FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
BILL ANALYSIS

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BILL #: HB 413	**COMPANION BILL:** SB 644 (Grall)
TITLE: Attorney Fees, Suit Money, and Costs	**LINKED BILLS:** None
SPONSOR(S): Gottlieb	**RELATED BILLS:** None

Committee References

Civil Justice & Claims ➤ Judiciary

SUMMARY

Effect of the Bill:

HB 413:

- Expressly authorizes a court to award appellate attorney fees in a determination of parentage proceeding.
- Specifies that, in determining entitlement to and the amount of an attorney fee award in a dissolution of marriage, support, time-sharing, or determination of parentage proceeding, the court may consider whether either party to the relevant action rejected a good faith settlement offer.
- Authorizes a court to, if it finds a party engaged in vexatious or bad faith litigation in a dissolution of marriage, support, time-sharing, or determination of parentage proceeding:
  - Award attorney fees to the aggrieved party; or
  - Reduce or deny an award of attorney fees to the offending party.
- Clarifies that an attorney fee award in a dissolution of marriage, support, time-sharing, or determination of parentage proceeding may be awarded retroactively and prospectively as equity requires, and that the total award may include any attorney fees incurred in pursuing the award.
- Provides that the changes made by the bill apply to court proceedings pending or filed on or after the bill's effective date.

Fiscal or Economic Impact:

The bill may have an indeterminate fiscal impact on state government and on the private sector.

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ANALYSIS

EFFECT OF THE BILL:

Attorney Fees and Costs in Family Law Disputes

Prospective and Retroactive Attorney Fee Awards

To address a First District Court of Appeal ("DCA") split on the question of whether a court may award attorney fees in certain family law disputes retroactively as a form of equitable reimbursement or as a sanction, the bill amends s. 61.16, F.S. (pertaining to attorney fee awards in dissolutions of marriage, support, and time-sharing proceedings under ch. 61, F.S.) and s. 742.045, F.S. (pertaining to attorney fee awards in determination of parentage proceedings under ch. 742, F.S.), to expressly state that a court may award attorney fees "retroactively and prospectively [in proceedings under either chapter] as equity requires." (Sections 1 and 2)

Attorney Fee Award as Sanction

The bill amends ss. 61.16 and 742.045, F.S., to codify the factors enumerated by the *Rosen* and *Moakley* Courts, which factors generally allow a court to impose, limit, or deny an attorney fee award where one party engages in vexatious or bad faith litigation in certain family law matters. Specifically, the bill provides that, if a party, directly

or through the party's attorney, "engages in vexatious or bad faith litigation" in a dissolution of marriage, support, time-sharing proceeding under ch. 61, F.S., or a determination of paternity proceeding under ch. 742, F.S., the court may:

- Award attorney fees, suit money, and costs as a sanction against the opposing party; or
- Deny or reduce an award of attorney fees, suit money, and costs to the offending party.

Under the bill:

- An order entered addressing vexatious or bad faith litigation in a covered dispute must include written findings identifying the specific conduct the offending party engaged in and the reasons the court granted, denied, or reduced fees, money, and costs.
- A party to a covered dispute could likely still avail himself or herself of the remedies under the Florida Vexatious Litigant Law or seek attorney fees as a sanction under s. 57.105, F.S. (Sections 1 and 2)

Further, to address a DCA split on whether a court may consider the rejection of a good faith settlement offer in limiting attorney fee awards in certain family law disputes, the bill amends ss. 61.16 and 742.045, F.S., to expressly provide that, in determining entitlement to, and the amount of, an award of attorney fees under either section, whether incurred at the trial court or appellate court level, the court may consider whether either party to the relevant proceeding rejected a good faith settlement offer. (Sections 1 and 2)

Appellate Attorney Fees

To address a DCA split as to whether s. 742.045, F.S. authorizes appellate attorney fee awards in determination of parentage proceedings under ch. 742, F.S., the bill amends s. 742.045, F.S., to expressly authorize the award of appellate attorney fees in such proceedings. This change makes the authority for courts to award attorney fees consistent as between s. 742.045, F.S. and the parallel provision in s. 61.16, F.S., pertaining to attorney fee awards in dissolution of marriage, support, and time-sharing proceedings under ch. 61, F.S. (Section 2)

Establishing Appropriate Attorney Fee Award

To address a DCA split on whether attorney fees incurred in establishing an appropriate attorney fee award in certain family law disputes may be included in the total attorney fee award, the bill amends s. 61.16, F.S. (pertaining to attorney fee awards in dissolution of marriage, support, and time-sharing proceedings under ch. 61, F.S.) and s. 742.045, F.S. (pertaining to attorney fee awards in determination of parentage proceedings under ch. 742, F.S.) to expressly provide that such fees may be included in the total attorney fee award under either section. (Sections 1 and 2)

