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LEGAL GUIDE FOR YOUNG ADULTS

This pamphlet will help you understand your rights and responsibilities when you become a legal adult at age 18. Understanding some of the legal aspects of your daily life can help you avoid problems that might otherwise occur.

This pamphlet outlines some general legal principles. It does not give you legal advice. If you have a specific question about the law, check with the agencies listed at the end of this booklet or with an attorney.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

WHEN DO YOU BECOME AN ADULT IN FLORIDA? In Florida, for most purposes, you become a legal adult on your 18th birthday. This is often referred to as the age of majority. (For exceptions, please see “Drinking Laws.”)

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW YOUR LEGAL RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES WHEN YOU BECOME AN ADULT? When you are 18, you have adult rights including the right to vote (§ 97.041, Fla. Stat.), to make contracts, to sue on your own behalf, to get medical treatment without your parent’s consent (§ 743.064, Fla. Stat.) and, should you choose, to live independently from your parent’s control (Chapter 985, Fla. Stat.)

WHAT IS EMANCIPATION? Emancipation is the act by which a minor, who had limited legal rights and additional legal privileges, gains all the rights and responsibilities of an adult. An emancipated minor has the legal capacity to act as an adult. This means the minor is no longer treated differently under the law and is free of the legal control and custody of her parents. However, an emancipated minor is no longer entitled to the benefits of being a minor, either. His parents no longer have a legal responsibility to support him and the Department of Children and Families will not intervene to protect his welfare as they would that of an un-emancipated minor. Emancipation does not change the effect of laws which restrict behavior by a minimum age. For example, an emancipated minor can not drink until she is 21 years old or vote until she is 18 years old. For more information, refer to Chapter 743 of the Florida Statutes.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THESE “NEW” ADULT RESPONSIBILITIES? If you break the law, you will be tried as an adult and can be sentenced to an adult prison. Unless a court orders otherwise, your parents are not required to support you, so you may have to support yourself. In addition, because you can make binding agreements with others (called contracts), you can also be sued. People over 18 may be called to jury duty. Males must register for the selective service. See generally § 743.07, Fla. Stat.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

CARS

DOES THE LAW PROTECT ME IF I BOUGHT A “LEMON?” Under the Florida Lemon Law (Motor Vehicle Warrant Enforcement Act), if a new or demonstration motor vehicle purchased or leased in Florida on or after January 1, 1989 has a defect or condition covered by the manufacturer’s warranty which substantially impairs the use, value or safety of the vehicle, you should report the problem to the manufacturer or authorized dealer. The lemon law applies to new and demonstration motor vehicles. The lemon law does not cover used motor vehicles. All sales and most long-term leases of automobiles and trucks of 10,000 pounds or less gross vehicle weight, and self-propelled recreational vehicles are covered by the law. The mechanical and structural components of recreational vehicles are also covered, but the interior fixtures such as chairs or lights, or living quarters are not. The law applies to any major problem reported to the manufacturer or its authorized service agent during the first 18 months or 24,000 miles of operation, whichever occurs first. At the time of purchase or lease of a new or demonstrator motor vehicle, the manufacturer must provide to the consumer a booklet prepared by the Office of the Attorney General entitled, “Preserving Your Rights Under “The Florida Lemon Law.”

The provisions of the law still apply after the rights period has expired if the consumer has notified the manufacturer or its authorized service agent of a defect during that period.

If the manufacturer or authorized service agent has been unable to fix the same defect after three attempts, the consumer must send written notification of the need for repair to the manufacturer by registered or express mail to give the manufacturer one final opportunity to cure the defect. The manufacturer must direct the consumer to a reasonably accessible repair facility within 10 days of its receipt of the written notification. After the vehicle has been delivered to the designated repair facility, the manufacturer has 10 days to fix the defect. If the manufacturer fails to comply with either of the above requirements within the time provided, the consumer does not have to give the manufacturer a final repair opportunity.

If the vehicle has been out of service for repair of major problems for a cumulative total of 30 days, the consumer must send written notification of this fact to the manufacturer by registered or express mail after 15 or more days, and give the manufacturer or authorized service agent an opportunity to inspect or repair the vehicle.

If the manufacturer cannot correct a defect after all the prescribed steps have been taken, the manufacturer shall repurchase the vehicle for the full purchase price, plus expenses, minus a reasonable charge for use or upon payment by the consumer of the reasonable charge for use, replace the vehicle with one acceptable to the consumer, plus pay expenses. The consumer has a right to choose a refund rather than a replacement.

If a manufacturer has established an informal dispute settlement program certified by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the consumer must first resort to relief under the program before making claim for replacement or a refund.

If the consumer resorts to a manufacturer's certified informal dispute settlement program and a decision is not rendered within 40 days, or if the consumer is not satisfied with the decision, or if the manufacturer does not have a certified informal dispute settlement program, the consumer may request arbitration by the Florida New Motor Vehicle Arbitration Board by contacting the Division of Consumer Services at the Lemon Law Hotline (850/488-2221 or 1-800-321-5366 if out-of-state) and asking for a Request for Arbitration form.

