

HB 3531

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1 A bill to be entitled
2 An act for the relief of L.T.; providing an
3 appropriation to compensate L.T. for injuries and
4 damages sustained as a result of the negligence of
5 employees of the Department of Children and Families,
6 formerly known as the Department of Children and
7 Family Services; providing for a waiver of specified
8 lien interests held by the state; providing a
9 limitation on the payment of fees and costs; providing
10 an effective date.

11
12 WHEREAS, on August 15, 1995, the Department of Children and
13 Families removed 14-month-old L.T. and her infant brother from
14 their mother's custody because they were not receiving adequate
15 care, and

16 WHEREAS, the Department of Children and Families
17 temporarily placed the children into the home of the children's
18 great aunt and uncle, Vicki and Eddie Thomas, and

19 WHEREAS, a background check that was conducted shortly
20 after L.T. and her brother were placed in the Thomases' home
21 indicated that Mr. Thomas had once been convicted of a
22 misdemeanor and possession of narcotics equipment, and

23 WHEREAS, the background check also revealed that Ms. Thomas
24 had been charged with, but apparently not convicted of, larceny,
25 and

26 WHEREAS, the background check did not reveal any prior

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27 | history of violence, sex offenses, or child abuse, and

28 | WHEREAS, the Department of Children and Families conducted
29 | a home study, interviews, and an investigation, concluded that
30 | the Thomases were capable of providing a safe and loving home
31 | for L.T. and her brother, and approved the placement, and

32 | WHEREAS, on August 21, 1996, approximately 1 year after
33 | L.T. and her brother had been placed in the Thomases' home, Mr.
34 | Thomas was charged with committing a lewd and lascivious act on
35 | a child under the age of 16, and

36 | WHEREAS, the alleged victim was the 13-year-old daughter of
37 | a woman with whom Mr. Thomas was having an extramarital affair,
38 | and the state later amended the charge to add a count for sexual
39 | battery on a child by a familial or custodial authority, and

40 | WHEREAS, after two hung jury trials in January and March of
41 | 1997, Mr. Thomas pled no contest in April 1997 to committing a
42 | lewd, lascivious, and indecent act on a child under the age of
43 | 16, and

44 | WHEREAS, Mr. Thomas was sentenced to 5 years' probation and
45 | required to attend sex offender classes and register as a sex
46 | offender, and

47 | WHEREAS, on May 9, 1997, 1 month after Mr. Thomas entered
48 | his plea and was convicted of a child sex crime, the Department
49 | of Children and Families recommended, and the judge approved, an
50 | order allowing Mr. Thomas to return home and have unsupervised
51 | contact with the children, and

52 | WHEREAS, although the policies of the Department of

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53 Children and Families barred Mr. Thomas from being able to adopt
54 a child because of his conviction for a sex act with a child and
55 his sex offender status, the policies did not prohibit the
56 continued placement of L.T. and her brother in the Thomases'
57 home, and so the children remained with the Thomases, and

58 WHEREAS, the Department of Children and Families
59 subsequently recommended to the court the permanent, long-term
60 placement of L.T. and her brother in the Thomases' home and
61 further recommended that the children be removed from protective
62 services, with no further supervision by the department, and

63 WHEREAS, on March 3, 2000, following the recommendation of
64 the Department of Children and Families, the court approved L.T.
65 and her brother's long-term placement with the Thomases and
66 removed the children from continued protective services, and

67 WHEREAS, on March 24, 2003, an abuse hotline call to the
68 Department of Children and Families reported that L.T. was being
69 abused by Mr. Thomas and that both Mr. and Ms. Thomas were using
70 drugs in the children's presence, and

71 WHEREAS, the next day, a child protective investigator with
72 the Department of Children and Families interviewed L.T. and her
73 brother while in the presence of Ms. Thomas, and neither child
74 was asked to be interviewed outside Ms. Thomas's presence, and

75 WHEREAS, L.T. and her brother denied the abuse allegations
76 while Ms. Thomas watched and listened to them, and

77 WHEREAS, results from new background checks and drug
78 screens were negative, and the Department of Children and

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79 Families concluded that L.T. and her brother were not at risk of
80 abuse and closed the case, and

81 WHEREAS, on February 24, 2005, L.T. ran away from the
82 Thomases' home and was found by law enforcement officers, and

83 WHEREAS, L.T. ran away from home because she had been
84 repeatedly sexually and physically abused by Mr. Thomas and
85 physically, verbally, and emotionally abused for years by Ms.
86 Thomas, and

87 WHEREAS, L.T. and her brother were finally removed from the
88 Thomases' home in 2005, and

89 WHEREAS, since her removal from the Thomases' home, L.T.
90 has been the subject of repeated Baker Act proceedings and
91 suicide attempts and has been in and out of inpatient and
92 outpatient psychiatric facilities, and

93 WHEREAS, L.T. has been seen and treated by physicians and
94 mental health care professionals who have diagnosed her with
95 depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorder, and
96 other disorders attributed to her trauma, and

97 WHEREAS, although L.T. struggles with the symptoms of
98 posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety, she
99 attends a university in this state and supports herself with
100 part-time employment as she works toward her goal of becoming a
101 mental health care professional to help children who have been
102 abused, neglected, or traumatized, and

103 WHEREAS, a lawsuit was brought on L.T.'s behalf in state
104 and federal courts alleging negligence pursuant to s. 768.28,

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105 Florida Statutes, and civil rights violations pursuant to 42
106 U.S.C. s. 1983, and

107 WHEREAS, the civil rights claims were disposed of by the
108 trial court, but the negligence claims continued to be
109 litigated, and a jury trial of the case was set in Leon County,
110 and

111 WHEREAS, the parties attended a court-ordered mediation and
112 on June 21, 2010, the parties agreed to a mediated settlement
113 under which L.T. will receive \$1 million, \$200,000 of which has
114 been paid, and

115 WHEREAS, the Department of Children and Families supports
116 the passage of this claim bill for the unpaid portion of the
117 settlement, which totals \$800,000, NOW, THEREFORE,

118

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

120

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

123 Section 2. There is appropriated from the General Revenue
124 Fund to the Department of Children and Families the sum of
125 \$800,000 for the relief of L.T. for the injuries and damages she
126 sustained.

127 Section 3. The Chief Financial Officer is directed to draw
128 a warrant in the sum of \$800,000, payable to a special needs
129 trust created for the exclusive use and benefit of L.T., upon
130 funds in the State Treasury to the credit of the Department of

131 Children and Families, and the Chief Financial Officer is
132 directed to pay the same out of such funds in the State Treasury
133 not otherwise appropriated. The trust shall be administered by
134 an institutional trustee that L.T. chooses and shall terminate
135 upon L.T.'s 30th birthday, at which time the remaining principal
136 shall revert to her, or if she predeceases the termination of
137 the trust, the principal shall revert to her heirs,
138 beneficiaries, or estate.

139 Section 4. It is the intent of the Legislature that all
140 lien interests held by the state resulting from the treatment
141 and care of L.T. for the occurrences described in this act are
142 waived.

143 Section 5. The amount awarded pursuant to the waiver of
144 sovereign immunity under s. 768.28, Florida Statutes, and the
145 amount awarded under this act are intended to provide the sole
146 compensation for all present and future claims arising out of
147 the factual situation described in this act which resulted in
148 the injuries and damages to L.T. The total amount paid for
149 attorney fees, lobbying fees, costs, and other similar expenses
150 relating to this claim may not exceed 25 percent of the total
151 amount awarded under this act.

152 Section 6. This act shall take effect upon becoming a law.