

## POLITICAL SCENE

• MIAMI-DADE COUNTY  
COMMISSION CONDEMS  
VENEZUELA VIOLENCE

Local government has no say over U.S. foreign policy, but that didn't stop Miami-Dade County commissioners from weighing in last week on the political unrest in Venezuela.

The board condemned the government of President **Nicolas Maduro** for repressing protesters and urged the United States to take unspecified "diplomatic action."

While the measure is merely symbolic, it's good commission politics. The resolution's sponsor was Commissioner **Jose "Pepe" Diaz**, whose district includes the Venezuelan stronghold of Doral.

"We cannot stand by and see beauty queens and normal people killed on the streets," Diaz said.

Several recent Miami-Dade meetings have begun with moments of silence for victims of the Venezuelan unrest. County Mayor **Carlos Gimenez** even mentioned the protests when he opened his annual State of the County speech.

PATRICIA MAZZEI

• MIAMI  
PASTOR TRIES TO  
SEAL RECORD

The Rev. **Gaston Smith**, the prominent Miami pastor who looted public grant money, wants to erase all record of his arrest and conviction by jury — but prosecutors aren't having it.

Jurors in 2010 convicted Smith, of the Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, of stealing from a nonprofit group he founded at the behest of one-time Miami City Commissioner **Michelle Spence-Jones**. The money was allocated to Smith by then-County Commissioner **Barbara Carey-Shuler**.

Spence-Jones later beat a criminal charge related to the same pool of grants.

Smith's lawyer, **Larry Handfield**, last month asked a judge to seal and expunge his client's criminal record. Surprised prosecutors then discovered that Miami-Dade Circuit Judge **Milton Hirsch** last year granted Smith a "withhold of adjudication," which means that the conviction technically doesn't appear on his record.

But Hirsch, before he was a judge, represented Carey-Shuler — a clear conflict of interest, prosecutors say. Hirsch recused himself from Smith's case Wednesday.

Prosecutor **Richard Scruggs** told the new judge, **Bronwyn Miller**, on Thursday that he would seek to overturn Hirsch's 2013 ruling and keep Smith's felony record intact.

Judge Miller will take up the issue March 21.

DAVID OVALLE

• MIAMI-DADE COUNTY  
COUNTY DROPS  
ITS BUDGET APPEAL

Lt. Gov. **Carlos Lopez-Cantera** may have the last laugh in Tallahassee over the office budget he left behind as Miami-Dade County's property appraiser.

Last year, Lopez-Cantera set aside funds to eliminate a 5 percent pay healthcare contribution from workers on his staff. The Florida Department of Revenue approved the spending plan.

But then County Mayor **Carlos Gimenez** sought to extend the pay concession by county workers. That created a mismatch between the budget that county commissioners approved and the one that Lopez-Cantera sent to Tallahassee. The two must be identical.

Miami-Dade appealed to the Florida Cabinet to amend the state's version. Lopez-Cantera wanted to hold off until commissioners decided whether to keep the concession.

Lopez-Cantera ended up being right. The commission made up its mind last month to eliminate the contributions, leaving most departments scrambling to make budget cuts to fill the new funding gap.

The county dropped its appeal on Feb. 19 in a letter to Gov. **Rick Scott**.

PATRICIA MAZZEI

## WEST MIAMI-DADE

# 'Stepping out' against violence

BY MARIA PEREZ  
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Roxana Silvera recalls that as a child, when her stepfather would beat her mother, she would hide under the bed or in the closet. Sometimes, she was so afraid, she would pee on herself and then her stepfather would beat her, as well.

"I was terrified when he opened the door," said Silvera, adding that she had to deal with those brutal consequences for most of her young life.

"Many times, I felt like I didn't want to live anymore."

Silvera, who now helps victims of domestic violence, was among about 200 people who took part in the second annual 5K walk dubbed "Step Out to Stop Violence Against Women and Girls" in west Miami-Dade.

The event, hosted by the Miami chapter of the U.S. National Committee for U.N. Women, was held at Women's Park at 10251 W. Flagler St. It was one of the few events commemorating International Women's Day.

