



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Florida's Annual Children's Week Honors Child Advocates**

*Children's Week hosts 2024 Advocacy Dinner and Awards Ceremony that celebrates children and youth champions*

**TALLAHASSEE, FL – February 26, 2024** – Last night, state leaders, elected officials, and child and youth advocates gathered for the annual Children's Week's Advocacy Dinner and Awards Ceremony. The highlights of the evening included a keynote from Lieutenant Governor Jeanette Nunez and the announcement of the recipients for the 2024 Chiles Advocate Award, the Impact Advocate Award, and the Youth Advocate Award.

Dr. Phyllis Kalifeh, former president and CEO of the Children's Forum, was honored with the 2024 Chiles Advocate Award. This award, named after former Florida Governor Lawton Chiles and his wife, Rhea, is presented each year to a Floridian who has dedicated extensive time, philanthropic effort, and advocacy on statewide issues affecting the status and well-being of children, youth, and families.

Dr. Kalifeh retired from the Children's Forum after serving as president and CEO for 22 years. She tirelessly advocated for young children, their families, and the early childhood and school-age workforce. Throughout her career, Dr. Kalifeh served in many leadership positions at the local, state, and national levels advocating for sound policies and systems to improve outcomes for children.

The Children's Week Florida Impact Advocate Award recognizes an individual who significantly improves the lives of children throughout our state. James R. Haj, president and CEO of The Children's Trust of Miami-Dade County was named the 2024 Florida Impact Advocate Award recipient.

When Haj joined The Children's Trust in 2016, his investments in programs and services for children and families in Miami-Dade County rose to their highest levels. He has led his team through unprecedented challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, including expanding funding for



emergency assistance programs, strengthening neighborhood supports, and serving as an essential voice for children and families during unprecedented hardships.

Lastly, we are pleased to announce Maurits Acosta as the 2024 Youth Advocate Award recipient. The Youth Advocate Award honors youth who have initiated or diligently worked on behalf of positive change in support of programs or policies that benefit children and families through their school, community, or even at the statewide level. Acosta, a junior at Hialeah-Miami Lakes Sr. High School, finds true passion in service to others. He started a program named Virtutem Populo that encourages youth participation in government and their communities. Through Acosta's efforts, Virtutem Populo has impacted over 3,000 students and raised more than \$40,000 for civic education programs.

"Each year, we gather to celebrate individuals making a positive impact on the lives of Florida's children to recognize the difference they make in the future of Florida," said Erin Smeltzer, president and CEO of the Children's Forum. "Dr. Kalifeh, James Haj, and Maurits Acosta have demonstrated an exceptional commitment to advocating for the improvement of Florida's future generation. I applaud them and everyone who joined us tonight to ensure every child has the opportunity to reach their fullest potential."

For more information about Children's Week Florida™, please visit [childrensweek.org](https://childrensweek.org) or call 850-487-6300.

Quotes from each award recipient describing why they support Children's Week can be found below:

*QUOTE FROM CHILES AWARD RECIPIENT DR. PHYLLIS KALIFEH*

*"Children's Week is a vibrant visual reminder of our youngest Floridians. We must engage with our legislators and policymakers so that together, we can ensure sound public policies on their behalf. Advocacy for children is essential to ensuring that Florida's children thrive!"*

*QUOTE FROM IMPACT AWARD RECIPIENT JAMES HAJ*

"Without the ability to vote, children need others to advocate for them. The decisions made throughout our legislative process, at all levels, directly impact what they experience, develop, and live. That's why advocating for children is essential to our democracy," said James R. Haj, president and CEO of The Children's Trust of Miami-Dade. "Children's Week is so important because it reminds



us all that the more we create healthy and positive circumstances for our children, the brighter our future will be.”

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**About Children’s Week Florida™:** Children’s Week Florida™ is the largest annual event held in the state that celebrates its commitment to children, youth, and advocates. The event, held each year at the Capitol during the legislative session, seeks to elevate the diverse needs of Florida’s children and youth to our state leaders while acknowledging their achievements.