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News Journal
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School prayer hotline opens

Line for Florida residents to report if their religious expression is restricted

Stephany Matat
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Praying is allowed in schools, according to federal guidelines. Now, the Florida Department of Education wants to make sure students, teachers and

school officials aren't having a problem doing so.

To that end, they've created a complaint line.

Florida Education Commissioner Anastasios "Stasi" Kamoutsas announced the department's new com-

plaint process, allowing people to report whether prayer and religious expression aren't being allowed in the state's public schools.

People can submit complaints to FLFaith@fldoe.org.

It comes a month after the U.S. Department of Education released guidance on prayer and religious expression, saying those in public school can pray, act and speak according to their faith, so long as they respect the rights of others.

Moreover, the school can't engage in religious activities as an institution and doesn't favor any set of secular or religious beliefs over others.

Kamoutsas sent an open letter to Florida parents March 17, saying the state "will continue to safeguard the constitutional protections for voluntary prayer and religious expression in our public schools."

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Chandler Massey and his mother, Cindi Massey, walk along the Shoreline Park Wetlands Boardwalk in Gulf Breeze on March 17. PHOTOS BY GREGG PACHKOWSKI/PENSACOLA NEWS JOURNAL

Shoreline Trail Wetlands Boardwalk reopens

Tom McLaughlin
Pensacola News Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Cooler temperatures couldn't deter visitors from taking a midafternoon St. Patrick's Day stroll along the Shoreline Trail Wetlands Boardwalk in Gulf Breeze, which has only recently reopened following work to replace "widespread defects" to the materials used to build it.

The city embarked in January on a project to repair the elevated boardwalk that extends for approximately a third of a mile across wetlands to the beach in Shoreline Park.

The trail was opened in 2022, but just a year later inspectors began noticing cracking and splitting to the composite decking material used in construction. By early last year it was determined that nearly 90% of the deck boards were compromised, according to the Gulf Breeze website.

Repair work got underway Jan. 27 and was completed within a 90 day projected timeframe. The city was able



An owl nests in a tree next to the Shoreline Park Wetlands Boardwalk.

Florida foots bill for its detention centers

J. Kyle Foster
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Recently released documents – given by court order to Friends of the Everglades – paint a picture of spending on Alligator Alcatraz to the tune of \$1 million a day.

The immigrant detention center built in far east Collier County, Florida, on the edge of the Everglades in Big Cypress National Preserve, needs \$1.02 million a day to house 4,000 to 4,100 detainees, according to documents obtained by Friends of the Everglades and shared with the Naples Daily News. Alligator Alcatraz was built in June 2025 and opened July 2.

Alligator Alcatraz is located on what was a Dade County-owned airport training field in Collier County. It was a first-of-its-kind facility, run by the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) instead of the U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. Gov. Ron DeSantis took over the training field via an emergency order.

In documents obtained by Friends of the Everglades through a court ruling, grant correspondence between FDEM and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) about costs and reimbursement included details about number of detainees and costs to feed, clothe and offer medical care and transportation.

In its FEMA grant application dated Aug. 3, 2025, Florida originally requested \$1.5 billion. FDEM later amended the request to \$608.4 million.

Alligator Alcatraz was Florida's first state-run immigrant detention center

• In June 2025, the State of Florida began building an immigration detention center at an airport training center at the edge of the Everglades in Big Cypress National Preserve, off of Tamiami Trail/US 41 at the eastern edge of Collier County just before the Miami-Dade County line. FDEM, which plans for and responds to both natural and

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