

## HAPPY 250th Birthday



### The Star-Spangled Banner

O say can you see, by the dawn's early light, What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming, Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight, O'er the ramparts we watched, were

so gallantly streaming? And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air, Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there; O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

## CEP Earns National Award of Excellence



Ocala Metro CEP Earns National Award of Excellence for Weekly Buzz Video Series  
OCALA, Fla. – The Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership (CEP) has been recognized nationally by the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE), receiving an Award of Excellence in the 2026 Awards for Communications Excellence competition for its Weekly Buzz video series.

The Award of Excellence represents one of only 12 top honors presented nationwide in this year's competition, recognizing outstanding communications and marketing efforts among chambers of commerce and economic development organizations across the country.

The Weekly Buzz serves as CEP's signature weekly video update, delivering chamber news, event information, economic development updates, and partner spotlights in a concise, engaging format.

Produced entirely in-house, the series has become a cornerstone of CEP's communications strategy, reaching business leaders and community stakeholders through social media, email newsletters, and partner communications.

The award-winning entry was produced by CEP Visual Media Specialist Noah Paradiso, whose creative vision and production expertise have helped elevate the quality and impact of CEP's digital communications. Through a blend of studio production, event coverage, interviews, and storytelling, Paradiso has helped transform the Weekly Buzz into one of the organization's most effective and recognizable

The Weekly Buzz is co-hosted by Tom James and Jessica Gilbert, who together deliver updates on business news, economic development initiatives, partner achievements, and community events. James, one of the original hosts of the series, helped establish the Weekly Buzz as a trusted source of information for CEP partners and the business community, while Gilbert has helped expand its reach and content strategy as part of CEP's broader communications efforts.

"At CEP, we are constantly looking for



Most people in Marion County already know Nick and Diana Navetta. Nick is an established business leader in our Community, serving as a Financial Advisor with Edward Jones Investments for the past twelve years and currently serves as the President of the Marion County Estate Planning Council. He also has an extensive military career --- so I started asking Nick some questions. He agreed to a bio on what he is doing today and a little about his military experiences. Here is what we came up with:

Colonel Nick Navetta served thirty years in the U.S. Army, with his last duty position as the J7 Training Division Chief for U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). He is branch qualified in Field Artillery; Military Police; and Civil Affairs and is a Veteran of Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm; Operation Joint Forge in Bosnia; Operation Iraqi Freedom; and Operation Enduring Freedom. Nick has commanded several units and has served in a variety of key staff positions. His awards include The Army Achievement and Army Commendation Medals; The Meritorious Service Medal; The Bronze Star Medal; and

innovative ways to keep our partners informed, engaged, and connected to the work happening across the Ocala Metro," said Matt McCormick, President and CEO of the Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership. "This recognition reflects not only the strength of our communications strategy but also the talent, creativity, and dedication of the team behind it."

In their evaluation, ACCE judges praised the series for its consistency, production quality, and effectiveness in showcasing community initiatives.

The Awards for Communications Excellence competition recognizes excellence in chamber communications,

The Legion of Merit Medal.

Colonel Navetta was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant upon completing four years of ROTC at The University of Florida. He commanded an 8-Inch, Self-Propelled Howitzer Battery (nuclear capable); a Field Artillery Service Battery; and a Combat Military Police Battalion (with 859 Soldiers assigned) in Kuwait/Iraq. He served as Airfield Commander for Wright Army Airfield in Georgia; J5 Plans Officer at U.S. Southern Command in Miami; Liaison Officer to the Serbian Army for the NATO Joint Military Commission in Bosnia; Deputy Provost Marshal for the Theater Support Command in Kuwait/Iraq (with over 20,000 Troops assigned); Civil Affairs Government Team Chief, U.S. Army Special Operations Command in Pensacola; and Senior Liaison Officer for Multi-National Corps-Iraq in Baghdad. Upon completing his final tour of duty at USSOCOM, Colonel Navetta became a Program Manager for large Department of Defense Contractors and also served on staff/faculty at Joint Special Operations University at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa.

Here in Marion County Nick, on a local level, Nick presently serves as President of the Military Officers Association of America local chapter and is the former Vice Chairman of Marion Military Academy — the only Charter High School in Marion County over a 12-year period. He is an active member and supporter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, the Veterans Council, and the Friends of Marion County Veterans Park Foundation. He works closely with all Junior ROTC units at Marion County High Schools, acts as a Military Liaison to West Point Military Academy and assists local recruiters in increasing their ranks.

Nick and his wife, Diana, have called Ocala/Dunnellon area their home since 1974. All of their children went on to successful careers after graduating from universities and they have blessed their parents with four grand babies, so far. Nick serves on a variety of local Boards here in Marion County and looks forward to giving back to the Community.

marketing, and media initiatives. Entries were reviewed by a panel of 16 chamber marketing and communications professionals representing chambers across the United States.

