

By the Committee on Rules; and Senator Benacquisto

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1 A bill to be entitled

2 An act for the relief of Eric Brody by the Broward  
3 County Sheriff's Office; providing for an  
4 appropriation to compensate Eric Brody for injuries  
5 sustained as a result of the negligence of the Broward  
6 County Sheriff's Office; authorizing the Sheriff of  
7 Broward County, in lieu of payment, to execute to Eric  
8 Brody and his legal guardians an assignment of all  
9 claims that the Broward County Sheriff's Office has  
10 against its insurer arising out of the insurer's  
11 handling of the claim against the sheriff's office;  
12 clarifying that such assignment does not impair the  
13 ability or right of the assignees to pursue the final  
14 judgment and cost judgment against the insurer;  
15 providing a limitation on the payment of fees and  
16 costs related to the claim against the Broward County  
17 Sheriff's Office and an exception to that limitation  
18 as to any assigned claims brought against the insurer;  
19 providing an effective date.

20  
21 WHEREAS, on the evening of March 3, 1998, 18-year-old Eric  
22 Brody, a college-bound high school senior, was returning home  
23 from his part-time job at the Sawgrass Mills Sports Authority.  
24 Eric was driving his 1982 AMC Concord eastbound on Oakland Park  
25 Boulevard in Sunrise, Florida, and

26 WHEREAS, that same evening, Broward County Sheriff's Deputy  
27 Christopher Thieman, who had been visiting his girlfriend and  
28 was running late for duty, was driving his Broward County  
29 Sheriff's Office cruiser westbound on Oakland Park Boulevard. At

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30 the time he left his girlfriend's house, Deputy Thieman had less  
31 than 15 minutes to travel 11 miles to make roll call on time,  
32 which was mandatory pursuant to sheriff's office policy and  
33 procedure, and

34 WHEREAS, at approximately 10:36 p.m., Eric Brody began to  
35 make a left-hand turn into his neighborhood at the intersection  
36 of N.W. 117th Avenue and Oakland Park Boulevard. Deputy Thieman,  
37 who was driving in excess of the 45-mile-per-hour posted speed  
38 limit and traveling in the opposite direction, was not within  
39 the intersection and was more than 430 feet away from Eric  
40 Brody's car when Eric Brody began the turn. Eric Brody's car  
41 cleared two of the three westbound lanes on Oakland Park  
42 Boulevard, and

43 WHEREAS, Deputy Thieman, who was traveling in the inside  
44 westbound lane closest to the median, suddenly and inexplicably  
45 steered his vehicle to the right, across the center lane and  
46 into the outside lane, where the front end of his car struck the  
47 passenger side of Eric's car with great force, just behind the  
48 right front wheel and near the passenger door, and

49 WHEREAS, Deputy Thieman testified at trial that although he  
50 knew that the posted speed limit was 45 miles per hour, he  
51 refused to provide an estimate as to how fast he was traveling  
52 before the crash, and

53 WHEREAS, despite the appearance of a conflict of interest,  
54 the Broward County Sheriff's Office chose to conduct the  
55 official crash investigation instead of deferring to the City of  
56 Sunrise Police Department, which also had jurisdiction, or the  
57 Florida Highway Patrol (FHP), which often investigates motor  
58 vehicle collisions involving non-FHP law enforcement officers so

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59 as to avoid any possible conflict of interest, and

60 WHEREAS, in the course of the investigation, the Broward  
61 County Sheriff's Office lost key evidence from the crashed  
62 vehicles and did not report any witnesses even though the first  
63 responders to the crash scene were police officers from the City  
64 of Sunrise, and

65 WHEREAS, the Broward County detective who led the crash  
66 investigation entered inaccurate data into a computerized  
67 accident reconstruction program which skewed the speed that  
68 Deputy Thieman was driving, but, nevertheless, determined that  
69 he was still traveling well over the speed limit, and

70 WHEREAS, accident reconstruction experts called by both  
71 parties testified that Deputy Thieman was driving at least 60 to  
72 more than 70 miles per hour when his vehicle slammed into the  
73 passenger side of Eric Brody's car, and

