

# Teen gets payment from state for botched surgery that left her paralyzed

## **\$8.5 million for her care and education included in budget**

By Nick C. Sortal

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HOLLYWOOD -- Minouche Noel is ready to move on.

Her goal: to be part of the state agency whose forerunner put her in a wheelchair likely for life.

"I'm going to college, get a Ph.D., then go do social work for the Department of Children & Families," said Noel, 19.

In 1988, Noel was paralyzed from the waist down because of botched back surgery arranged by the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, DCF's predecessor. Noel, her family and their attorneys have been seeking compensation ever since. Bills to make that happen have been filed with the Legislature since 2001, only to die.

But not this year. On Thursday, Gov. Charlie Crist signed off on an \$8.5 million payment to her as part of the annual state budget. Noel and her family attended Crist's budget-signing ceremony at the Greater Hollywood Family YMCA.

"No amount of money can repay them for what they have suffered," Crist said. "But it is just. It is right."

Noel was born with spina bifida, a congenital defect in which the spinal column fails to close properly. Her surgery in 1988 resulted in an infection and a compressed spinal cord, which failed to heal properly.

In 1999, a Broward County jury ruled the surgery was unnecessary, and that DHRS, the agency overseeing her care, was negligent. The jury said Noel and her parents were entitled to \$8.5 million. But Florida government agencies are shielded from damages above \$200,000 unless the Legislature approves what is known as a claims bill.

Noel's attorney, Sheldon Schlesinger, said: "It's been a long, hard, rough road for Minouche Noel to justice. But the bottom line is that it's a road she never could have traveled any place else but the United States of America."

The family lived in Sunrise until Noel graduated from Dillard High School, then moved to Brevard County, where she is attending community college.

She plans to attend the University of Central Florida, then hopes to work for DCF.

"I'm happy I'm finally getting the check," she said Thursday. "Very happy."

"Now I want to spend the rest of my life helping children."

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**Goal achieved**

Minouche Noel says she wants to work for the state Department of Families & Children, successor to the agency that arranged the operation that paralyzed her.

(AP photo/Phil Coale)