Of the 12 Award of Excellence recipients, three organizations will be selected as Best in Show winners during ACCE's Annual Convention in New Orleans this July.

"This recognition is especially meaningful because it celebrates the work of an incredibly talented in-house team," said Jessica Gilbert, Vice President of Foundation and Communications for CEP. "Noah's creativity and production expertise

*Continued page 3*

## CEP CHAMBER NEWS



As Marion County prepares to celebrate Independence Day, we are reminded of the values that have long defined our nation: service, sacrifice, resilience, and opportunity.

The Fourth of July is a time for gathering with family and friends, enjoying community traditions, and reflecting on the freedoms we often take for granted. It is also an opportunity to recognize the men and women who have served our country and continue to make a lasting impact right here in the Ocala Metro.

Veterans are an important part of our community and economy. They serve as business owners, employers, educators, public servants, nonprofit leaders, and community volunteers. The leadership, discipline, and commitment they developed through military service often translate into successful careers and thriving businesses that strengthen Marion County.

At the Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership, we have the privilege of working alongside veteran-owned businesses and organizations that contribute to the growth and vitality of our region. Their entrepreneurial spirit reflects a belief in hard work, innovation, and service—qualities that are essential to building a strong local economy.

Economic prosperity does not happen by accident. It is built by people who invest in their communities, create opportunities for others, and work together toward a shared vision for the future. Veterans continue to play a significant role in that effort, helping to drive business growth, workforce development, and community engagement throughout Marion County.

As we celebrate our nation's independence, we are also reminded that strong communities are built on the same principles that have guided our country for generations: leadership, responsibility, and a commitment to something greater than ourselves.

On behalf of the Ocala Metro Chamber & Economic Partnership, we extend our sincere gratitude to the veterans, active-duty military personnel, and military families who have served and sacrificed on behalf of our nation. We thank you for your contributions to our country and to our community.

We wish everyone a safe, happy, and meaningful Independence Day as we celebrate the freedoms that unite us and the people who help make Marion County a great place to live, work, and do business

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## TODD BELKNAP

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE  
VETERANS HELPING VETERANS USA



### THE VETERAN WATCH STANDER: SERVICE AND SACRIFICE

Greetings! July is steeped in history that has forged our beloved Republic into the standard bearer of freedom for the

world. Pivotal July military battles shaped our nation's independence, altered the course of the Civil War, and helped break the

deadlock of World War II. Since the "shot heard around the world" at Concord in 1775, 41 million Americans have served in the military, defending the freedoms and liberties we continue to enjoy present day.

Throughout our 250-year history, two enduring threads connect all who have selflessly and honorably served: service and sacrifice.

The Oath of Enlistment is a solemn pledge sworn by all enlisted personnel, committing them to support and defend the U.S. Constitution, remain faithful to the nation, and obey lawful orders. It is a binding promise with no expiration date that remains with a Veteran forever.

This means serving a cause greater than ourselves, with our actions focused on the greater good rather than personal interest. Accordingly, as we celebrate 250 years of independence this month, let us pause and reflect upon the cost of said independence as

well as what it will continually take to preserve it.

See you next month!



## CEP

*Continued from page 1*

have elevated the Weekly Buzz to a new level, while Tom helped build the foundation that made the program successful from the beginning. It has been a privilege to work alongside both of them each week to share the stories, successes, and opportunities that are shaping the future of the Ocala Metro."

## Ocala Fire Rescue

**Ocala Fire Rescue Hosts Ceremony and Receives Cancer Prevention Grant Funding**

(OCALA, FL.) In a significant step towards enhancing firefighter safety and emergency response capabilities, Ocala Fire Rescue proudly served as the host site for the presentation of cancer prevention and firefighter assistance grants awarded by Florida's Chief Financial Officer and Fire Marshal, Blaise Ingoglia.

The grants, aimed at strengthening firefighters' protection against harmful chemicals encountered during fires, are part of Florida's commitment to equipping firefighters with the tools and infrastructure that support their critical role in public safety. The funding is provided through the Firefighter Cancer Decontamination Grant and the Firefighter Assistance Grant. These programs are designed to improve the health and safety of firefighters by ensuring they have access to essential equipment and educational training.

During the event, Firefighter Cancer Decontamination Grants were awarded to: Ocala Fire Rescue (\$6,372.75), and High Springs Fire Department (\$4,793.44).