Retroactivity

The bill provides that the amendments made to ss. 61.16 and 742.045, F.S., by the bill apply to any court proceeding pending or filed on or after the bill's effective date. (Section 3)

Effective Date

The bill provides an effective date of upon becoming a law. (Section 4)

FISCAL OR ECONOMIC IMPACT:

STATE GOVERNMENT:

The bill may have an indeterminate fiscal impact on state government. Such impact may be positive to the extent that the bill discourages the filing of frivolous litigation or encourages the good faith settlement of disputes, thereby reducing the burden on the state court system.

PRIVATE SECTOR:

The bill may have an indeterminate fiscal impact on the private sector. To the extent the bill authorizes the award of attorney fees and costs where such fees and costs were not previously awardable, or makes such fees and costs easier to obtain, the bill may have a positive economic impact on those parties awarded their attorney fees and costs but a negative economic impact on those parties ordered to pay such awards. To the extent that the bill discourages the filing of frivolous litigation or encourages the parties to settle their disputes in good faith, thereby reducing each party's total litigation expenses in either instance, the bill may have a positive economic impact on all parties to a covered dispute.

RELEVANT INFORMATION

SUBJECT OVERVIEW:

Civil Litigation in the State Court System

Trial Courts

Section 21 of the State Constitution's Declaration of Rights provides that "the courts shall be open to every person for redress of any injury, and justice shall be administered without sale, denial, or delay." To that end, the State Constitution provides for a two-tier trial court system comprised of 67 county courts – that is, one county court for each of Florida's 67 counties – and 20 circuit courts, each of which serves at least one county.[1] The county courts, as courts of limited jurisdiction established by statute, hear matters including traffic offenses, landlord-tenant disputes, small claims cases up to $8,000, misdemeanor criminal matters, local government ordinance violations, and monetary disputes up to $50,000.[2] The circuit courts, meanwhile, as courts of general jurisdiction, hear all matters not within the county courts' jurisdiction, including dissolution of marriage and other "family law" proceedings, felony criminal matters, juvenile delinquency and dependency proceedings, probate proceedings, guardianship matters, and monetary disputes over $50,000.[3]

Florida law establishes various causes of action for which a person may sue, but it is the Florida Rules of Civil Procedure, promulgated by the Florida Supreme Court, which govern the procedural requirements for such lawsuits. Generally speaking, under these Rules, lawsuits in Florida's state court system begin with one party to a dispute (known as the "plaintiff") filing a complaint with the clerk of the court for the trial court with jurisdiction over the matter, after meeting any pre-suit requirements. Once served with the complaint, the person sued (known as the "respondent") has the right to file a response to the complaint, and must serve such response on the plaintiff. Once the pleadings are filed, the parties begin the "discovery" phase – that is, the phase during which both parties exchange information and evidence and depose witnesses[4] – and either party may file pre-trial motions asking the court to make a ruling on some aspect of the case. Ultimately, if the parties do not reach a settlement,[5] the lawsuit may then proceed to trial; such trials may be before a jury, in which case the jury determines questions of fact[6] while the judge determines questions of law, or else such trials may be "bench trials" – that is, trials solely before a judge, in which case the judge determines both questions of fact and of law.[7] In either case, at the trial's conclusion,

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[1] Art. V, ss. 5 and 6, Fla. Const.
[2] Office of the State Courts Administrator, *Trial Courts – County,* https://www.flcourts.gov/Courts-System/Court-Structure/Trial-Courts-County (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).
[3] Office of the State Courts Administrator, *Trial Courts - Circuit*, https://www.flcourts.gov/Courts-System/Court-Structure/Trial-Courts-Circuit (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).
[4] Legal Information Institute, Discovery, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/discovery (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).
[5] A "settlement" is an agreement that ends a dispute and results in voluntary dismissal of the related lawsuit. Legal Information Institute, *Settlement*, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/settlement (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).
[6] "Questions of fact" are those questions answered by the evidence presented. To determine questions of fact, the "factfinder," whether a jury or a judge, must weigh the strength of the documentary evidence presented and the credibility of all witnesses giving testimony. Legal Information Institute, *Questions of Fact*, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/question_of_fact (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).
[7] "Questions of law" are those questions relating to the identification, interpretation, and application of the relevant laws. Legal Information Institute, *Questions of Law*, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/question_of_law (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).