The Florida New Motor Vehicle Arbitration Board is administered by the Office of the Attorney General. If the request for arbitration is approved, the board will hear the dispute within 40 days and render a decision within 60 days of the date of approval. If the decision is in favor of the consumer, the manufacturer must comply with the decision within 40 days after receipt of the written decision. Once the arbitration board rules on the case, either side can then appeal the decision in court.

For more information, refer to Chapter 681 of the Florida Statutes.

CAN A REPAIR SHOP CHARGE ME MORE THAN THE ESTIMATE FOR REPAIRS? If the repairs cost over \$100, the repair shop must give you a written estimate unless you request to be notified only if the repairs exceed a specified amount. § 559.909, Fla. Stat. The shop can charge 10 percent or \$10 over the estimate, whichever is greater, but not more than an additional \$50 without your authorization. § 559.905, Fla. Stat.

CAN THE REPAIR SHOP CHARGE FOR DIAGNOSING A PROBLEM PRIOR TO DOING A REPAIR ESTIMATE? Yes, but the shop must tell you about this charge and get your acceptance of the charge prior to the diagnostic work. § 559.905, Fla. Stat.

CAN I GET MY CAR BACK IF I DISAGREE WITH THE REPAIR SHOP ON THE BILL? It is unlawful for any motor vehicle repair shop to fail to return any customer's motor vehicle because the customer refused to pay for unauthorized repairs or because the customer has refused to pay for repair charges in excess of the final estimate in violation of a written estimate. § 559.909, Fla. Stat. However, if work was performed under a proper written estimate, the repair shop may institute a possessory lien against the vehicle under part II of chapter 713 of Florida Statutes. If this occurs, you can pay the amount of the repair plus storage charges less any payments as a bond to the clerk of the circuit court. § 559.909, Fla. Stat. The clerk will issue a certificate which you deliver to the shop to pick up the car. The repair shop then must sue to get their money within 60 days. If the repair shop does not sue within 60 days, the clerk of the court shall return the bond money to you. Release of the bond money does not prohibit the shop from filing suit later. § 559.909, Fla. Stat. No motor vehicle repair shop may refuse to return a customer's motor vehicle by virtue of any miscellaneous lien. § 559.919, Fla. Stat.

CONTRACTS

WHAT IS A CONTRACT? A contract is an enforceable oral or written agreement between two or more people.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I SIGNED A CONTRACT BEFORE I TURNED 18? As a minor, your parents are responsible for you. § 741.24 and § 772.11, Fla. Stat. Adults sometimes co-sign contracts and loans for minors. Some contracts entered into by minors are not enforceable.

WHAT KINDS OF CONTRACTS WILL I ENTER INTO AS AN ADULT? Some of the contracts you may enter into as an adult include employment contracts (§ 743.04, Fla. Stat.), school loans (§ 743.05, Fla. Stat.), house or car purchases (§ 743.045, Fla. Stat.), installment loan contracts for purchases

(televisions, stereos, computers, etc.) (§ 743.044, Fla. Stat.), rental contracts (§ 743.045, Fla. Stat.), insurance contracts (Chapter 627, Fla. Stat.), contracts for services and credit card agreements (Chapter 743, Fla. Stat.).

DOES A CONTRACT HAVE TO BE IN WRITING? Not necessarily. However, if the contract is for your payment of another person's debt (§ 725.01, and § 687.0304, Fla. Stat.), if it concerns real estate (§ 689.01, Fla. Stat.), or if it lasts more than one year (Chapter 670-680, Fla. Stat.), it must be in writing.

WHY ARE WRITTEN CONTRACTS USEFUL? When there is a written contract the people making the contract (parties) are presumed to know what their responsibilities are. Never sign a contract or other legal document without understanding what it means. If a problem arises, a written contract would offer proof of the agreed-upon terms and conditions between the parties. This may be beneficial in a court of law.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I AM ASKED TO SIGN A CONTRACT? Read the contract carefully and make sure you understand all of it, cross out any parts that are not what you agreed to and write in the parts of the agreement you want that do not appear in the written contract. Do not sign a contract with any blank space on it. Get a copy of the contract and make sure the other party signs it.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I DON'T COMPLETE THE CONTRACT OR MISS PAYMENTS? If you fail to complete the contract or miss payments, you can be sued. You will be given a chance to defend yourself and the court will then determine if the claim is valid. If it is valid, you may have to pay money for breaking the contract.

THE COURT SYSTEM

WHAT ARE FLORIDA'S VARIOUS COURTS? Trial courts in Florida are divided into county courts and circuit courts. Cases in county court or circuit court may be taken to a higher court. This is called an appeal. In addition to state courts, a lawsuit may be brought in the federal court system. Federal district courts are the trial courts in the federal system. For more information, refer to Title V, Florida Statutes.