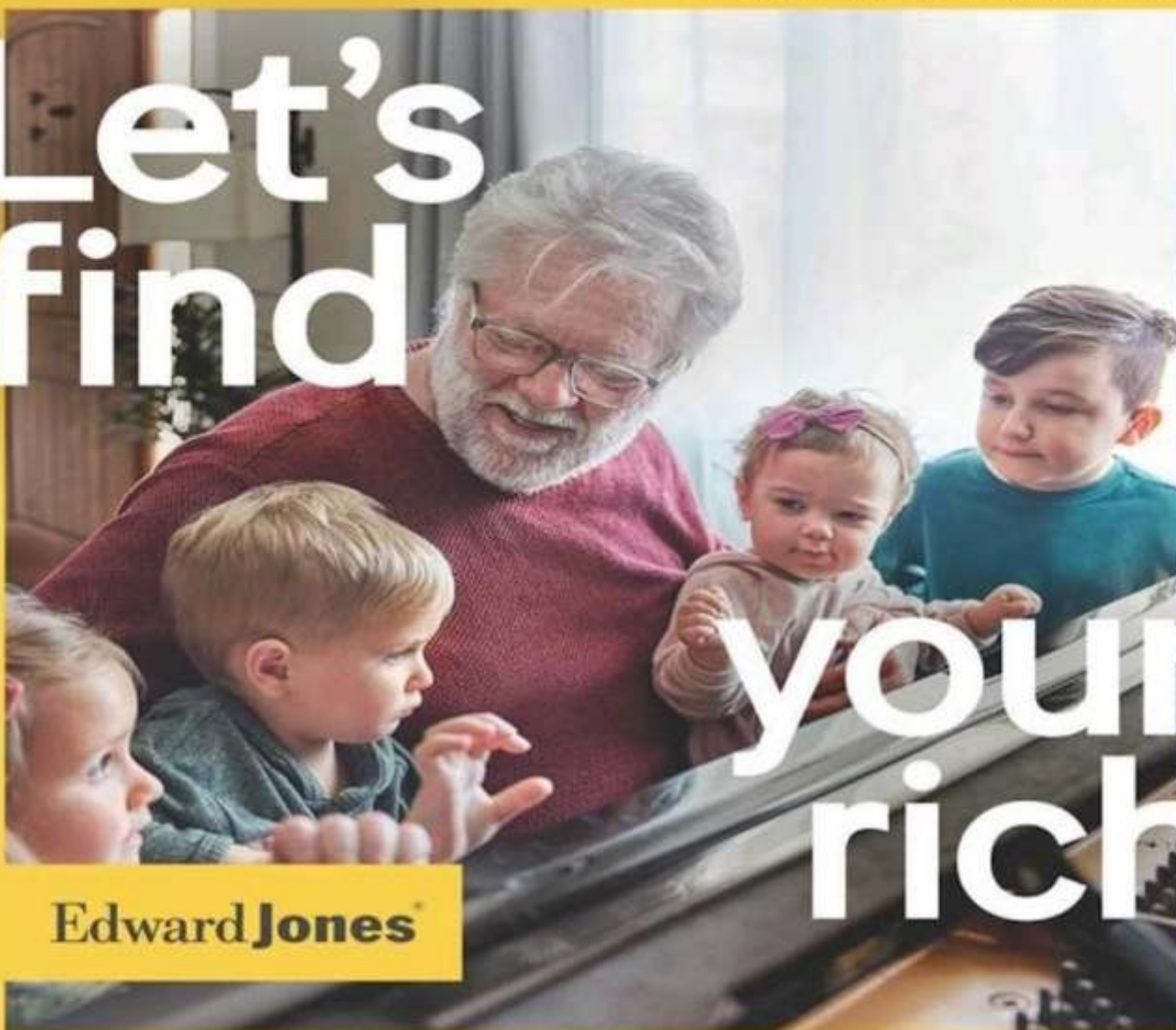
A third \$500,000.00 award was presented to the City of Newberry Fire Department for a training facility.

Ocala Fire Chief Clint Welborn expressed gratitude for the support provided through these grants, stating, "This investment directly enhances the safety and well-being of our firefighters and reinforces our ongoing mission to protect them as diligently as they protect others."

**Contact: Ashley Lopez, Public Information Officer. Telephone: (352) 629-8306. Mobile: (352) 817-5914**

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Tom Loury Tom Loury Long time member of CEP/Ocala Chamber of Commerce, Past President of the Ocala Business Leaders and current member, Co-Founder and past President of Select Business Associates, Past President of the Lady Lake Chamber and current member. If you want to make contact with the newspaper / Tom Loury email TLoury@att.net

### PUBLISHER'S NOTES



I heard a quote that an Iranian woman made about the war. If you are humiliated and you die it ends the humiliation, if you don't die you have to deal with it for the rest of your life! So the way I read that they

will have to fight to the death? Is JD have any hope of peace or has Trump dumped it on him. If that is what happened I will be disappointed!