the judge issues a final judgment,[8] and may also issue orders on any post-trial motions filed by the parties, which may include motions for attorney fees and costs.[9]

Appellate Courts

Article V, Section 4 of the State Constitution guarantees litigants the right to appeal final judgments and orders issued by the state's trial courts to one of Florida's District Courts of Appeal ("DCA") when such judgments or orders are not directly appealable to the Florida Supreme Court or to a circuit court; given that the State Constitution and Florida law limit the appellate jurisdiction of the Florida Supreme Court and of the circuit courts, most appeals in state court go from the trial court to a DCA.[10] Currently, Florida has six DCAs – that is, one DCA serving each of Florida's six appellate districts.[11]

An appeal, irrespective of which court takes it up, is not an opportunity for the parties to reargue the facts of a case; instead, the parties must rely on the factual record established by the trial court, and the party appealing the trial court's decision (known as the "appellant") may only argue that the trial court made a legal error, which error prejudiced the outcome of the case.[12] Furthermore, the appellant generally must have "preserved" the trial court's error, by making a specific, contemporaneous objection to the trial court;[13] appellate courts generally do not address new legal issues raised for the first time on appeal, as, under Florida's civil litigation scheme, the trial courts are the principal arbiter of disputes while the appellate courts are courts of review.[14]

Chapter 59, F.S., provides a general framework for appellate proceedings in state courts; however, state court appeals are more specifically governed by the Florida Rules of Appellate Procedure, promulgated by the Florida Supreme Court. Such rules address, among other things, the timeframes for commencing an appeal (typically 30 days from the rendition of the judgment or order to be reviewed) and for filing briefs,[15] as well as procedures specific to the various types of appeals. Generally speaking, once an appeal commences, a three-judge panel considers the matter and renders a decision, for which a concurrence of two judges is necessary.[16] If the panel believes that the trial court ruled correctly, or at least that the trial court did not make a prejudicial legal error, the DCA will affirm the trial court's ruling. Alternatively, if the panel believes that the trial court made a prejudicial

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[8] A "final judgment" is the last decision from a court, which decision resolves all issues in dispute and settles the parties' rights with respect to those issues. Generally speaking, the only issues which may remain after the issuance of a final judgment include decisions on judgment enforcement, entitlement to attorney fees and costs, and whether to appeal the judgment. Legal Information Institute, *Final Judgment*, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/final_judgment (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).

[9] *Stockman v. Downs*, 573 So. 2d 835, 838 (Fla. 1991).

[10] Death penalty sentences imposed by trial courts are directly appealable to the Florida Supreme Court. The circuit courts have limited appellate jurisdiction as provided for by general law; however, the Legislature largely eliminated the circuit court's authority to hear appeals of county court matters as of January 1, 2021. Art. V, ss. 3 and 5, Fla. Const.; Ch. 2020-61, L.O.F.

[11] Art. V, s. 3, Fla. Const.; s. 35.01, F.S.

[12] Appealable legal errors include procedural violations, the improper admission of or refusal to admit evidence, and the incorrect application of law to the facts of the case.

[13] *Castor v. State*, 365 So. 2d 701 (Fla. 1978).

[14] "Fundamental error" – that is, errors that "reach down into the validity of the trial itself" and could potentially erode the public's trust in the justice system – may generally be challenged on appeal absent a contemporaneous objection. In civil cases, courts have found the award of judgments based on non-existent rights and lack of any foundation to be fundamental error, as well as improper, harmful, and totally incurable closing arguments that so damage a trial's fairness as to require a new trial (such as closing arguments that appeal to racial, ethnic, or religious prejudices). *Murphy v. International Robotics Systems, Inc.*, 766 So. 2d 1010 (Fla. 2000).

[15] A "brief" is a written legal argument filed by a party to an appeal to explain his or her legal position. In a typical appeal, the appellant files an "initial brief" to explain to the appellate court why the trial court's decision was wrong and why the appellate court should, therefore, grant the appellant relief; the appellee thereafter files an "answer brief" to provide the appellate court with legal and factual support to uphold the trial court's decision. Legal Information Institute, *Brief*, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/brief (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).