WHAT TYPES OF CASES ARE CONSIDERED BY THE COUNTY COURTS? Some less serious criminal offenses (misdemeanors), traffic offenses and civil cases where the amount claimed is under \$15,000 are handled in the county court and disputes under \$5,000 are handled in small claims court. § 34.01, Fla. Stat.

WHAT TYPES OF CASES ARE HEARD BY THE CIRCUIT COURT? All serious criminal offenses (felonies), matters involving the property of a person who has died (probate), juvenile matters for those under age 18, civil cases where the amount claimed is more than \$15,000, divorces and most actions involving real estate are heard by the circuit court. § 26.012, Fla. Stat.

DO I NEED AN ATTORNEY TO FILE A CIVIL CASE IN COURT? An attorney is not required for an individual to file a case in court. If the claim is based on a written document, you should bring it with you when you file a claim. The court clerk's office has simple forms for you to complete if the amount involved is less than \$15,000. However, it is usually best to talk with an attorney before handling a case in court yourself.

HOW LONG DO I HAVE TO FILE A LAWSUIT? The length of time you have to file a lawsuit varies by the type of case. See generally Florida Statutes, Chapter 95. If you have a possible claim or want to file a lawsuit, consult an attorney as soon as possible to protect your rights. The Florida Bar and local bar associations operate lawyer referral services to assist you in finding an attorney for your special needs. The service allows you to meet with an attorney for an initial consultation at costs ranging from \$25 to \$50.

CREDIT

HOW DO I GET A GOOD CREDIT RATING? There are a number of ways, including: maintaining a savings account, buying and paying for items on time, getting a job and using credit cards. A credit rating is intended to measure your ability to repay a debt. Lenders look at your past record of paying bills and your income or other sources of money in determining whether to extend credit.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO CLEAR A BAD CREDIT REPORT? It depends on the seriousness of the past problems. Credit reporting agencies often want references on loans and employment for the past five to seven years.

WHAT IS COLLATERAL? Collateral is anything of value that can be taken by the lender if you do not pay back the loan. The lender wants to identify property which has a value at least equal to the amount of the loan so that the property can be used to pay back the debt if you are unable to repay the loan. There is another type of loan called an “unsecured loan” which does not require collateral, but is based on the user’s ability to pay (i.e., credit cards, student loans).

CAN A LENDER HAVE DIFFERENT RULES FOR MAKING LOANS TO WOMEN AND MEN? No. It is unlawful for any creditor to discriminate against any applicant on the basis of sex or marital status. § 725.07, Fla. Stat. Lenders may only make decisions based on the borrower’s credit rating. A married person who does not have an outside job might have problems obtaining a loan unless that person has sufficient collateral to provide security for the loan. If the person’s spouse has a good credit rating, the spouse could guarantee the loan or provide other security to support the loan.

CRIMINAL CHARGES

WHEN ARE YOU UNDER ARREST? You are arrested when law enforcement officers take you into custody or otherwise deprive you of your freedom of movement in any significant way, in order to hold you to answer for a criminal offense. Police officers, under Florida law, are obligated to identify themselves and to advise you that you are under arrest and why, unless circumstances make it impossible for them to do so at that time. You may, in fact, be under arrest even though no one has actually used the word “ar-rest” or any other comparable word. The fact that you have been deprived of your freedom of movement in some significant manner may amount legally to an arrest. Ordinarily, private citizens do not have power of arrest in Florida; but under limited circumstances a private party may make an arrest where an actual commission of a felony is involved. § 901.16 and § 901.17, Fla. Stat.

IF SOMEONE IS ARRESTED FOR A CRIMINAL OFFENSE, WHAT DOES HE OR SHE HAVE A RIGHT TO EXPECT FROM THE ARRESTING OFFICER(S)? If arrested, you can expect to be searched for weapons by the police and taken to jail. § 901.21 and § 901.211, Fla. Stat. If questioned, you will be advised of your rights under the United States Constitution, in what is commonly called Miranda warnings. As soon as you request an attorney, the police are not supposed to question you

further. Important rights to remember are the right not to talk to the police and the right to have an attorney present if you are questioned. If you cannot afford an attorney, the court will appoint one for you. § 901.24, Fla. Stat.

- You have a right to know the crime or crimes with which you have been charged.
- You have a right to know the identity of the police officers who are dealing with you. This is your right to statute and by custom.
- You have the right to communicate by telephone with your attorney, family, friends, or bondsperson as soon after you are brought into the police station as practicable. The police have a right to complete their booking procedures before you are allowed to use the telephone.

WHAT BASIC THINGS SHOULD A PERSON REMEMBER IF ARRESTED? You should remember your right to have an attorney present. Once you have identified yourself, you may refuse to make any statement or discuss the case with anyone. § 901.24, Fla. Stat. On the other hand, you may choose to answer questions or sign papers. However, any information you give can be used as evidence against you in court. Law enforcement officers cannot force or threaten you into answering questions and cannot offer leniency in exchange for any written or oral statements.