Marion County and all the other counties have a problem with the County Commissioners raising the taxes. Understand this, they can't be on the cutting edge without money. They need to charge Impact fees and raise the money they need that way. The way they're doing it is giving the greedy Mortgage Insurance Company's an excuse to c charge higher Mortgage

Insurance rates! Some have tripped in three years!

So don't blame the Marion County Commissioners for wanting to be on the cutting edge but buyers are not stupid, they are going places that don 't have that problem. So I like the County Commissioners that are in there now. They just need another tool to raise money!

MISSING PEOPLE? Conspiracy theories are flying around. I don't think it is a fact that UFO's have anything to do with. This is a way of having the blame put on someone else that is a pie in the sky. Get it (pie in the sky?) I believe it is something like the Cartel's stealing high profile people extracting information from them, selling it and blaming it on the UFO which makes it a mystery they can't go after who did it because they don't know.

I think Nancy Gutherie's abduction was done by Cartel, maybe someone hired them??? They can make money by abducting someone without a ransom fee.

The property is worth a lot of money and maybe someone wants to buy it??? There is all kinds of reasons that could come into play that has nothing to do with the family! Of course law enforcement investigates the family first. A lot of cases find a family member guilty.

Something additional just happened. The Feds just arrested a dual citizenship man for espionage for selling nuclear secrets to Iran. I wonder if that has anything to do with our missing scientist? If they were kidnapped and torched for information. We have to protect our scientist! Iran would do anything to best us so would China or Russia.

Hospital Stay, My wife was in the hospital HCA in Ocala Florida. Was a good stay and she had good care. Three things I would like to mention.

First there were two young nurses on the floor my wife was on. They were identical twin's and their first names fit their jobs, Faith & Hope, I got a kick out of that. Second I wonder where the cellphone chargers go after the Patient is discharged. It seems like I have heard that from patient's a number of times. Where is my charger?

The third thing is you better be in good shape to go visit your spouse, especially if she is on the floor my wife was on. A person in good shape takes twenty minutes of walking. I had to stop and rest a few times to visit my wife. Then had to make it back to the parking lot. They need some electric scooters for wheel chair visitors, after all

they may be the ones paying the hospital bill! One more thing, does that sound d filmier, On TV I saw an ad I saw a comfy thing next thing that you put around your neck. IT SAID Buy one and the second half price, Guess what the second one was HALF SIZE. I complained and they said I could pay the difference and get a large one. I said you should be charged with false advertising! So just so you know what your buying half price could mean half size!

I am working toward helping Veterans helping veteran with publicity, a newspaper column and a suppling information that they might need in their daily lives. We are trying to reach every veteran in Marion County. Thing's are going on that are not good for them so we will try to shed some light on it through Todd Belknap our Veterans editor.

I recently talked to a veteran who is going to the VA hospital. He said it was too far to walk in the hospital for his test and treatment. He is buying an electric scooter to get to where he needs to be in the hospital!

I staying in the Ritz veterans home may not be the veterans home for long. It seems a grant application was not turned in by the expiration date (it was 13 minutes late?) and the grant expired. It takes a special person to write a grant application and it was not turn in by a short expiration TIME date.

One more thing...A couple of election back in California I ran a picture that a reader took of a official ballot in the middle of a park with no body to watch it!

## Newspaper Deadlines

*Editorial & Ad Copy for August*

**Seniors Voice & Ocala DownTown**  
Noon, July 21st

**Lady Lake Magazine & Village Spectator**  
12am, July 26th

## Seniors Voice of Ocala/Ocala Downtown

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**Publisher: Tom Loury**  
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**Email: tloury@att.net**

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# God Bless our Troops

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## CHAIR CHAT

BY BRIGGITTE SMITH

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

Remembering the true essence of our Independence. As we approach the 250th anniversary of our nation this July 4th, it's time to remember what this holiday is truly about. In 1776, fifty-six brave men stood together and signed the Declaration of Independence. With those signatures, they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to a dangerous idea — that a free people could govern themselves. These weren't reckless dreamers. They were defying the greatest military power on earth — Great Britain, with the world's most powerful navy. They had no standing army, no navy of their own, and everything to lose.

Yet they chose liberty over safety. Some paid a heavy price. Homes were burned. Property was seized. Families suffered. Richard Stockton of New Jersey was captured and imprisoned. Others lost land and wealth. But they stood firm. Their courage gave us the chance to build something extraordinary.

The Founding Fathers didn't want mob rule or tyranny. In the Federalist Papers, James Madison explained why a large

republic could succeed where small democracies had failed. He wrote that liberty is to political differences what air is to fire — you cannot destroy one without destroying the other. Their solution was a constitutional republic designed to protect freedom while controlling its worst impulses.