[16] In extraordinary circumstances, a DCA may, by majority vote of all active judges on the court, order that a proceeding be determined *en banc* – that is, the panel will consist not of three judges but of all judges in regular, active service on the court who are not disqualified from hearing the appeal; *en banc* hearings typically occur when the case is of exceptional importance or there is a need to maintain uniformity in the court's decisions, such as when two appellate panels reach conflicting decisions when presented with similar facts. A party to the appeal may also request a rehearing *en banc* after the initial panel issues a ruling but must state with specificity those points of law or fact that the party believes the panel overlooked or misapprehended. Art. V, s. 4, Fla. Const.; Fla. R. App. P. 35.

legal error, the DCA may reverse the trial court's ruling and "remand" – that is, send – the case back to the trial court for further action.[17]

Florida Supreme Court

Article V, s. 3 of the State Constitution establishes the Florida Supreme Court's jurisdiction, which, in most instances, is "discretionary" – in other words, the Court may generally decide whether or not to take up a particular matter on appeal.[18] Because of this, most appeals do not reach the Florida Supreme Court and are instead resolved by a DCA. Matters falling into the Florida Supreme Court's discretionary jurisdiction include, among other matters, any DCA decision that expressly and directly conflicts with another DCA's decision on the same question of law – that is, when the DCAs are "split."[19] When a split occurs, a DCA may choose to "certify conflict" to the Florida Supreme Court by issuing a written opinion expressly attesting to the conflict; this certification then triggers the Florida Supreme Court's discretionary jurisdiction, giving the Court the option to review and resolve the conflict and to thereby ensure uniformity in the interpretation and application of Florida law across the state.[20]

Attorney Fees and Costs in Family Law Disputes

The traditional "English rule" on attorney fees entitled a prevailing party in a lawsuit to recover his or her attorney fees and costs from the losing party as a matter of right. However, Florida and a majority of other United States jurisdictions have adopted the "American rule" on attorney fees, under which each party bears its own attorney fees and costs unless a contract or a "fee-shifting statute" provides a specific entitlement to such fees and costs.

In Florida, several fee-shifting statutes create a "one-way" attorney fee structure, typically entitling a specific type of prevailing plaintiff to recover his or her attorney fees and costs from a losing respondent.[21] Certain other fee-shifting statutes create a "two-way" attorney fee structure, entitling the prevailing party in a lawsuit to recover his or her attorney fees and costs from the losing party.[22]

Equity Standard for Fee Awards

Whether a fee-shifting statute is "one-way" or "two-way," courts typically determine the entitlement to attorney fees at the relevant proceeding's conclusion and award the amount owed for completed work; this makes sense when considering that, in most instances, a party or a plaintiff must "prevail" before a court may award attorney fees. However, in certain "family law"[23] matters, the standard for an attorney fee award is neither "prevailing plaintiff" nor "prevailing party," but rather an equity standard, under which courts generally consider the parties' relative financial resources when determining whether to award attorney fees – that is, the courts generally

[17] The appellate court may, depending on the posture of the case, remand the case back to the trial court for actions including correcting an order, holding a rehearing on a motion, or conducting an entirely new trial.

[18] As previously mentioned, the Florida Supreme Court has mandatory jurisdiction over, and therefore must hear, all death penalty sentences imposed by trial courts. The Court also has mandatory jurisdiction over all DCA decisions declaring a state statute or state constitution provision invalid, over all trial court rulings upholding local government bonds, and over all state utility regulator decisions concerning rates or service. Furthermore, the Florida Supreme Court has no jurisdiction over, and therefore may not hear, decisions that were *per curium affirmed* by the DCA, as there is no written opinion issued with such decisions which the Court could review. Art. V, s. 3, Fla. Const.; *Jenkins v. State,* 385 So. 2d 1356 (Fla. 1980).

[19] Other matters within the Florida Supreme Court's discretionary jurisdiction include a DCA decision that expressly: construes the State or Federal Constitution; declares a state statute valid; passes upon a question of great public importance; or affects a class of constitutional or state officers. Art. V, s. 3 Fla. Const.

[20] *State v. Vickery*, 961 So. 2d 309 (Fla. 2007).

[21] *See, e.g.,* s. 400.023, F.S. (nursing home resident); s. 440.34, F.S. (claimant in a workers' compensation case in certain situations); s. 501.2105, F.S. (plaintiff in specified FDUTPA actions); and s. 790.33, F.S. (plaintiff in a suit to enforce his or her firearm rights).

[22] *See, e.g.*, s. 713.29, F.S. (prevailing party in action to enforce a lien); s. 83.48, F.S. (prevailing party in action to enforce rental agreement or the Florida Residential Landlord and Tenant Act).

