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Federal Lawsuit Filed Against Florida Sheriff's Office for Malicious Prosecution of a Young Girl Who Reported Being Sexually Abused

Philadelphia, PA — Oct. 2025 — A federal civil rights lawsuit has been filed by Philadelphia-based law firm Laffey Bucci D'Andrea Reich & Ryan, along with Florida co-counsel, Rafferty Domnick Cunningham & Yaffa, on behalf of Taylor Cadle, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse who was wrongfully charged and convicted of making a false statement to law enforcement officers, when she was 13 years old, after reporting years of horrific sexual abuse to the Polk County Sheriff's Office.

The complaint, filed on Oct. 10 in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida, names Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd, Detectives Melissa Turnage and William Rushing, and Henry Cadle, the plaintiff's abuser, as defendants. The lawsuit alleges that the Polk County Sheriff's Office violated Ms. Cadle's constitutional rights through coercive interrogation tactics, malicious prosecution, and systemic failures to protect child victims of sexual abuse.

According to the complaint, then-12-year-old Taylor Cadle reported years of sexual abuse by her adoptive father. Instead of being protected, she was accused of lying and charged with giving false information to law enforcement. The charge resulted in her conviction, probation, and an order to apologize to both her abuser and the Sheriff's Office.

After being wrongfully convicted, Taylor was returned to the custody of her sexually abusive adoptive father, who continued sexually abusing her. In a remarkable act of courage, Taylor documented the sexual abuse herself, capturing both photographic and video evidence of the incident, and then calling 911 that same day, hopeful that this time law enforcement would believe her. Her abuser was arrested, convicted, and is currently serving 17 years in prison. Thanks to Taylor's bravery, the Polk County State's Attorney's Office overturned her conviction, finding that her initial statements were in fact true, and she had not lied about the sexual abuse.

Brenda Harkavy, Stewart Ryan, and Alexandria MacMaster of Laffey Bucci D'Andrea Reich & Ryan serve as lead counsel in the case, with Florida-based attorney's Troy Rafferty and Madeline Pendley, of Rafferty, Domnick Cunningham & Yaffa serving as co-counsel.

"Taylor's courage in coming forward again, at such a young age, after everything she endured, is extraordinary," said Brenda Harkavy, Senior Attorney at Laffey Bucci D'Andrea Reich & Ryan. "This lawsuit seeks not just justice for Taylor, but systemic change to ensure no other child is ever retraumatized or subjected to further abuse by the very institutions that are supposed to protect them."

"Taylor's case is a devastating example of what happens when the system designed to protect children turns against them," said Stewart Ryan, Partner at Laffey Bucci D'Andrea Reich & Ryan. "Instead of being believed and supported, she was treated as a criminal. The damage done

to Taylor by those sworn to protect her is unconscionable, and we intend to hold every responsible party accountable.”

The lawsuit outlines a pattern of failures within the Polk County Sheriff’s Office, including inadequate training and supervision of detectives assigned to the Special Victims Unit and a culture that prioritized disbelief of victims, particularly minors, over proper investigation. Despite clear red flags and multiple consistent reports by Taylor, detectives coerced her into recanting and then pursued criminal charges that left her vulnerable to further abuse. In the aftermath of her case, the Polk County State’s Attorney’s Office implemented new policies regarding the charging of child sexual abuse victims to prevent similar injustices from happening again.

“As a Floridian, I find it deeply troubling that a child in our state could be punished for reporting sexual abuse,” said Troy A. Rafferty, a shareholder at Rafferty Domnick Cunningham & Yaffa. “Meaningful progress requires accountability, and this case serves as a reminder that protecting survivors must remain a top priority in every corner of the state.”

The complaint alleges violations of Taylor Cadle’s Fourth and Fourteenth Amendment rights, including malicious prosecution, substantive due process violations, and failure to train and supervise by the Sheriff’s Office. It also asserts state law claims for sexual battery, intentional infliction of emotional distress, and invasion of privacy against her abuser.

Laffey Bucci D’Andrea Reich & Ryan LLP (www.laffeybucci.com) is a Philadelphia-based, trauma-informed personal injury law firm dedicated to representing individuals who have suffered severe injuries due to negligence. Since 2009, the firm has provided exceptional, “leave no stone unturned” representation in personal injury, construction accident, workplace injury, and product liability cases. The firm’s Crime Victims Department—staffed by former sex crimes prosecutors—exclusively represents survivors of abuse, assault, and human trafficking nationwide, and has led high-profile litigation, including cases against the Southern Baptist Convention for concealing sexual abuse.