HOW SOON AFTER AN ARREST MUST A PERSON APPEAR BEFORE A JUDGE? If you are arrested and placed in jail, an “initial appearance” before a judge must occur within 24 hours of your arrest. At an initial appearance, you will be apprised of the charges against you and asked if you understand the charges. Bail will be set and you will be asked if you can afford an attorney. Florida Rule of Criminal Procedure 3.130.

WHAT IF A PERSON CANNOT AFFORD TO HIRE AN ATTORNEY? If you cannot afford an attorney, the judge will appoint an attorney from the Public Defender’s Office to represent you. Generally, an attorney from the Public Defender’s Office will be in court and you will be given an opportunity to briefly speak with him/her. Florida Rule of Civil Procedure 3.111.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE RELEASED ON BAIL? Bail is designed to guarantee your appearance in court. Unless charged with a capital offense or an offense punishable by life imprisonment, and the proof of guilt is evident or the presumption is great, every person charged with a crime or violation of municipal or county ordinances shall be entitled to pretrial release on reasonable conditions. If no conditions of release can reasonably protect the community from risk of physical harm to persons, assure your presence at trial or assure the integrity of the judicial process, you may be detained. The court will require that a specific amount of money be deposited with the clerk of the court or sheriff. Chapter 903, Fla. Stat. Sometimes the court allows deposit of a bond or title to a vehicle or home. Usually a member of the family must get the money, give the money to the clerk or sheriff and then show the receipt in order to get you released. Private bail bondspersons can be called from the jail. Florida Rule of Civil Procedure 3.131.

IS IT TRUE, A SEEMINGLY MINOR ACTION WOULD BE A FELONY IN FLORIDA? Yes. For example, if you falsely apply for an I.D. or unlawfully spray a fire extinguisher, or falsely report child abuse.

CAN A PERSON YOUNGER THAN 18 BE TREATED AS AN ADULT WITH CRIMINAL SANCTIONS SUCH AS A PRISON SENTENCE? Yes. It depends on the seriousness of the offense and the age of the person charged. § 985.225; § 985.226; § 985.233 and § 985.565 Fla. Stat.

CAN MY JUVENILE RECORD BE USED AGAINST ME AFTER I BECOME AN ADULT? Yes.

All prior criminal acts may be considered for sentencing purposes. Chapter 921, Fla. Stat.

DRINKING LAWS

WHAT IS THE LEGAL DRINKING AGE IN FLORIDA? The current legal drinking age in Florida is 21. § 562.11, Fla. Stat.

WHY CAN'T I DRINK AT AGE 18? Drinking is a privilege regulated by state laws. The legislature has the power to determine who and under what conditions a person may drink alcoholic beverages.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I DRIVE AFTER I HAVE BEEN DRINKING? Driving while under the influence of alcoholic beverages or a controlled substance is one of the most serious traffic violations you can commit. In fact, it is classified as a crime and in some circumstances a felony. If you are found guilty of driving while under the influence (DUI), you are subject to heavy penalties for the first offense. These include possible imprisonment of up to six months, a loss of your driver license for up to one year, a fine up to \$500 in addition to court costs, completion of a substance abuse course and driving course and 50 hours of community service. § 316.193, Fla. Stat. The vehicle you were driving must be impounded. The penalties are even more serious if your blood alcohol level is .20 or higher. § 316.1934, Fla. Stat.

If you operate a motor vehicle in the State of Florida, you are subject to the “implied consent” law. This means because you are operating a motor vehicle in the State of Florida, you have agreed to take a chemical test if you are arrested by a law enforcement officer who believes you are under the influence of alcoholic beverages. A urine test can be requested if drugs are suspected. A blood test can be requested under some circumstances. If you have a Florida driver license, the statement, “I hereby consent to any chemical test for sobriety as required by law” appears directly above your signature.

These tests are to determine your blood alcohol or drug level to find out how much alcohol or drugs are in your bloodstream. If you refuse to take the test, you are subject to a suspension of your driver license for a period of one year for a first refusal and a period of 18 months if your driving privilege has been previously suspended for refusing to submit to such a test. § 316.1939, Fla. Stat. You do not have the right to have your own doctor give you the test at the time of the arrest, and you do not have the right to have an attorney present when you take such a test. You do have the right to have a second test administered by a physician or a laboratory technician of your choice. However, the second test must be paid for by you.

Police officers now have the power to suspend your driver license on the spot for a DUI arrest. When police officers seize a license, they will issue a traffic citation, a suspension order and issue a temporary license that is good for seven days. To earn reinstatement, drivers cited under this law must pay costs and fines. Hardship licenses are available under certain limited circumstances upon request, but not for at least 30 days after being charged.