[23] "Family law" is a collective term for a wide range of legal matters revolving around familial or otherwise domestic relationships. Such legal matters include marriages, dissolutions of marriage (or "divorce"), time-sharing (once known as "child custody"), spousal and child support, adoption, determination of parentage (or "paternity actions"), and domestic violence. Legal Information Institute, *Family Law*, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/family_law (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).

consider one party's financial need and the other party's ability to pay. Section 61.16, F.S. (governing dissolution of marriage, support, and time-sharing proceedings under ch. 61, F.S.) and s. 742.045, F.S. (governing determination of parentage proceedings under ch. 742, F.S.) establish such an equity standard.

Prospective and Retroactive Attorney Fee Awards

In proceedings under either chs. 61 or 742, F.S., courts may award attorney fees prospectively – that is, for future legal work – where one party demonstrates his or her need and the other party's ability to pay.[24] This ensures that, even where there is a marked income disparity between the parties to a family law dispute, each party has access to legal representation for the proceeding's duration.[25] Where equity so requires, courts have also awarded attorney fees in family law matters retroactively – that is, for legal expenses already incurred – either as a form of equitable reimbursement or as a sanction. However, in 2024, the First DCA split from the other DCAs, holding that s. 61.16, F.S., as currently written, only contemplates prospective attorney fee awards and, therefore, does not authorize retroactive attorney fee awards.[26] In support of its position, the court noted that s. 61.16, F.S., refers to a need for immediate financial assistance, and access to legal representation, which phrases speak to future events.[27]

Attorney Fee Award as Sanction

In 1997, the Florida Supreme Court decided *Rosen v. Rosen*, a case in which the court acknowledged that the financial resources of the parties – that is, need and ability to pay – is the primary factor for a court to consider in determining whether to award attorney fees in a dissolution of marriage, support, or time-sharing proceeding under ch. 61, F.S.[28] However, the *Rosen* Court went on to enumerate a list of other relevant factors which a court may consider in awarding such attorney fees, including:

- The litigation's scope and history;
- The litigation's duration;
- The merits of each party's respective positions;
- Whether the litigation is brought or maintained primarily to harass (or whether a defense is raised primarily to frustrate or stall); and
- The existence and course of prior or pending litigation.[29]

Subsequently, in 2002, the Florida Supreme Court decided *Moakley v. Smallwood*, a case in which the Court opined that a trial court has the inherent authority to impose attorney fees for bad faith conduct.[30] Thus, in deciding *Rosen* and *Moakley*, the Florida Supreme Court acknowledged that attorney fees may be awardable in family law matters as a sanction for vexatious or bad faith litigation; however, neither chs. 61 nor 742, F.S., codify this holding.

Further, in 2012, the Fourth DCA held that, under *Rosen*, a court may properly consider a party's refusal to accept a settlement offer in determining, and limiting, an attorney fee award under ch. 61, F.S.[31] However, in 2016, the First DCA split from the Fourth DCA on this issue, holding that, "while there may be special circumstances to consider in addition to the parties' financial positions when determining entitlement to attorney fees in a marital dissolution proceeding, no [statutory] authority exists for denying attorney fees [from the point of offer rejection] solely based on the failure to accept an offer of settlement."[32]

Appellate Attorney Fees

[24] *Nisbeth v. Nisbeth*, 568 So. 2d 461 (Fla. 3d D.C.A. 1990); *Lochridge v. Lochridge*, 526 So. 2d 1010, 1012 (Fla. 2d D.C.A. 1988); *Blackburn v. Blackburn*, 513 So. 2d 1360 (Fla. 2d D.C.A. 1987); see, e.g., s. 61.16, F.S.
[25] *Id.*
[26] *Haslauer v. Haslauer*, 381 So. 3d 662 (Fla. 1st DCA 2024).
[27] *Id.* at 666.
[28] 696 So. 2d 697 (Fla. 1997).
[29] *Id.* at 700.
[30] 826 So. 2d 221 (Fla. 2002).
[31] *Hallac v. Hallac*, 88 So. 3d 253 (Fla. 4th DCA 2012)(noting that, under Florida law, a refusal to accept a settlement offer could not, by itself, form the basis for denying an attorney fee award altogether).
[32] *Palmer v. Palmer*, 206 So. 3d 74 (Fla. 2016).