Before the race, there was no talk about the inequalities between men and women in areas such as access to jobs or positions. The aim was to raise awareness about violence against women, such as the beatings suffered by Silvera.



ROBERTO KOLTUN/EL NUEVO HERALD STAFF  
AT WOMEN'S PARK: A young lady looks at a poster at the 'Step Out to Stop Violence Against Women and Girls' event.

"Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights in the world," said Marisa Feito, president of the U.N. group in Miami.

Feito said that millions of girls around the world are subjected to rape, forced into prostitution or disfigured by acid attacks in so-called honor retaliations. Women constitute the majority of victims of human trafficking, an industry for which traffickers have profited by some \$31.6 million, according to U.N. statistics.

Locally, domestic violence

caused at least 17 deaths in Miami-Dade in 2012, where nearly 10,000 crimes of domestic violence — including rape, assault, or stalking — were reported, according to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 85 percent of victims of domestic violence in the United States are women.

Silvera said her mother waited 11 years before leaving her stepfather because she feared being a single mom with four children in Panama and having to pay for rent and

utilities on her own.

Silvera said the abuse destroyed her self-esteem, and that after settling in the United States, she fell into another abusive relationship with a boyfriend, this time psychologically.

"He would tell me I was useless, that I had a mosquito's brain," Silvera said.

Silvera finally had enough and left her boyfriend. But at her foundation, Pearl of Hope, she is used to seeing a lot of women who struggle to leave their abusers for fear of threats or because do they do not want to bring harm to their abusers.

Some also fear deportation and are not aware of laws that allow victims of domestic violence to seek legal residency.

Ivon Mesa, director of Miami-Dade's Division of Violence Prevention, said that a common trait among battered women who seek reprieve at shelters is fear.

"They usually come with their children, desperate because someone is chasing and threatening them," said Mesa, adding that domestic violence crosses all ethnic and socioeconomic lines.

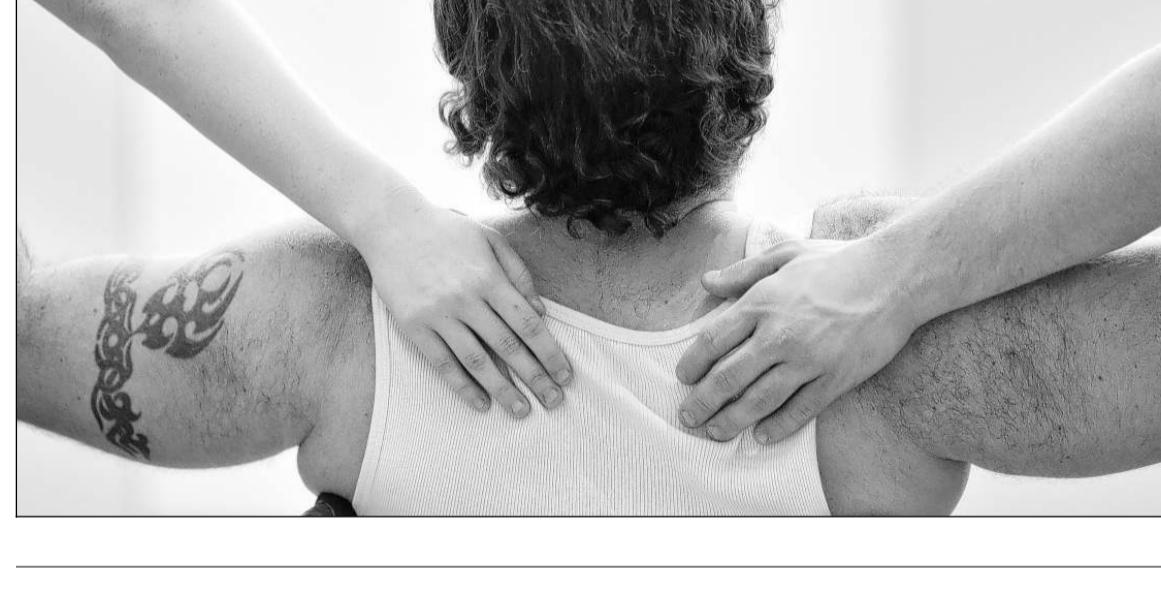
For victims of abuse, there is help.

