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Florida Court PIOs Elect New Board Officers

TALLAHASSEE – The men and women who serve as the spokespersons for Florida’s trial and appellate courts have chosen new board officers for their educational organization, Florida Court Public Information Officers, Inc. (FCPIO).

The elections come at a time when FCPIO and its members will begin implementing a new statewide court communications plan developed by the Supreme Court’s chief advisory body, the Florida Judicial Management Council.

The FCPIO board officers come from Miami, Viera, Tallahassee and Clearwater. Nick Sudzina, immediate past president of FCPIO and trial court administrator in Florida’s 10th Judicial Circuit in Bartow, made the announcements last week.

Eunice Sigler, director of the Office of Government Liaison and Public Relations for Florida’s 11th Judicial Circuit in Miami, will serve as president until January 2018.

Sigler has served as the public information officer for the largest judicial circuit in Florida since 2006. As PIO, she is the main point of contact for the public as well as local, national and international reporters covering court proceedings in Miami-Dade County.

Before joining the 11th Judicial Circuit, Sigler was a reporter at the Miami Herald and shared in the paper’s 2001 Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Reporting, awarded for coverage of the surprise federal raid on Elian Gonzalez’s Little Havana home. Her career also includes working as a technology consultant for more than a decade.
The other officers are:

- **Vice President**, Michelle Kennedy, public information officer for the 18th Judicial Circuit, which includes Brevard and Seminole counties;
- **Secretary**, Francine Walker, director of Public Information and Bar Services at The Florida Bar in Tallahassee;
- **Treasurer**, Stephen Thompson, public information officer in the Sixth Judicial Circuit, which includes Pasco and Pinellas counties.

While each of Florida’s 20 Judicial Circuits, its five District Courts of Appeal and the State Supreme Court have designated public information officers, only some, like Sigler in Miami, are full-time PIOs. Most, like Sudzina in Bartow, have other responsibilities. The FCPIO is a tax-exempt educational nonprofit corporation, organized in 2007 to promote the sharing and development of best practices and professionalism among Florida’s Court PIOs.

All Florida state court divisions were directed to appoint PIOs by the Chief Justice following a 2002 special report on emergency preparedness after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the anthrax attacks that followed in Florida. Every judicial circuit has had a designated public information officer since 2003.

In late 2015, the Florida Supreme Court approved a new Court Communication Plan for the state’s judicial branch. The plan outlines a five-year implementation schedule beginning in January 2016.

“I know I speak for the new board members and our entire group in saying that we are all very excited about our work this next couple of years, especially with respect to implementation of the new Communication Plan,” Sigler said.

The plan calls for expanded use of electronic communications technology and social media to the extent appropriate in judicial settings but also emphasizes the importance of age-old principles essential to any healthy communication dynamic – building and maintaining trust and cooperation with members of the press and the public, and maintaining preparedness for both emergency response and high-profile cases in the state courts.

Florida has long been a pioneer in increasing public access to court information. In the mid-1970s, Florida was the first state to allow cameras in its courtrooms. The Supreme Court’s first webpage went on-line in 1994 when the World-Wide Web was still in its infancy.
The Supreme Court established its Public Information Office in 1996. That office's first major transparency program – broadcasting all high-court arguments live on television, satellite and the Web – began in 1997 and has been showcased in every high-profile case since. In social media, the Florida Supreme Court began sending official tweets in 2009, and many other courts throughout the state followed suit.

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