Both ss. 61.16 and 742.045, F.S., provide a "two-way" attorney fee provision based on need and ability to pay. Specifically, s. 61.16, F.S., provides that "the court may from time to time, after considering the financial resources of both parties, order a party to pay a reasonable amount for attorney's fees, suit money, and the cost to the other party of maintaining or defending any proceeding under this chapter, including enforcement and modification proceedings *and appeals*."[33] Similarly, s. 742.045, F.S., provides that "the court may from time to time, after considering the financial resources of both parties, order a party to pay a reasonable amount for attorney's fees, suit money, and the cost to the other party of maintaining or defending any proceeding under this chapter, including enforcement and modification proceedings." However, unlike the parallel provision in s. 61.16, F.S., the provision in s. 742.045, F.S., does not include the phrase "and appeals."[34]

In recent years, Florida's DCAs have split on the issue of whether s. 742.045, F.S., authorizes an award of appellate attorney fees – that is, attorney fees incurred in connection with an appeal of a matter originating in a trial court. The Fourth and Fifth DCAs have, broadly speaking, taken the position that, as s. 742.045, F.S., authorizes the award of such fees (where conditions pertaining to need and ability to pay are met) in "any proceeding under [ch. 742, F.S.]," and the term "proceeding" encompasses appeals, this section naturally authorizes the award of appellate attorney fees. Indeed, the Fourth DCA noted that "it is axiomatic that this [term] would include any appellate proceedings necessary to maintain or defend an action under [ch. 742, F.S.]."[35] However, the Sixth and Third DCAs have taken the opposite position, concluding that s. 742.045, F.S., does not authorize the award of appellate attorney fees and certifying conflict with the Fourth and Fifth DCAs.[36]

Interestingly, the Sixth and Third DCAs arrived at their conclusions through different analyses. The Sixth DCA focused on what it considered to be narrowing language – that is, the phrase "under [ch. 742, F.S.]" – noting that nothing in ch. 742, F.S., identifies an appeal as a proceeding "under that chapter"; indeed, noted the Sixth DCA, ch. 742, F.S., repeatedly refers to proceedings under that chapter as "circuit court proceedings" – that is, proceedings at the trial court level.[37] However, the Third DCA looked to the language of a parallel statute – that is, s. 61.16, F.S. – which expressly authorizes the recovery of appellate attorney fees in proceedings under ch. 61, F.S.; noted the Third DCA, "for whatever reason, the Legislature has chosen not to include similar language in [s. 742.045, F.S.]."[38] The Third DCA panel then concluded that, if the Legislature had intended to authorize the award of appellate attorney fees in s. 742.045, F.S., as it did in s. 61.16, F.S., it would have done so.[39]

Establishing Appropriate Attorney Fee Award

In 2010, the Fourth DCA held that, under the provisions of ch. 61, F.S., "the need and ability to pay requirement is tantamount to a finding of entitlement of one spouse to have the other spouse pay all or a portion of that spouse's fees. To determine that need and ability, however, the amount of [the attorney fees] must also be considered. Therefore, the court in its discretion may assess fees for litigating both factors…"[40] However, in 2025, the Third DCA split from the Fourth DCA on this issue, holding that a party may not collect attorney fees incurred in establishing an appropriate attorney fee award, as such fees are not statutorily authorized.[41]

Florida Vexatious Litigant Law

Troublesome, or "vexatious," litigants create chaos in Florida's court system by repeatedly abusing the judicial process, generating significant work for judges and court personnel and diverting judicial resources away from

[33] Emphasis added.
[34] *Compare* s. 61.16(1), F.S., *with* s. 742.045, F.S.
[35] *Beckford v. Drogan*, 216 So. 3d 1 (Fla. 4th DCA 2017); *McNulty v. Bowser*, 233 So. 3d 1277 (Fla. 5th DCA 2018).
[36] *C.T. v. T.G.*, 397 So. 3d 219 (Fla. 6th DCA 2024); *Perez-Palm v. Rodriguez*, 2025 WL 1243790 (Fla. 3d DCA 2025).
[37] *C.T. v. T.G.*, 397 So. 3d at 221.
[38] *Perez-Palma*, 2025 WL 1243790.
[39] *Id.*
[40] *Schneider v. Schneider*, 32 So. 3d 151 (Fla. 4th DCA 2010).
[41] *Schultheis v. Schultheis*, No. 3D23-1250 (Fla. 3d DCA 2025).

legitimate disputes; further, parties that find themselves litigating against a vexatious litigant will likely have to expend significant time and resources to resolve the case.[42] Vexatious litigation can take many forms, including:

- Filing multiple meritless lawsuits;
- Attempting to relitigate matters already decided by the court; and
- Submitting documents with harassing, scandalous, or sham materials to the court.[43]

To address such conduct, the Legislature enacted the Florida Vexatious Litigant Law, codified in s. 68.093, F.S.

