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HOPE IN HAND

New Hope Cards empower domestic violence survivors with instant proof of protection

BY CARLIE ADMIRE
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Survivors of domestic violence, stalking and abuse now have access to a new, simple tool to add to their protective arsenal. It's small and portable enough to carry in your wallet, making it accessible at all times.

No, it's not an app or a gadget. It's a card.

Launched at the beginning of the year, Florida's Hope Card Program allows those with active injunctions to carry them on a wal-



let-sized card or digital version. This makes it easier for law enforcement to verify their protection quickly and respond faster to potential violations.

SEE HOPE CARD, A22 ►

Editor's note: This is the first in a series of stories about some of Florida's newest laws that will be published over the coming weeks.

A dangerous path

'Tour de Sprawl' bus tour exposes the threat of new developments to Florida panther habitats

BY MARY WOZNIAK
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Environmental groups and advocates are talking a lot about proposed developments in east Lee County and Collier County that they say will negatively impact the continued existence of the endangered Florida panther and other listed species that use or live on the land these developments would be built on.

Instead of talking, they decided to show what they mean by holding a recent bus tour dubbed "Tour de Sprawl" by its organizer, the Sierra Club. They took environmental experts, including planning officials and a wildlife biologist, concerned citizens and media out to where the developments would be built, driving past their locations.

They also visited and took short hikes in what they say will be impacted public lands, such as the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and

SEE TOUR DE SPRAWL, A12 ►
ALSO SEE FLORIDA PANTHER UPDATE, A14 ►



MARY WOZNIAK/FLORIDA WEEKLY
Tour participants hiked part of the Duncan Trail, one of two trails open to the public at the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge.

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HOPE CARD

From page 1

By streamlining the process of proving the existence of court-ordered protection, the Hope Card is poised to offer thousands across the state practical support and peace of mind.

The Florida Legislature passed the bill establishing the Hope Card Program for individuals with orders of protection, requiring clerks of courts statewide to implement the program as of Jan. 1, 2025.

"It is about bringing awareness and tools to those who have been harassed, stalked or experienced abuse or domestic violence," said Nicole Bishop, director of Palm Beach County's Department of Public Safety, Victim Services. "Domestic violence and harassment have no boundaries; it can affect men, women, children, the elderly and those of any race or economic status. Hope Cards are another way to support those with a protection injunction."

The initiative serves survivors of all forms of violence, harassment and abuse by simplifying access to verified case details for law enforcement, leading to quicker response times and enhanced safety protocols.

"We are proud to be able to bring this service to Lee County to help protect victims of abuse and violence," said Lee County Clerk Kevin Karnes. "The Hope Card will provide them with a clear and easily accessible tool to show law enforcement that they have a final injunction for protection to help ensure their safety."

Meaghan Smith, senior communications strategist for the Lee County clerk, announced that 11 Hope Cards were issued during the program's first week.

Quicker response

The Florida Court Clerks & Comptrollers organization created the Hope Card Program in coordination with the Florida Attorney General's Office.

According to the Florida Court Clerks & Comptrollers, "In support of this legislation, a person who has been issued a final injunction for protection against domestic violence, stalking, repeat violence, sexual violence, dating violence or abuse or exploitation of an elderly person or disabled adult may apply for a Hope Card with the clerk of court where the petition was originally filed."

"This is a great step to help survivors in our community by allowing them to easily hand over the

needed documentation to law enforcement without being the gatekeepers of lengthy paperwork," said Tama Caldarone, legal programs director of The Shelter for Abused Women & Children of Naples. "Ultimately, this will enhance the accessibility of crucial actions for those needing protection."

Hope Cards can be requested any time after the final protection order is filed. The cards remain valid for two years or until the issued injunction expires, whichever occurs first. If the injunction is still active, the card can be renewed af-



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ter the two years. Presenting the card will improve law enforcement's response to any order violations. The cards can be requested online or in person at the Clerk of Court's office. Digital Hope Cards are emailed directly to petitioners within three business days.

"Protection injunctions, or restraining orders, are filed by the petitioner and are considered a civil case rather than a criminal case," explained Caldarone. "These orders are issued by a judge, maintaining the original case number, and can be about 35 pages long. If a protection order is being violated, petitioners must have access to this information to file with law enforcement. In the past, many individuals would have to keep copies on them and in their car, along with photos of the first few pages on their phones. The Hope Card is now replacing that by serving as active proof of the case from the details, dates, protect petitioner, the respondent."

