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**Local**

**“It’s Time for the state to pay its debts to paralyzed teen”**

**By Michael Mayo**

TALLAHASSEE – Sitting in her wheelchair on Monday, Minouche Noel stood out in the bustling Capital rotunda. Amid a sea of expensive suits and fashionable skirts, she wore a Dillard High School varsity jacket.

When it came time for her meeting with House Speaker Marco Rubio, she held up a poster that said, “Justice for Minouche Noel.” As her father, Jean, pushed her along, her left leg twitched uncontrollably.

“You understand why her leg is shaking like that,” said her attorney, Sheldon Schlesinger. “It’s not because she’s nervous. It’s from the neurological damage.”

She has been paralyzed below the waist since she was an infant, victim of botched back surgery in 1988. A Broward County jury ruled that the surgery wasn’t necessary, that the state agency overseeing her care was negligent and that she and her parents were entitled to \$8.5 million.

That was in 1999. She’s still waiting for her money. So, she took the 7 a.m. flight from Fort Lauderdale to Tallahassee on Monday. She came to meet with a sympathetic Rubio and to show the Legislature that she was real, not some abstract dollar figure on a page.

In Florida, government agencies are shielded from paying damages above \$200,000 unless the Legislature approves what is known as a claims bill.

Every year since 2001, a claims bill has been filed on Noel’s behalf.

Every year, it has failed.

“Government is slow,” Noel said. “And sloppy.”

She is now 19, studying social work and psychology at Brevard Community College. After she graduated from Dillard High last year, her family moved to Palm Bay, about a two-hour drive north on the coast. A dollar goes further there.

She could use a new wheelchair, one that doesn’t have a big tear in the armrest. She’d like to get a specially equipped van and learn to drive. She wouldn’t mind having an attendant, so her father, 44, could spare his aching back lifting her.

“It’s hard to depend on your parents for everything,” said Noel. “They’re not young anymore and I’m getting bigger and heavier [she weighs 160 pounds]. It’s a lot of stress on everyone.”

Her mother is a nurse. Her father, who used to work at a Davie pizza restaurant, now works in the deli at a Publix near her school. He arranges his schedule around hers.

Long trips are nothing unusual for her. When she went to Dillard, her commute from Sunrise would take almost two hours each way because the special needs bus would pick her up first and drop her off last.

But her patience is wearing thin.

“It’s getting frustrating,” Noel said. “I don’t know why it’s taking so long.”

It’s taken so long because the claims process is no longer about the merits of a case. Like everything else in Tallahassee, it’s become about politics.

The past two years, no claims bills went through. The former House speaker and Senate president clashed over lawsuit reform and medical malpractice, and they held up all the claims bills as a result.

Last week, the House unanimously passed Noel’s claims bill. Once again, it awaits Senate approval.

This time, there’s a glimmer of hope.

Senate President Ken Pruitt, R-Port St. Lucie, said Monday he’d be open to Noel’s bill if the House passes the claims bill for Martin Lee Anderson, the Panhandle teen who died after being beaten at a juvenile boot camp.

Rubio, a Republican from west Miami-Dade, has trumpeted Noel’s case, so he’s probably willing to approve the Anderson bill in exchange.

When Noel paid her visit Monday, her wheelchair scraped against the cherry wood doorframe of Rubio’s office. It was a snug fit, but she made it through.

At home, the doorways aren’t tall wide enough for her wheelchair, so sometimes Noel has to hoist herself out and drag herself across the floor to get from one room to the next.

The knuckles on her right hand look like those of a journeyman fighter, gnarled and swollen from too many rounds.

In a way, she is a fighter, forced to go the distance for a payday she wishes she didn’t need.