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OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL STATE OF FLORIDA

Florida Attorney General's Office News Release

Attorney General James Uthmeier and FDLE Announce the Rescue and Recovery of 163 Missing Children



Courtesy of the Office of the Attorney General

TAMPA, Fla.—Attorney General James Uthmeier announced the recovery of 163 children, ranging in ages from 2 months to 17 years old, during Operation Statewide Shield, the first statewide child recovery initiative and the largest operation of its kind in Florida history.

“Many of these kids have been victimized by those who prey on the most vulnerable,” **said Attorney General James Uthmeier**. “Thanks to the outstanding work of FDLE, the Office of Statewide Prosecution, and our state and local partners, these children are now safe and receiving the care they deserve. Florida will continue leading the recovery of missing children, hunting down every predator, and prosecuting abusers to the fullest extent of the law.”

“Operation Statewide Shield demonstrates the power of collaboration and the unwavering commitment shared by all participating agencies and organizations to achieve a singular mission: find our kids and bring them home,” **said FDLE Commissioner Mark Glass**. “This operation brought together state, local, and federal partners, to safely return home 163 missing

children."

"The results of this combined law-enforcement operation should make one thing very clear: Florida will never tolerate you harming our children," **said Representative Danny Alvarez.** "To every sick person in this society who even tries it, if you think you got away with it you should keep looking over your shoulder every second of your life because we're coming, and we will never rest in order to protect our children and their futures."

"The success of Operation Statewide Shield reaffirms what partnership can accomplish when government, faith organizations, not for profits, and the private sector come together, share their strengths and use their collective expertise to protect children across this state," **said Florida Department of Children and Families Assistant Secretary Jonathan Stephens**. "Under the leadership of Governor DeSantis, the Department will continue to foster opportunities to collaborate with local and state partners to maximize our impact."

Operation Statewide Shield was a five-day, statewide operation focused on identifying, locating, and recovering missing children. Developed to provide immediate access to child-focused services, the investigation utilized real-time intelligence and field operations for location and recovery. Sub-operations took place in and across Pensacola, Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa, Fort Myers, and Miami.

The multi-disciplinary task force proactively located vulnerable youth across the country and outside of the United States, including 46 recoveries by the Tampa Bay region, 41 by Miami, 32 by Jacksonville, 21 by Orlando, 12 by Fort Myers, 8 by Pensacola, and 3 by Tallahassee. Locations where operations took place in the US and its territories included Alabama, California, Ohio, New York, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, and Tennessee. Outside of the US included Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Dominica, Finland, Ghana, Guatemala, Italy, Jamaica, Mexico, Spain, and Taiwan.

The children ranged in age from 2 months to 17 years old. Many recovered children had experienced various levels of abuse, neglect, exploitation, or exposure to other criminal activity, including human trafficking.

There were multiple arrests, including a defendant who was wanted on three counts of lewd and lascivious acts with a minor and also had a warrant for interference with child custody; another defendant for lewd and lascivious battery on a victim 12 to 16 years old; and one for interference in a child custody case as well as resisting officers without violence. More arrests are expected over the coming days.

Recovered children were safely transported by local law enforcement to designated recovery hubs, where they received support from social services, child welfare professionals, medical providers, victim advocates, and other child-centered resources. All recovery information was documented through the Missing and Endangered Persons Information Clearinghouse to ensure case closure.

Using lessons learned from the U.S. Marshals-led Operations Dragon Eye and Home for the Holidays, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) led Operation Statewide Shield

with Special Counsel to the Attorney General for Human Trafficking Rita Peters serving as legal advisor.

The operation was planned and executed by FDLE Tampa, the Office of Statewide Prosecution, the Department of Children and Families (DCF), the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), Baycare, More to Life, and the Florida Human Trafficking Victims Fund. Thirteen Sheriff's Offices provided critical assistance, including Manatee, Sarasota, Jacksonville, Clay, Nassau, Putnam, St. Johns, Flagler, Orange, Escambia, Hillsborough, Pasco, and Pinellas, as well as numerous municipal law enforcement agencies and federal partners.

Multiple law enforcement investigations related to the operation remain ongoing.

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