The Hope Cards are portable and convenient, laminated, and smaller than a credit card. They feature an issuing county seal and a domestic violence hotline number for additional support. The back of the card, or its electronic version, provides the whole case number and complete information about the respondent, including their full name, date of birth, county of issuance, the date the order was issued and its expiration date. It will also include information about the protected person(s), including their full name and date of birth.

Caldarone added, "This not only ensures that law enforcement takes the case more seriously, but also empowers the petitioner regarding the extent of the situation, since often the contact isn't always a clean-cut situation with the respondent onsite. Most of the attempts of contact are through text messages, emails, phone calls and third-party harassment."

"The Hope Card will serve as the order of protection," said Bishop. "It will guarantee having the documentation on hand since it is now more compact, making survivors safer. Having the injunction report allows law enforcement to note and act on repeated violations, resulting in steps of arrest or other consequences for the respondent. Other steps are still needed to keep those protected safe, but it is a great addition for survivors."

However, Bishop recommends that Hope Card holders carry original paperwork while traveling or relocating out of state.

All in favor

Since not all states acknowledge the card, having the physical court documentation could be crucial for enforcing the protection injunction if it is violated outside of Florida's borders. Also, injunctions should be re-registered if the petitioner moves to another state.

"Currently, Hope Cards are utilized

in only a few states, but they should be expanded nationwide to raise the public and law enforcement awareness of the program, improving the safety of survivors," said Bishop. "It is something we don't talk about enough. In our Palm Beach facility, we assist approximately 5,000 victims and conduct over 300 rape kits annually — not including those for children."

The motion for the Hope Card advanced through both the House and Senate before being referred to the Judiciary Appropriations Committee on Criminal and Civil Justice and Fiscal Policy Committee last year. The final bill, finalized by the Civil Justice Subcommittee, received no opposition.

The Florida Bar reports over 80,000 petitions for protective orders were filed during the 2022-23 fiscal year in the state of Florida, leading to nearly 18,000 court-ordered protections. The analysis estimated that the annual cost for developing and distributing Hope Cards by Florida's 67 court clerks would be approximately \$704,000, or \$39 per card. To offset the costs of implementing the program, the bill allocated a one-time appropriation of \$170,000 per court clerk. Strongly backed by the Family Law Section, the measure passed through both legislative chambers unanimously.

"I think it's a fantastic idea," said Carolyn Alden, a resident of Naples. "It provides survivors of domestic violence with a simple and efficient way to share crucial information about their injunction. Rather than carrying around a bulky paper document, the Hope Card allows them to quickly inform law enforcement, schools and others about the terms of the injunction, who it involves and what protections it offers. I truly believe it could save lives."

Alden is the author of "A Triumph of Spirit," a memoir detailing her journey through domestic violence, harassment and stalking and the reclamation of her life.

Hope Cards can be disclosed to law enforcement, educational institutions,

workplaces, places of worship and shared among friends and family.

"You can show the Hope Card to anyone you feel comfortable with," said Caldarone. "My petitioners internalize the situation out of fear of judgment or losing a career. Sharing the information, when needed, could assist with protection."

"I believe that anyone with a protection injunction will benefit from using the Hope Card," said Bishop. "It is more practical and enables survivors to alert authorities about violations, leading to prompt actions."

Caldarone noted that many survivors in Florida may not be aware of the Hope Card's availability.

Getting the word out

"It is essential to raise awareness so survivors can apply for and utilize this new tool to enhance their protection and legitimacy while continuing to advocate for others who have encountered similar challenges," said Caldarone.

The Shelter for Abused Women & Children of Naples had over 1,400 calls related to domestic violence in 2023, re-

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— Nicole Bishop, director of Palm Beach County's Department of Public Safety, Victim Services

sulting in more than 530 arrests in Collier County, not including the numerous incidents of abuse, stalking and harassment that often go unreported.

The Shelter for Abused Women and Children, in collaboration with Palm Beach County's Department of Public Safety, Victim Services, operates 24/7 to support individuals experiencing violence, harassment, abuse and other difficult situations. They provide assistance for those fleeing dangerous environments, including counseling, medical care and support in securing injunctions for protection, along with other vital resources.

"We assist anyone seeking an injunction for protection, including attending court dates with them," Caldarone stated. "It can be daunting for many to recount their experiences, so having someone present to answer questions and navigate the paperwork can be reassuring. We also assist in applying for and obtaining Hope Cards. For any questions, feel free to reach out to us."

The Hope Card Program aims to streamline safety measures by enabling faster responses from law enforcement on violations and is valid statewide.

"Our mission is to assist survivors of abuse and harassment in upholding their rights and reclaiming their lives as they were before the traumatic event," said Bishop. ■