74 WHEREAS, Eric Brody was found unconscious 6 minutes later  
75 by paramedics, his head and upper torso leaning upright and  
76 toward the passenger-side door. Although he was out of his  
77 shoulder harness and seat belt by the time paramedics arrived,  
78 the Brody's attorney proved that Eric was wearing his seat belt  
79 and that the 16-year-old seat belt buckle failed during the  
80 crash. Photographs taken at the scene by the sheriff's office  
81 investigators showed the belt to be fully spooled out because  
82 the retractor was jammed, with the belt dangling outside the  
83 vehicle from the driver-side door, providing proof that Eric  
84 Brody was wearing his seat belt and shoulder harness during the  
85 crash, and

86 WHEREAS, accident reconstruction and human factor experts  
87 called by both the plaintiff and the defendant agreed that if

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88 Deputy Thieman been driving at the speed limit, Eric Brody would  
89 have easily completed his turn, and

90 WHEREAS, the experts also agreed that if Deputy Thieman  
91 simply remained within his lane of travel, regardless of his  
92 speed, there would not have been a collision, and

93 WHEREAS, in order to investigate the seat-belt defense,  
94 experts for Eric Brody recreated the accident using an exact  
95 car-to-car crash test that was conducted by a nationally  
96 recognized crash test facility. The crash test involved vehicles  
97 identical to the Brody and Thieman vehicles, a fully  
98 instrumented hybrid III dummy, and high-speed action cameras,  
99 and

100 WHEREAS, the crash test proved that Eric Brody was wearing  
101 his restraint system during the crash because the seat-belted  
102 test dummy struck its head on the passenger door within inches  
103 of where Eric Brody's head actually struck the passenger door,  
104 and

105 WHEREAS, when Eric Brody's head struck the passenger door  
106 of his vehicle, the door crushed inward from the force of the  
107 impact with the police cruiser while at the same time his upper  
108 torso was moving toward the point of impact and the passenger  
109 door. The impact resulted in skull fractures and massive brain  
110 sheering, bleeding, bruising, and swelling, and

111 WHEREAS, Eric Brody was airlifted by helicopter to Broward  
112 General Hospital where he was placed on a ventilator and  
113 underwent an emergency craniotomy and neurosurgery. He began to  
114 recover from a deep coma more than 7 months after his injury and  
115 underwent extensive rehabilitation, having to relearn how to  
116 walk, talk, feed himself, and perform other basic functions, and

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117 WHEREAS, Eric Brody, who is now 30 years old, has been left  
118 profoundly brain-injured, lives with his parents, and is mostly  
119 isolated from his former friends and other young people his age.  
120 His speech is barely intelligible and he has significant  
121 cognitive dysfunction, judgment impairment, memory loss, and  
122 neuro-visual disabilities. Eric Brody also has impaired fine and  
123 gross motor skills and very poor balance. Although Eric is able  
124 to use a walker for short distances, he mostly uses a wheelchair  
125 to get around. The entire left side of his body is partially  
126 paralyzed and spastic, and he needs help with many of his daily  
127 functions. Eric Brody is permanently and totally disabled;  
128 however, he has a normal life expectancy, and

129 WHEREAS, the cost of Eric Brody's life care plan is nearly  
130 \$10 million, and he has been left totally dependent on public  
131 health programs and taxpayer assistance since 1998, and

132 WHEREAS, the Broward County Sheriff's Office was insured  
133 for this claim through Ranger Insurance Company and paid more  
134 than \$400,000 for liability coverage that has a policy limit of  
135 \$3 million, and

136 WHEREAS, Ranger Insurance Company ignored seven demand  
137 letters and other attempts by the Brodys to settle the case for  
138 the policy limit, and instead chose to wait for more than 7  
139 years following the date of the accident until the day the trial  
140 judge specially set the case for trial before offering to pay  
141 the policy limit. By that time nearly \$750,000 had been spent  
142 preparing the case for trial, and Eric Brody had past due bills  
143 and liens of nearly \$1.5 million for health and rehabilitative  
144 care services. Because so much money had been spent preparing  
145 the case for trial, the exorbitant costs of Eric Brody's

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146 medical bills and liens, and the costs of future care continued  
147 to escalate, settlement for the policy limit was no longer  
148 feasible, and

149 WHEREAS, on December 1, 2005, after a 2-month trial, a  
150 Broward County jury consisting of three men and three women  
151 found that that Deputy Thieman and the Broward County Sheriff's  
152 Office were 100 percent negligent, and Eric Brody was not  
153 comparatively negligent, and

