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John Pacenti

Gov. Scott signs guardianship reform law to protect seniors

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More than four years ago, concerned families went to lawmakers for the first time with their stories of how professional guardians were ransacking the estates of the elderly.

Groups such as South Florida-based Americans Against Abusive Probate Guardianship talked about how unethical guardians appointed by judges were isolating seniors from their families, over-medicating them and then taking their money through frivolous fees.

On Thursday, Florida Gov. Rick Scott signed a bill giving the state its first regulatory authority over professional guardians who are appointed by courts to take over the lives of incapacitated senior citizens. The bill was one of 25 Scott signed into law.

The new law creates an Office of Public and Professional Guardians and requires the office standardize practices and create rules for professional guardians. It also gives the office enforcement power, including the ability to revoke a guardian's registration.

Adult Degree Info Session

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March 15
5:30-7 p.m.




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It follows in the wake of a guardianship reform bill signed last year by Scott that imposed criminal penalties for exploitation or abuse of a senior in guardianship among other changes.



Sheila Jaffe (left) and Natalie Andre (right), President of FACTS (Families Against Court Travesties), protest last month with a group of people about the state of guardianship outside the South County Courthouse in Delray Beach. (Lannis Waters / The Palm Beach Post)

Guardianship reforms are not just happening in Tallahassee.

Following The Palm Beach Post's series Guardianships: A Broken Trust in January on how judges are complicit in allowing the savings of seniors to be soaked by guardians and their attorneys, the chief judge acted.

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Gov. Scott signs guardianship reform law to protect seniors



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James Vassallo with his father, Albert. Vassallo claims professional guardian Elizabeth Savitt - wife of Judge Martin Colin - took money without court approval and failed to account for all of his father's assets.

Palm Beach County Chief Circuit Judge Jeffrey Colbath transferred Circuit Judge Martin Colin out of the Probate & Guardianship Division.

Colin's wife, Elizabeth "Betsy" Savitt, works as a professional guardian, compiling complaints from families for taking tens of thousands of dollars in fees without court approval. The chief judge required the south county judges to recuse themselves from her cases and instituted other reforms, as well.

James Vassallo's father was in a Savitt guardianship. He said the new law signed by Scott could be the right remedy.

"Nobody was looking at the professional guardians watching what they were doing," he said. "They are abusing their guardianship privileges."

Dr. Sam Sugar, co-founder AAAPG, said the passage of this law is clear progress.

"We look forward to being intimately involved - as promised in the legislation - in the development of rules and regulations of this new department as advocates for victims of abusive guardianships," he said.

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