Today, many young people barely know who these men were or what they sacrificed. The story of the American Revolution has been softened or forgotten in too many classrooms. But the truth remains: fifty-six men risked everything so that we could enjoy the blessings of liberty.

This 250th anniversary is not just another celebration. It's a call to remember who we are, where we came from, and what we must protect. The men who signed that document bet their lives on an idea. The least we can do is remember why they did it.



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# 2026 Congregate Club King and Queen

Marion Senior Services is proud to announce its 2026 Congregate Club King and Queen. Nominations were received from each of the congregate clubs and scored by a selection committee, based on the following

criteria: 1) regular attendance; 2) display of outstanding pride, service, and commitment; 3) regularly, and enthusiastically participates in club activities.

Congregate Dining Clubs are

more than just a place to go. At no costs to attendees, it is a place where perfect strangers gather, bond as friends over a nutritious meal; enjoy laughter while engaging in games and activities; strike up meaningful

conversations, and most of all, become family. To find out more about this nutrition and socialization program, contact Marion Senior Services Nutrition Department at 352-620-3437



**Pictured (L to R)**  
**Meylin Powell-Smith**  
Medicare Benefits  
Consultant

**Carol Lane**  
Congregate Club  
Queen 2026

**Luis Constance**  
Congregate Club King  
2026

**Glenda Thomas**  
MSS Nutrition &  
Outreach Director



# Marion Senior Services 2026 Congregate Club



FROM THE DESK OF  
**CONGRESSWOMAN KAT CAMMACK**



**Press conference at Ocala fire station spotlights legislation to strengthen mental health support for first responders**

**OCALA, Fla.** — Congresswoman Kat Cammack (FL-03) joined area fire and law

enforcement leaders at Marion County Fire Rescue Station 28 today to champion the Answering the Call Act of 2026 (H.R. 8637), her legislation to strengthen mental health support for first responders through the national 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

“First responders see the worst of the worst, day in and day out, and it takes a toll. This bill creates a resource dedicated solely to them, with counselors trained to understand exactly what they are going through,” said Rep. Cammack. “They answer the call every single time, and it is high time we answer the call in return.”

The Answering the Call Act directs dedicated outreach and support to first responders through the 988 Lifeline. It funds specialized training for the counselors who answer those calls so they understand what first responders face, provides grants for states and departments to raise awareness of the resource, and keeps access completely anonymous so no one fears retaliation or judgment for reaching out. The bill covers firefighters, law enforcement, corrections officers, dispatchers, and EMS personnel.

Research has found that police officers and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty, and the crisis has hit Marion County directly.

The choice of Station 28 was deliberate. It was the home station of firefighter and

paramedic Allen Singleton, a six-year veteran and member of the Marion County Fire Rescue and Sheriff’s Office SWAT Medic team, who died by suicide in January 2023. Marion County Fire Chief James Banta said the department has lost four firefighters to suicide, a toll that underscores the urgency of the legislation.

“First responders answer the call every day. We respond to tragedy, trauma, and human suffering, often carrying the weight of those experiences long after the incident is over,” said Marion Chief James Banta. “Yet for far too long, seeking help has carried a stigma in our profession. If even one first responder reaches out before a crisis becomes a tragedy, it will have made a difference.”

Ocala Police Chief Mike Balken echoed the need for greater awareness of and access to mental health resources for first responders: “This legislation sends a clear message: seeking help is a sign of strength. At the end of the day, this is about taking care of the men and women who take care of our communities.”

Rep. Cammack, whose husband Matt is a 19-year veteran of Gainesville Fire Rescue, said the measure of success is simple. “Success would be if one life was saved,” she said. “That, to me, is the measure of success.”

The Answering the Call Act has earned support from the Florida Fire Chiefs’ Association, the Florida Sheriffs’ Association, and the National Police Association.

*The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is available 24 hours a day by call or text.*

**Congresswoman Kat Cammack Honors Five Inductees at Florida Law**

**Enforcement Officers’ Hall of Fame Ceremony**

**TALLAHASSEE, Fla.** —Congresswoman Kat Cammack (FL-03) joined Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) Commissioner Mark Glass for the 2026 Florida Law Enforcement Officers’ Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony at FDLE Headquarters, where five of Florida’s most distinguished law enforcement leaders were formally inducted. Following her remarks, Congresswoman Cammack presented each inductee or their family with an American flag flown over the United States Capitol in their honor, along with a challenge coin and certificate of recognition from her office.

“Law enforcement is not simply a profession. It is a calling,” said Congresswoman Cammack. “It is a commitment to run toward danger when others run away. It is a willingness to miss birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, and family dinners. And it is a promise made every day to complete strangers: that no matter what happens, someone will answer the call.”