154 WHEREAS, the jury found Eric Brody's damages to be  
155 \$30,609,298, including a determination that his past and future  
156 care and other economic damages were \$11,326,216, and

157 WHEREAS, final judgment was entered for \$30,609,298, and  
158 the court entered a cost judgment for \$270,372.30, and

159 WHEREAS, the court denied the Broward County Sheriff's  
160 Office posttrial motions for judgment notwithstanding the  
161 verdict, new trial, or remittitur, and

162 WHEREAS, the insurer of the Broward County Sheriff's Office  
163 retained appellate counsel and elected to appeal the final  
164 judgment but not the cost judgment, and

165 WHEREAS, the Fourth District Court of Appeal upheld the  
166 verdict in the fall of 2007, and

167 WHEREAS, the insurer of the Broward County Sheriff's Office  
168 subsequently petitioned the Florida Supreme Court to seek  
169 another appeal, but the petition was denied in April of 2008,  
170 and

171 WHEREAS, all legal remedies for all parties involved have  
172 been exhausted and this case is ripe for a claim bill, and

173 WHEREAS, upon the passage of a claim bill for any amount in  
174 excess of the insurance policy limit of \$3 million, the Broward

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175 County Sheriff's Office may have a cause of action pursuant to  
176 state law against its insurer for bad-faith-claims practices,  
177 breach of fiduciary duty, breach of contract, and other possible  
178 legal remedies which may result in a recovery from the insurer  
179 to pay all outstanding sums owed to the guardianship of Eric  
180 Brody, and

181 WHEREAS, the Broward County Sheriff's Office has paid  
182 \$200,000 pursuant to s. 768.28, Florida Statutes, and the final  
183 judgment and cost judgment remainder in the amount of  
184 \$30,679,298.30 is sought through the submission of a claim bill  
185 to the Legislature, and

186 WHEREAS, Eric Brody is willing to accept an assignment of  
187 all claims the Broward County Sheriff's Office may have against  
188 its insurer in lieu of the sheriff's office making any payment  
189 on this claim, and

190 WHEREAS, if the Broward County Sheriff's Office assigns all  
191 of its claims against its insurer to Eric Brody, he will not  
192 hold the sheriff's office responsible for any payment, NOW,  
193 THEREFORE,

194

195 Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

196

197 Section 1. The facts stated in the preamble to this act are  
198 found and declared to be true.

199 Section 2. The Sheriff of Broward County is authorized and  
200 directed to appropriate from funds of the Broward County  
201 Sheriff's Office not otherwise appropriated and to draw a  
202 warrant payable to Eric Brody in the sum of \$23,679,298.30. In  
203 lieu of payment, the Sheriff of Broward County may assign to

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204 Eric Brody and his legal guardians all rights it may have  
205 against its liability insurance carrier for breach of contract,  
206 breach of fiduciary duty, bad faith, and any similar or related  
207 claims that may exist pursuant to state law. If the Sheriff of  
208 Broward County makes an assignment to the claimant as provided  
209 for in this section, the Broward County Sheriff's Office is not  
210 responsible for any further payment to the claimant.

211 Section 3. If the Sheriff of Broward County makes the  
212 assignment permitted under section 2 of this act, the protection  
213 given to the Broward County Sheriff's Office does not impair in  
214 any respect the ability or right of the assignees to pursue the  
215 final judgment and cost judgment against the insurer of the  
216 Broward County Sheriff's Office, less the \$200,000 already paid,  
217 pursuant to state law.

218 Section 4. The amount paid by the Broward County Sheriff's  
219 Office pursuant to s. 768.28, Florida Statutes, and the amount  
220 awarded under this act are intended to provide the sole  
221 compensation for all claims arising out of the facts described  
222 in this act which resulted in the injuries to Eric Brody. The  
223 total amount of attorney's fees, lobbying fees, costs, and other  
224 similar expenses may not exceed 25 percent of the total amount  
225 awarded under sections 2 and 3 of this act, which shall include  
226 any fees earned and amounts recovered in the prosecution of any  
227 assigned claim as permitted under section 2 of this act.

228 Section 5. This act shall take effect upon becoming a law.