If you refuse to take the test, your license will be suspended by the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. Upon receipt of the law enforcement officer’s sworn statement that you refused, the department will notify you in writing by certified mail to your last known address that your license has been suspended unless a notice of suspension has already been served by a police officer. Therefore, it is very important that your correct address appears on your driver license. If it does not, you should immediately correct it with the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. Failing to timely change your address on your driver license can be the basis for another charge. You then have the right to a hearing before a judge concerning the refusal, but only if you or your attorney file for the hearing

within a strict deadline. In this hearing, the judge is concerned with four major issues:

- Was there probable cause to stop you for driving while under the influence of alcoholic beverages or a controlled substance? Unusual or hazardous driving might be the reason for stopping you. The arresting officer must have cause to believe you were driving while under the influence in order to stop you.
- Were you placed under lawful arrest?
- Did you refuse to submit to the test after being requested to do so by a law enforcement officer?
- Did the law enforcement officer tell you that your right to drive would be suspended for one year if you refuse to submit to the test?

Your license can be suspended even though you are later found not guilty of the driving while under the influence charge. The suspension is based on the fact that you refused to take the test. Therefore, you may want to consult an attorney for advice about such a hearing.

See Chapter 316, Fla. Stat.

WHAT IS THE OPEN CONTAINER LAW? It is unlawful for any person to possess an open container of an alcoholic beverage while operating a vehicle or while a passenger in or on a vehicle being operated. Any operator of a vehicle who violates this law is guilty of a noncriminal moving traffic violation and will be fined. A passenger of a vehicle who violates this law is also guilty of a noncriminal nonmoving traffic violation and will also be fined. § 316.1936, Fla. Stat.

DRIVING

IS DRIVING A RIGHT OR A PRIVILEGE? Driving is a privilege regulated by the State of Florida. It carries great responsibility. For more information, refer to Chapter 322, of the Florida Statutes.

DO I LOSE MY DRIVER LICENSE IF I DROP OUT OF SCHOOL BEFORE I REACH 18 OR BEFORE I EARN MY DIPLOMA? Yes. Florida law requires that students under age 18 be enrolled in an educational program and satisfactorily meet relevant attendance requirements in order to apply for or retain a driver license. Students under 18 who have unsatisfactory attendance records or drop out of school will have their license suspended. A student under the age of 18 whose license has been suspended may have the license reinstated one time by improving attendance or returning to school. § 232.19; § 322.09; and § 322.091, Fla. Stat. This law does not apply to anyone above the age of 18. For more information, contact the Department of Education's Program Development and Analysis Service Department. (The telephone number is listed on the last page of this pamphlet.)

DO I HAVE TO HAVE CAR INSURANCE? According to Florida law, if you own a motor vehicle with four or more wheels you must carry at least \$10,000 of personal injury protection insurance (PIP) also known as no-fault insurance. A minimum of \$10,000 of property damage liability insurance is also mandatory. § 324.021, Fla. Stat.

WHAT IF I DRIVE OFF WITHOUT PAYING FOR GASOLINE? In addition to possible theft charges, you are also subject to losing your driver license. § 812.014, Fla. Stat.

WHAT IF I RECEIVE A TICKET OUT OF STATE? If you are guilty of an out of state driving infraction, points will be assessed against your Florida driver license. § 322.27, Fla. Stat.

WHAT DOES PIP INSURANCE COVER? Personal injury protection (PIP) insurance covers you regardless of whether you cause an accident (are "at-fault") up to the limits of the policy. PIP is

designed to reduce the necessity of suing for reimbursement of injuries in auto accidents. PIP pays for 80 percent of reasonable and necessary medical expenses, 60 percent of lost wages and \$5,000 for death benefits. § 324.021, Fla. Stat.

WHO IS COVERED UNDER PIP INSURANCE? For accidents that happen in Florida, PIP covers you and relatives who live in your home, certain passengers, and others who drive your car with your permission. Pedestrians and bicyclists are also covered if they are Florida residents.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I HAVE AN ACCIDENT OUTSIDE OF FLORIDA? For accidents that happen outside of Florida, but inside the United States or Canada, PIP insurance covers you and relatives who live in your home. In these cases, you must be driving your own vehicle. Persons other than you or your relatives are not covered.

WHO IS COVERED UNDER PROPERTY DAMAGE LIABILITY INSURANCE? All drivers are required to purchase \$10,000 of property damage liability insurance as well as PIP insurance. A \$30,000 combined limit of property damage and bodily injury liability is a legal option. This coverage pays for damage you or members of your family cause to other people's property while driving. The term "property" may include a fence, telephone pole or building, as well as another car. Coverage applies even if you drive someone else's car. Depending on the terms and conditions of your policy, it may also include anyone else who uses your car with your permission. § 324.021(9)(b)(1) , Fla. Stat.

IS IT UNLAWFUL TO PLAY MY CAR RADIO OR TAPE PLAYER AT A LOUD VOLUME? It is unlawful for any person operating or occupying a motor vehicle on a street or highway to operate or amplify the sound produced by a radio, tape player, or other mechanical sound making device or instrument from within the motor vehicle so it is audible at a distance of 25 feet or more from the motor vehicle or is louder than necessary for the convenient hearing of persons inside the vehicle, in areas adjoining churches, schools, or hospitals. § 316.3045, Fla. Stat.

ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Today there are many local, state, and federal laws regarding our environment that you should be aware of in order to act responsibly within your community to help preserve our air, land, water and other natural resources.

DID YOU KNOW? Garbage and natural resource depletion are major environmental problems. However, recycling, composting and water and energy conservation measures are great ways to help preserve a healthy environment.

If you change the oil in your car yourself, you are responsible for properly disposing of the used oil, which is considered a hazardous substance and must be properly disposed of, not dumped on the ground, down the drain or in a body of water.

Many homes and businesses use or produce other types of hazardous substances. Some examples of materials that may be considered hazardous include:

- * paint
- * paint thinner
- * solvents
- * oil

So, if you are dealing with materials which may contain hazardous substances, you should be sure they are handled properly because strict laws often require people to pay for cleanup of and injuries caused

by hazardous substances. Most communities have “amnesty days” several times a year for free disposal of hazardous substances.

If you spend time in the woods or waters of Florida, certain animals are protected as threatened or endangered species and their habitat, including most wetlands, are also protected by law. Harming protected animals or destroying wetlands or habitat may make you subject to civil or criminal fines or penalties. The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission lists hundreds of endangered and threatened species. Protected animals include the alligator, manatee, gopher tortoise, red-cockaded woodpecker and Florida panther, to name a few.

EMPLOYMENT

WILL I BE GIVEN A WRITTEN EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT? Most employment contracts are not in writing.

CAN I BE FIRED? In Florida, employees are presumed to be "at will." At-will employees may be terminated for any reason, so long as it's not illegal. Generally, employees who work under an employment contract can only be terminated for reasons specified in the contract. However, under neither circumstance can your employment status be adversely affected due to discrimination based on your race, sex, age, religion, national origin, handicap, disability or marital status. § 760.10, Fla. Stat.

HOW DO LAWS REGULATE MY WORKPLACE? You can expect to work in a safe environment. Employers may be fined for unsafe working conditions under the Occupational Safety and Health Act. Workers' Compensation laws provide protection for workers injured on the job. You must notify your employer immediately to ensure your rights are protected. Finally, unemployment compensation provides financial payments to individuals who have lost their jobs through layoffs or other specific reasons. To get more information, contact the Florida Department of Labor and Employment Security. See generally Chapter 760, Fla. Stat.

FEDERAL INCOME TAX

WHY DO I HAVE TO PAY TAXES? You pay taxes to help the government raise revenue to meet its expenses. The revenue raised by personal and other taxes is used to provide a wide variety of services to the public. Among these are our national defense, conservation of our natural resources and public education.

WHAT ARE MY RESPONSIBILITIES? You are responsible for reporting your income to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and figuring the tax due on it. See generally 26 U.S.C. §1. You do this by filing an income tax return each year. Wages, tips and other fees you get for work count as income for tax purposes. Income from investments such as interest on savings accounts and dividends also count as income. An accountant can help you with your tax responsibilities.

HOW ARE TAXES USUALLY PAID? Usually your employer withholds or takes taxes out of your paycheck and deposits them in a federal bank. By the end of the year you should have paid all or most of the tax due on your income for that year. In addition to federal income tax on your earnings, your employer will also withhold and match Social Security taxes (FICA) which pays for old age, survivor and disability pension payments for you when you become eligible for them. It also pays for Medicare coverage.

WHERE CAN I GET HELP? IRS provides the forms and instructions needed to file an accurate return. For more information, contact the IRS by calling 1-800-829-1040. If you need information to assist you in gathering and maintaining your important records such as financial records, insurance records, or school and educational records, contact the Bureau of Archives and Records Management of The Office of the Secretary of State, (850) 245-6700.

JURY DUTY

WHAT ARE THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR SERVING ON A JURY? You must be at least 18, a citizen of the United States, a resident of Florida, and you must have a valid driver license. § 40.01, Fla. Stat.

IF YOU ARE CALLED FOR JURY DUTY, WILL YOU ALWAYS SERVE AS A JUROR? No. More people are called than will be chosen as jurors. People may be excused from a jury by the judge or one of the attorneys for a variety of reasons.

WHO WILL BE EXCUSED FROM JURY DUTY? The judge will excuse a governor, a cabinet officer, a sheriff, a deputy, a municipal police officer, a clerk of the court or a judge. A judge will also excuse a person who is involved in the case, who is physically incapacitated, or who is being prosecuted for a crime.

In addition, the judge may excuse other persons upon showing of hardship, extreme inconvenience, or public necessity; a person 70 years of age or older; a person who has served as a juror in any court in his or her county within two years; an expectant mother; or a parent of a child under age six who are not employed full-time. § 40.013, Fla. Stat.

DO JURORS GET PAID? Yes. In Florida state court, jurors are paid \$15 per day for the first three days and \$30 per day starting on the fourth day of jury service and each day afterward, but they are not paid for travel from their home. Jurors serving a federal court are normally paid \$40 per day and 25¢ per mile. § 40.24, Fla. Stat.