The 2026 class includes:

- **Assistant Chief Larry Corbin**, South Miami Police Department (ret.), whose nearly four decades of service include a Silver Medal of Valor, more than 200 commendations, and a volunteer deployment to New York City to support the NYPD in the days after September 11, 2001.

- **Sergeant Michael “Mick” McHale**, City of Sarasota Police Department (ret.), who serves as National President of the National Association of Police Organizations, representing more than 241,000 sworn officers nationwide.

- **Sheriff O.L. Raulerson Jr.** (posthumous), the only person to date elected sheriff in two different Florida counties, serving Highlands County and

Okeechobee County across four decades.

- **Sheriff J. Harrell Reid** (posthumous), who served Hamilton County for nine consecutive terms over 36 years as Florida’s longest-serving sheriff and Dean of Florida Sheriffs.

- **Chief Daniel Slaughter**, Clearwater Police Department (ret.), whose more than 30 years of service included building a Real-Time Operations Center recognized as a national model and pioneering mental health co-response partnerships.

Congresswoman Cammack, who represents Hamilton County, paid special tribute to Sheriff Reid, who passed away in April. Sheriff Reid was first elected in 1988, the year the Congresswoman was born, and she noted she was proud to have worked alongside him and to have called him a friend.

Cammack closed her remarks by thanking the inductees directly: “Thank you for your service. Thank you for your sacrifice. And thank you for helping make Florida the safest, strongest, and greatest state in the nation.”

The Florida Law Enforcement Officers’ Hall of Fame was created by the Florida Legislature in 2014 to recognize and honor law enforcement officers who put their lives on the line for the safety and protection of Florida’s citizens and visitors. Inductees are nominated by the Florida Sheriffs’ Association, the Florida Police Chiefs’ Association, the Florida Police Benevolent Association, the Fraternal Order of Police, and the State Law Enforcement Chiefs’ Association, and approved by the Governor and Cabinet. Each inductee’s name is permanently displayed on the Plaza Level of the Florida Capitol.

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Your partnership in the CEP is an investment in your business and your community. By taking advantage of the CEP’s many programs, events, and services available exclusively to CEP partners, we are confident that you will find a substantial return on your CEP investment.

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 352.629.8051 Chris@OcalaCEP.com  
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## OCALA DOWNTOWN MARKET

Join us at the Ocala Downtown Market (ODM) to purchase a diverse array of products from farmers, artisans, craftspeople, food trucks! A true destination location, ODM is set just blocks off the Ocala Downtown square, in a beautiful open-air Market Pavilion. Besides permanent roof cover the facility it also has large overhead fans, restrooms, a nearby ATM, and water fountains. The Market Pavilion is also available for rental.



Interested in becoming a vendor?  
Visit [www.ManageMyMarket.com](http://www.ManageMyMarket.com)



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## Love is just a leash away!!

The HSMC is here for you and the animals who depend on us. We wanted to share that we will continue to be here to help unwanted pets during this pandemic while following all Marion County and Florida state guidelines.

As this situation is constantly changing, we ask that you continue to visit our Shelter using the safety guidelines in place.

### How can you help?

**Pet Food Bank:** Help stock our Pet Food Bank with pet food and supplies for people who cannot afford them due to job loss or other reasons. You can also bring donations to our Shelter daily from 10-6. Masks required please! If you need help keeping your pet with you during this time, our Happy Paws food program is here for you.

**Volunteer:** A small number of volunteers have returned to help in various departments. We are accepting volunteer applications but do not yet know when we will schedule orientations for new volunteers. Please contact us for more information about volunteering. We are currently working on a digital orientation.

**Opt to adopt:** According to the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization, there is no evidence that companion animals such as cats and dogs can spread the virus that causes COVID-19.

**Donate:** We know there is a lot of uncertainty right now but homeless and unwanted animals still need us. Donate to help the Humane Society of Marion County so we continue our lifesaving work and make them feel safe and loved.



Bilbie

Bilbie is a 14 weeks old male brought to the HSMC with her brother Wombat! We believe they could be Xolaitzcuinli, or Xolo, which is Mexican hairless dog breed.



Fuchsla is a 15 week old paralyzed kitten full of love.



Ninja is paralyzed in his hind legs but enjoys runs with his wheels.

Your donations make it possible to provide medical care, food and shelter to animals in need. On behalf of all the animals, thank you for caring.



Humane Society of Marion County  
PO Box 1542 Ocala, FL 34478  
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Donations to the Humane Society are tax-deductible. Check with your accountant for more information. No goods or services have been provided to the donor as a result of this gift.