Vexatious Litigant Defined

Under s. 68.093(2), F.S., "vexatious litigant" means a person, as defined in s. 1.01(3), F.S.,[44] proceeding *pro se* – that is, a person without legal representation[45] – who:

- In the immediately preceding seven-year period, has commenced, prosecuted, or maintained, *pro se*, five or more actions in any court that have been finally and adversely determined against such person;[46]
- After an action has been finally and adversely determined against the person, repeatedly relitigates or attempts to relitigate an aspect of the case;
- Repeatedly files pleadings, requests for relief, or other documents on which the court has already ruled;
- Repeatedly files unmeritorious pleadings; conducts unnecessary discovery; or engages in other tactics that are frivolous or solely intended to cause unnecessary delay in any action; or
- Has been previously found to be a vexatious litigant in any state or federal court.

An action is not deemed to be "finally and adversely determined," for the purposes of this definition, during a pending appeal.

Security Requirements

Under s. 68.093(3), F.S., a litigant may file a motion asking the court to order the opposing party to furnish security[47] to the moving party on the grounds that such opposing party is a vexatious litigant and not likely to win his or her claims against the moving party. At the hearing on such motion, the court must consider any evidence which may be relevant to the motion and, if, after hearing the evidence, the court determines that the opposing party is indeed a vexatious litigant and is not reasonably likely to win his or her claims against the moving party, the court must then order the vexatious litigant to furnish security to the moving party in an amount and within such time as the court deems appropriate. If the vexatious litigant fails to post the required security and is:

- A plaintiff, the court must immediately dismiss the action with prejudice[48] as to the moving party for whose benefit the security was ordered; or
- A respondent, the court may immediately impose one or more of the following sanctions, as appropriate:
    - Denial of the vexatious litigant's request for relief;
    - Striking of the vexatious litigant's pleading or other document from the record; or
    - Rendition of a default judgment[49] against the vexatious litigant.

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[42] Workgroup on Vexatious Litigants, *Final Report and Recommendation*, (Sept. 6, 2024) https://flcourts-media.flcourts.gov/content/download/2446359/file/Workgroup%20on%20Vexatious%20Litigants%20Final%20Report%209-6-24%20Amended%20-%20Accessible.pdf (last visited Dec. 1, 2025); *Smith v. Fisher*, 965 So. 2d 205, 209 (Fla. 4th DCA 2007)(providing that "in a frivolous lawsuit, justice delayed is justice denied to a defendant who expends time and money to bring the case to an end.").

[43] Workgroup, *supra* note 34.

[44] Under this section, the word "person" includes individuals, children, firms, associations, joint adventures, partnerships, estates, trusts, business trusts, syndicates, fiduciaries corporations, and all other groups or combinations.

[45] Legal Information Institute, *Pro Se*, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/pro_se (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).

[46] An action may not be included in the total count where the litigant commenced, prosecuted, or maintained the action in good faith.

[47] "Security" means an undertaking by a vexatious litigant to ensure payment to a party in an amount reasonably sufficient to cover the party's anticipated, reasonable litigation expenses, including attorney fees and costs. S. 698.093(2), F.S.

[48] When a court dismisses an action "with prejudice," the plaintiff cannot refile the same action in that court. Legal Information Institute, *With Prejudice*, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/with_prejudice (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).

Prefiling Orders

Section 68.093(4), F.S., authorizes the court in any judicial circuit to, on its own motion or on the motion of any party, enter a "prefiling order" prohibiting a vexatious litigant from commencing, *pro se*, any new action in the courts of that circuit without first obtaining leave of the court – that is, without first obtaining permission to file the action. The court may grant such leave only upon a showing that the proposed action is meritorious and is not being filed for the purpose of delay or harassment, and may condition the filing of the proposed action upon the furnishing of security.

Section 68.093(6), F.S., requires the clerk of the court to provide copies of all prefiling orders to the Clerk of the Florida Supreme Court, who must maintain a vexatious litigant registry. Further, under s. 68.093(5), F.S., the clerk of the court may not file any new action by a *pro se* vexatious litigant against whom the court has entered a prefiling order unless the vexatious litigant has obtained an order from the court allowing such filing. If the clerk of the court mistakenly allows a *pro se* vexatious litigant to file any new action in contravention of a prefiling order, any party to that action may file with the clerk and serve on the vexatious litigant a notice stating that the vexatious litigant is subject to a prefiling order. The filing of such a notice automatically stays the litigation against all parties to the action, and the court must automatically dismiss the action with prejudice within ten days after the filing of such notice unless the vexatious litigant files a motion for leave to file the new action. If the court grants such leave, the pleadings or other responses to the complaint are not due until ten days after the date the vexatious litigant serves the party with a copy of the order granting leave.