WILL I LOSE MY JOB OR MY PAY WHEN I HAVE JURY DUTY? You cannot lose your job because of your jury duty, but employers are not required to continue to pay wages to employees who are on jury duty. § 40.271, Fla. Stat.

HOW ARE PEOPLE SELECTED FOR JURY DUTY? In each county the clerk of the court selects at random enough jurors from driver license lists to fill a jury. If selected for jury duty, you will receive a notice in the mail. You must appear at the location indicated when notified or call the clerk of the court if you have a problem. Failure to appear may result in penalties imposed by the judge. § 40.23, Fla. Stat.

LANDLORD/TENANT

IS A WRITTEN LEASE FOR A RESIDENCE NECESSARY? A written lease is not required, but it is a good idea because a lease defines what the landlord (owner) and the tenant (renter) must do.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I BREAK A LEASE? You may be sued depending upon the provisions of the lease. You may be liable for unpaid rent, advertising expenses, court costs, attorney's fees, etc.

HOW MUCH NOTICE MUST A LANDLORD GIVE THE TENANT TO MOVE OUT OF THE RESIDENCE? Unless the lease states some specific period of time, the amount of notice depends on the rent payable period. If the rent is paid every week, the landlord must give seven days notice prior to the end of the weekly period. If the rent is paid every month, the landlord must give 15 days notice before the end of the month. § 83.46, Fla. Stat. If the tenant continues to occupy the premises after the expiration of the lease (without permission) or if the landlord has terminated the rental agreement for any of the reasons allowed under the Landlord and Tenant Act and the tenant does not move, the landlord can start eviction procedures. In the case of non-payment of rent, the landlord must serve the tenant with a written notice allowing three days (excluding weekends and legal holidays) in which to pay the rent or move. In order to gain possession of the dwelling, the landlord must file suit in county court, providing the court with a copy of the three-day notice. The tenant then has five days, excluding weekends and legal holidays, to respond in writing to the court. If the tenant does not respond or a judgment is entered against the tenant, the clerk of the county court will issue a writ of possession to the sheriff and the tenant will have only 24 hours notice prior to eviction. § 83.56, Fla. Stat.

Florida law does not allow the landlord to use self-help eviction. The landlord is not allowed to:

- a. Shut off the utilities (water, gas, electricity, etc.) even if the service is in the landlord's name.
- b. Change the locks or use any boot lock or similar device, except for repair, maintenance or replacement.
- c. Remove the outside doors, locks, roof, walls or windows.
- d. Remove the tenant's personal property from the dwelling unit unless proper legal action has been taken.

If this occurs, the tenant may sue for actual and consequential damages or three months rent, whichever is greater, plus court costs and attorneys' fees. § 83.64; § 83.67; and § 83.51, Fla. Stat.

SHOULD A TENANT GET INTEREST ON A SECURITY DEPOSIT OR ADVANCE RENT? A landlord may hold a security deposit or advance rent in a separate non-interest bearing account or in a separate interest-bearing account with the tenant receiving approximately 5 percent per year simple interest. § 83.49, Fla. Stat.

HOW CAN THE TENANT TELL IF THE LANDLORD IS USING AN INTEREST OR NON-INTEREST BEARING ACCOUNT? The landlord must notify the tenant in writing within 30 days of receiving the security deposit or advance rent how and where the money is held. § 83.49, Fla. Stat.

CAN THE TENANT GET HIS OR HER SECURITY DEPOSIT BACK? Once a tenant vacates the premises at the end of the rental agreement or abandonment with proper notice to the landlord, the landlord has 15 days to refund the security deposit or send a certified letter to the tenant imposing a claim on the deposit and stating the amount and the reason for the claim. If this notice is not sent as required, the landlord forfeits his or her right to impose a claim. Should the tenant, however, fail to give the landlord at least seven days written notice prior to vacating, the landlord is not required to send the written notice of claim. Unless the tenant objects in writing to the landlord within 15 days of receipt of the claim letter, the landlord must return the deposit less the landlord's claim within 30 days of the date of the landlord's claim notice. After the tenant objects, should the landlord and the tenant not be able to reach an agreement, the matter may be taken to small claims court. § 83.49, Fla. Stat.

DOES THE LANDLORD HAVE A RIGHT TO COME INTO THE TENANT'S RESIDENCE? The landlord or those hired to perform work for the landlord may enter the residence from time to time to inspect or make repairs. The landlord may also enter the residence with the consent of the tenant, in

case of emergency, when the tenant unreasonably withholds consent, or when the tenant is absent from the dwelling for a time equal to one-half of the rental period. § 83.53, Fla. Stat.

WHAT MUST THE LANDLORD DO TO MAINTAIN THE PREMISES? The landlord must follow all applicable building, housing and health codes and statutes. This usually means keeping roofs, windows, screens, doors, floors, steps, porches, exterior walls, foundations, and structural components in good repair and the plumbing in reasonable working condition. Unless otherwise agreed in writing, for any rental other than a single family house or duplex, the landlord also must provide for locks and keys, the clean and safe condition of common areas, removal of garbage and provide garbage receptacles, extermination of rodents, roaches, ants and termites, heat, hot water and running water. The tenant may be charged for utilities, water, fuel and garbage removal. § 83.51, Fla. Stat.