## FROM THE DESK OF ATTORNEY GENERAL UTHMEIER



### Attorney General James Uthmeier Announces Arrest of 58 Child Predators in Marion County Sting Operation

TALLAHASSEE, Fla.—Attorney General James Uthmeier announced the arrest of 58 child predators in a five-day statewide sting operation. The operation was led by the Marion County Sheriff's Office, in collaboration with the U.S. Marshals Taskforce, Homeland Security Investigations, the Federal Bureau of Investigations, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Florida Highway Patrol, Polk County Sheriff's Office, Columbia County Sheriff's Office, the Florida Sheriff's Association, the Office of the State Attorney for the Fifth Judicial Circuit, and the Office of Statewide Prosecution

"With nearly 1,700 predators arrested since I took office, we are just getting started," said Attorney General James Uthmeier. "58 more child predators are behind bars and away from our kids because Florida has the best sheriffs in the nation who continue to put themselves in harm's way to keep our kids safe."

"Once again, the amazing teamwork and determination among all of these agencies involved are sending a clear message to child sex predators that Florida has no tolerance for this and we will continue to do everything we can to protect these children," said Marion County Sheriff Billy Woods.

"The fact that this many predators are

actively trying to prey on the vulnerable children in our community is deeply disturbing," said Bill Gladson, Fifth Judicial Circuit State Attorney. "My office is proud to partner with Sheriff Woods and Attorney General Uthmeier to continue to conduct these covert operations to apprehend these predators before they cause real harm. Taking these offenders off the streets makes our community safer for our youth. We will relentlessly pursue justice in these cases."

"FDLE is proud to work with our partners to find and arrest these dangerous individuals who prey on our children. Our mission is to make Florida the safest place for families," said Florida Department of Law Enforcement Commissioner Mark Glass. "I commend the unwavering dedication of law enforcement in this great state to work these investigations and continue to prioritize the safety of Florida's children."

"This operation reflects exactly the kind of coordinated, multi-agency effort that makes Florida a difficult place for predators to operate," said Florida Highway Patrol Colonel Gary Howze. "Your State Troopers were proud to support this mission with our aviation assets, working alongside the Attorney General's Office, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the Marion County Sheriff's Office, and the Ocala Police Department to protect Florida's children. Those seeking to victimize children will face the full weight of the law and the full force of every agency committed to protecting them."

The undercover operation targeted predators who were sexually exploiting

children through online chatrooms. The defendants engaged in sexually explicit conversations with the undercover officers despite being informed they were communicating with a child between the ages of seven and 15 years old. The defendants continued to make plans to meet for sexual activity, and were arrested upon arriving at a previously agreed upon meeting spot.

Many of the predators had regular access to children, and included parents and school teachers.

This marks the most successful Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) operation in Marion County, arresting 58 predators as part of an undercover operation that spanned from June 1-6, 2026.

The investigation is ongoing, and law enforcement officials anticipate further arrests in the coming weeks.

### Attorney General James Uthmeier Charges Six Defendants in Multi-County Drug Trafficking Enterprise

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Attorney General James Uthmeier announced that Isaac Lakeith Bruton, Wayne Morgan Bruton Jr., Wayne Morgan Bruton Sr., Omar Dwayne Cooper, Rene Danger Jr., and Cleon Fabian Reid have all been charged in connection with their participation in a drug trafficking ring in Broward County and surrounding areas of South Florida.

"This joint investigation dismantled a criminal enterprise that pumped dangerous drugs into Florida communities," said Attorney General James Uthmeier. "Through the tireless work of the Office of Statewide Prosecution and our great law enforcement partners, we are taking on more criminal prosecutions than ever

before."

The charges stem from an investigation led by the Broward County Sheriff's Office's Organized Crime Unit and the Office of Statewide Prosecution, with assistance from the Federal Bureau of Investigations, and the Miami-Dade Sheriff's Office.

The investigation revealed that the enterprise obtained and distributed kilogram quantities of cocaine, multiple pounds of marijuana, prescription pills, and other narcotics. The members converted powdered cocaine into crack cocaine at or near the distribution locations and used vehicles with hidden compartments to transport narcotics. Bruton and Cooper would then launder drug proceeds by purchasing vehicles, real estate, investing in business ventures, restoring classic cars, and buying jewelry.

Isaac Lakeith Bruton and Omar Dwayne Cooper are each charged with:

- Racketeering, F.S. 895.03(3), 1st Degree Felony
- Conspiracy to Commit Racketeering, F.S. 895.03(4), 1st Degree Felony
- Money Laundering, F.S. 896.101 and 777.01, 3rd Degree Felony

Wayne Morgan Bruton Jr., Wayne Morgan Bruton Sr., Rene Danger Jr., and Cleon Fabian Reid are each charged with:

- Racketeering, F.S. 895.03(3), 1st Degree Felony
- Conspiracy to Commit Racketeering, F.S. 895.03(4), 1st Degree Felony

If convicted as charged, Bruton and Cooper face up to 75 years and Bruton Jr., Bruton Sr., Danger Jr. and Reid face up to 60 years in the Florida Department of Corrections.