Information can be found at the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

## TROUPE GETS EVERYONE IN MOTION



PHOTOS BY LYNNE SLADKY/AP



Participants at Karen Peterson and Dancers, a nonprofit organization, rehearse a routine in South Miami-Dade on Saturday. The Miami-based dance troupe aims to incorporate disabled dancers into its repertoires. The group was founded in 1990 by Karen Peterson. For disabled dancers, the performances give them confidence and help them to build physical strength.

## LEGISLATURE 2014

## Absentee ballot drop sites limited under proposal

BY STEVE BOUSQUET  
AND ANNA M. PHILLIPS  
Herald/Times Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — At the urging of state Sen. Jack Latvala, the Senate will take up voting law changes that include preventing counties from using satellite locations where voters can drop off absentee ballots.

The proposal is aimed at Pinellas County Supervisor of Elections Deborah Clark, but it antagonized two other supervisors who say drop-off sites save money and are convenient for voters.

The Senate plan follows a confrontation in December between Clark and Gov. Rick Scott's top elections official, Secretary of State Ken Detzner, who ordered an end to dropoff sites because no law allows it. Clark continues to defy the directive and is using five sites in the Congressional District 13 special election.

Clark has allowed voters to leave completed ballots at branch libraries and tax collectors' offices since 2008, where she said her workers carefully monitor and protect bal-

lots. She sent all Pinellas legislators a letter Thursday saying that if lawmakers ban the practice, it will have a "major impact" on hundreds of thousands of voters and she will have to ask county commissioners for more money.

In an interview airing Sunday on Bay News 9's Political Connections, Clark is again critical of Detzner: "I do not understand why the secretary of state, the chief elections official for the state of Florida, would want to eliminate an option that voters have to participate by returning their ballot to the ballot drop-off locations."

More than 12,000 people have dropped off absentee ballots for next week's special election.

The Senate Ethics & Elections Committee's draft bill (SPB 7068) would require voters to return absentee ballots only to the main elections office, branch elections office, polling rooms at an early voting site or an election supervisor's P.O. box at a post office. The committee is chaired by Latvala, R-Clearwater, who said he was "putting it out there for full public

discussion."

Democratic U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson urged Latvala to reconsider.

"The last thing Floridians need are laws that make it harder for them to exercise their right to vote," Nelson said in a letter.

Among Florida elections supervisors, Clark is the leading proponent of voting absentee or by mail. She says early voting sites are too expensive.

During the 2012 presidential election, Clark had three early voting sites (compared to 14 in Hillsborough), which Latvala said was the fewest of any major urban county in Florida.

"So who's guilty of trying to limit people's opportunity to vote?" Latvala asked.

Two other counties with satellite ballot drop-off locations are Osceola and St. Johns, where both supervisors voiced opposition to the Senate proposal.

"The biggest detriment to voting by mail is not having a stamp," said Osceola Supervisor Mary Jane Arrington. "That's why (the drop-off sites) were so popular."

St. Johns Supervisor of Elections Vicky Oakes placed red metal ballot boxes at 10 sites in 2012, and only her staff members had keys to the boxes.

"I'm disappointed," Oakes said.

Latvala's committee bill, which gets its first hearing Monday, also would require the state to offer online voter registration by July 1, 2015. It's an idea proposed by Sen. Jeff Clemens, D-Lake Worth, and backed by other Democrats who track voting issues.

Voters could register online through a secure website and a digital signature. Similar systems are used in nearly two dozen states.

Latvala's willingness to include a Democratic proposal increases the likelihood that Democrats will support his proposal to ban absentee ballot drop-off sites.

"I was naïve enough to think that if we proved it could work, that other people would see that," Clark said.

Tampa Bay Times Political Editor Adam C. Smith contributed.