Attorney Fees

Section 68.093(8), F.S., specifies that any relief provided under Florida's Vexatious Litigant Law is cumulative to any other relief or remedy available under Florida law or applicable court rules. Such additional relief which may be available to a party dealing with a vexatious litigant includes attorney fees awardable as a sanction under s. 57.105, F.S., for frivolous litigation.

Sanctions Under s. 57.105, F.S.

To deter the filing of frivolous litigation, the Legislature enacted s. 57.105, F.S., which generally authorizes a court to award attorney fees as a sanction against a party who raises a claim that is unsupported by law or facts or takes some action primarily for the purpose of causing unreasonable delay in the proceedings. Any party to a civil action may seek such sanctions by serving the offending party with a copy of a motion for sanctions; however, the party seeking sanctions may only file said motion with the court if, after 21 days from the date of service, the challenged paper, claim, defense, contention, allegation, or denial is not withdrawn or appropriately corrected. Thus, s. 57.105, F.S., provides a "safe harbor" under which an offending party may avoid the imposition of sanctions by taking corrective action. In certain instances, this may leave the aggrieved party without a remedy to recover his or her attorney fees incurred in defending against or otherwise necessarily responding to the frivolous litigation.

[49] A "default judgment" is a judgment automatically entered by a court in favor of one party and against the other party, typically do to one party's failure to do something, such as respond to a pleading or appear in court. Legal Information Institute, *Default Judgment*, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/default_judgment (last visited Dec. 3, 2025).

Retroactivity

In determining whether a law may apply retroactively, courts first determine whether the law is procedural, remedial, or substantive in nature.[50] A purely procedural or remedial law may apply retroactively without offending the Constitution,[51] but a substantive law generally may not apply retroactively absent clear legislative intent to the contrary.[52] However, even where the Legislature has expressly stated that a law will have retroactive application, a court may reject that application if the law impairs a vested right, creates a new obligation or duty, or imposes a new penalty.[53] Further, where a law is designed to serve a remedial purpose, a court may decide not to apply the law retroactively where doing so "would attach new legal consequences to events completed before its enactment."[54]

The Florida Supreme Court, noting that the American Rule adopted in Florida requires each party to a lawsuit to pay his or her own attorney fees unless a statute or contract provides otherwise, has found that a statutory requirement for one party to pay another party's attorney fees is "a new obligation or duty," and is therefore substantive in nature.[55] Courts considering the application of statutory attorney fee provisions have generally held that such provisions only apply prospectively, as the applicable law when dealing with substantive rights is the law in effect at the time of the operative event.[56]

BILL HISTORY

COMMITTEE REFERENCE	ACTION	DATE	STAFF DIRECTOR/ POLICY CHIEF	ANALYSIS PREPARED BY
Civil Justice & Claims Subcommittee			Jones	Mawn
Judiciary Committee				

[50] A procedural law merely establishes the means and methods for applying or enforcing existing duties or rights. A remedial law confers or changes a remedy, i.e., the means employed in enforcing an existing right or in redressing an injury. A substantive law creates, alters, or impairs existing substantive rights. *Windom v. State*, 656 So. 2d 432 (Fla. 1995); *St. John's Village I, Ltd. v. Dept. of State*, 497 So. 2d 990 (Fla. 5th DCA 1986); *McMillen v. State Dept. of Revenue*, 74 So. 2d 1234 (Fla. 1st DCA 1999).

[51] Constitutional provisions which the retroactive application of law may offend include the Contracts and Due Process Clauses. *See Campus Communications, Inc. v. Earnhardt*, 821 So. 2d 388 (Fla. 5th DCA 2002); *see also Menendez v. Progressive Exp. Ins. Co., Inc.*, 35 So. 3d 873 (Fla. 2010); U.S. Const. art. I, §10 and amend. XIV; Art. I, ss. 9 and 10, Fla. Const.

[52] *State Farm Mutual Automobile Ins. Co. v. Laforet*, 658 So. 2d 55 (Fla. 1995).

[53] *Menendez,* 35 So. 3d at 877.

[54] *L. Ross, Inc. v. R.W. Roberts Const. Co.*, 481 So. 2d 484 (Fla. 1986).

[55] *Young v. Altenhaus*, 472 So. 2d 1152 (Fla. 1985).

[56] *See, e.g., Brodose v. School Bd. of Pinellas County*, 622 So. 2d 513 (Fla. 2d DCA 1993); *see also Parrish v. Mullis*, 458 So. 2d 401 (Fla. 1st DCA 1984).