The case will be prosecuted by Assistant Statewide Prosecutors Jillian Tate and Nicholas Kaleel.

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FROM THE DESK OF

## GOVERNOR DESANTIS



**Governor Ron DeSantis Announces Additional Days Off for State Employees as America Celebrates 250 Years of Independence**

**TALLAHASSEE, Fla.**— Governor Ron DeSantis announced that state offices will be

closed on Thursday, July 2, 2026, and Monday, July 6, 2026, in celebration of Independence Day weekend, which this year marks America's 250th anniversary of its independence.

"America's 250th anniversary is a historic milestone and an opportunity to reflect on the courage, sacrifice, and enduring principles that established the United States as the freest and most prosperous nation in the world," said Governor Ron DeSantis. "As Florida leads the nation's semiquincentennial celebration, I am pleased to provide state employees additional time to celebrate our country's founding, participate in America 250 events, and spend time with family and friends honoring the blessings of liberty that generations of Americans have fought to preserve."

State offices will be closed on Thursday, July 2, and Monday, July 6, in addition to the regular state holiday observance of Independence Day on Friday, July 3. These office closures will create a five-day holiday weekend and will benefit nearly 100,000 employees in the State Personnel System.

The additional holiday time reflects Florida's commitment to recognizing this once-in-a-generation milestone and providing state employees with the opportunity to participate in celebrations taking place across the state and nation.

Throughout 2026, Florida is commemorating America's 250th anniversary through educational initiatives, community events, historical exhibits, and celebrations that honor the founding of our nation and the principles of freedom, self-

government, and individual liberty. As part of these efforts, Florida is encouraging citizens to learn more about the people, events, and ideas that shaped the United States and continue to inspire future generations. Floridians can find more information at [America250FL.com](http://America250FL.com), the state's official hub for the Semiquincentennial celebration.

**Governor Ron DeSantis Announces Medicaid Integrity Initiative to Crack Down on Fraud**

**Launch a pilot program with SentiLink**  
AHCA will partner with SentiLink to strengthen provider screening and detect sophisticated fraud schemes, including stolen identities, synthetic identities, and hidden ownership structures before taxpayer dollars are lost.

**Implement enrollment moratoriums for high-risk provider categories**

AHCA has imposed enrollment moratoriums on certain high-risk provider categories, including durable medical equipment suppliers and adult day care providers, while the agency strengthens screening procedures and oversight.

**Conduct a comprehensive statewide provider revalidation effort**

All active Florida Medicaid providers will be required to revalidate their credentials and identities. Providers who fail to comply or do not meet program requirements will be removed from the Medicaid program.

**Enhance claims monitoring and enforcement efforts**

AHCA will deploy additional tools to identify potentially fraudulent billing practices and work with state partners to support investigations, enforcement actions, and victim protection efforts.

Florida's Medicaid integrity initiative represents one of the most significant anti-fraud efforts undertaken by the state and reflects Florida's continued commitment to protecting taxpayers while ensuring Medicaid resources are available for those who legitimately need them.



**Fire Fighter Honor Guard**

Contact: Ashley Lopez, Public Information Officer, Telephone: (352) 629-8306, Mobile: (352) 817-5914

**Celebrating Excellence: Ocala Fire Rescue Honor Guard Wins First Place in 2026 Competition**

There is an unparalleled level of reverence when witnessing the respect, discipline, and traditions upheld by Honor Guard Members during their ceremonial displays. Whether at a celebratory event or a distinguished farewell, their unwavering dedication to their craft commands attention and admiration.

Ocala Fire Rescue is thrilled to announce that its Honor Guard team has been awarded First Place in the 2026 First There First Care Honor Guard Competition. The team's exceptional skills were showcased through a variety of ceremonial activities, including inspection, colors posting, casket watch, casket carry, and flag folding.

We invite everyone to join us in celebrating this remarkable achievement and recognizing the hard work of our Participating Honor Guard team members, including:

Firefighter / EMT Andrew Bowyer

Firefighter / EMT Michael Brittle  
Captain / Paramedic Tim Carver  
Firefighter / EMT Emanuel Del Rio  
Captain / Paramedic Nicole Kopolovits (not pictured)

Fire Equipment Operator / Paramedic Christopher Maxon  
Fire Equipment Operator / Paramedic Jacqueline Nettles

Their exceptional ceremonial mastery has earned them the distinction of first-place winners. We are immensely proud of their dedication and commitment to honoring the traditions that define our service.



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