVIL CITATIONS ISSUED TO ELIGIBLE YOUTH IN 2025, FOURTH CIRCUIT:
865

$25 million saved is a major milestone for community safety and taxpayer savings. The fiscal cost of arresting a juvenile goes beyond the $5,000 to book and house them; it takes a toll on their future. Civil citations hold young people accountable and save them from acquiring permanent and life changing records.

State Attorney Melissa Nelson

1. Prearrest Delinquency Citation Dashboard; 2. Florida-Juvenile-Civil-Citation-June-2018.pdf



OFFICE OF THE STATE ATTORNEY
4TH
4TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT • CLAY • DUVAL • NASSAU

CLAY COUNTY
825 N. Orange Avenue
Green Cove Springs, FL 32043
(904) 269-6319

DUVAL COUNTY
311 W. Monroe Street
Jacksonville, FL 32202
(904) 255-2500

NASSAU COUNTY
76347 Veterans Way, Ste 2105
Yulee, FL 32097
(904) 548-4700