WHAT MUST THE TENANT DO TO MAINTAIN THE PREMISES? The tenant must also follow applicable building, housing and health codes and statutes. The tenant has an obligation to keep the premises clean and sanitary; remove garbage; keep plumbing fixtures clean, sanitary and in repair; use equipment and appliances in a reasonable manner; not destroy, deface or remove property of the landlord or allow those visiting to do so; and to conduct self, family and others in a manner which does not disturb neighbors or breach the peace. § 83.52, Fla. Stat.

MARRIAGE

HOW OLD MUST A PERSON BE TO GET MARRIED? A person 18 can marry without parental consent. § 741.04, Fla. Stat. However, if under 18 but at least 16, parental consent is needed. § 741.0405, Fla. Stat.

HOW DO I GET A MARRIAGE LICENSE? A marriage license is issued by the clerk of the circuit court. § 741.01, Fla. Stat. Blood tests are no longer required in Florida.

IS A WIFE REQUIRED TO TAKE HER HUSBAND'S LAST NAME? It is customary in the United States that a wife take her husband's last name (or surname as it is legally called), but it is not required by law. If the wife takes her husband's surname, she should change her name on her Social Security card, driver license, voter registration, credit cards, bank accounts, and inform others with whom she does business.

WHAT ARE GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE IN FLORIDA? Florida is a "no-fault" divorce state, meaning the court need not find either party at fault to dissolve a marriage. It is sufficient to show only that the marriage is irretrievably broken. § 61.052, Fla. Stat.

IF I GET A DIVORCE, HOW IS MY PROPERTY DIVIDED? Florida is known as an equitable distribution state. This means that the courts have the power to decide how property and debts obtained during a marriage should be fairly divided upon divorce. Even though fault is not an issue in granting the dissolution, the division of property and possessions, responsibility for support and custody of children may become contested matters. See generally § 61.052; 61.12; 61.14; 61.19; 61.075; 61.077, Fla. Stat.

WHAT ABOUT ALIMONY? After equitable distribution has been made, the court may consider the award of alimony. The court may grant alimony to either the husband or the wife. In awarding alimony, the court considers many factors necessary to do equity and justice between the husband and wife. § 61.12, Fla. Stat. For more information, please review Florida Bar publication: "Divorce in Florida."

PATERNITY ISSUES

WHAT IF I CANNOT TAKE CARE OF MY CHILD? Under Florida's Safe Haven law, a parent may drop off a newborn within three days of birth at any hospital emergency room, staffed fire rescue station, or staffed emergency medical service station in the state of Florida. The person leaving the baby is not required to answer any questions. A parent of a newborn infant left at a hospital, emergency medical services station, or fire station under the "Safe Haven" law may claim his or her newborn infant up until the court enters a judgment terminating his or her parental rights which is approximately 30 days. A claim for the newborn infant must be made to the entity having physical or legal custody of the newborn infant or to the circuit court before whom proceedings involving the newborn infant are pending.

WHAT HAPPENS IF A BABY IS LEFT IN AN UNSAFE PLACE INSTEAD OF A DESIGNATED "SAFE HAVEN LOCATION"? The person will face criminal charges.

WHAT HAPPENS TO CHILDREN DURING A DIVORCE? You and your spouse can work out the parenting issues, avoid or minimize the harm to the children and avoid a court fight. However, if you are unable to resolve these issues, the court must decide them for you. Both parents have an affirmative duty under Florida law to promote a good relationship between the children and the other parent. Each parent has the responsibility of making day-to-day decisions regarding the children's care, maintenance and welfare while the children are in his or her care. The parents should at all times conduct themselves and their activities in a way that will promote the welfare and best interests of the children. Each parent must notify the other parent promptly of any serious illness or accident affecting the children.

VOTING

WHO CAN REGISTER TO VOTE? Any person who is at least 18 years of age, a citizen of the United States, and a resident of Florida, among other criteria, may register to vote for local, state, or federal elections. § 97.041; 97.052; and 97.053, Fla. Stat. A person who is otherwise qualified may preregister on or after that person's 17th birthday or receipt of a valid Florida driver license, whichever occurs earlier, and may vote in any election occurring on or after that person's 18th birthday. Your local supervisor of elections will tell you how to register to vote.

MAY I VOTE IF I WILL NOT BE IN MY VOTING DISTRICT ON ELECTION DAY OR CANNOT APPEAR? Yes, you may vote using an absentee ballot. An absentee ballot can be obtained from your local supervisor of elections before Election Day. § 101.665, Fla. Stat.

WHERE DO I VOTE? After you register to vote, you will be notified of your voting precinct. A voting precinct is a place close to the area in which you live where you will go to vote.