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**Statewide Association Launches “*Mind Your Brain Campaign*”
More Access & Support Sought for Traumatic Brain Injury Survivors
*New Resource Center, Sports Concussion Legislation Highlighted***

TALLAHASSEE, FL – Florida’s 100,000 annual survivors of Traumatic Brain Injury and their families will have quicker access to assistance than ever before through a new statewide database of community services tailored to meet their needs, the Brain Injury Association of Florida announced today.

The Traumatic Brain Injury Resource & Support Center is designed to give Floridians who have experienced brain injuries one-stop access to a vast network of information and services – as well as education and advocacy – through a web-based portal (www.byyourside.org) and toll-free helpline (1-800-992-3442).

The Center – along with proposed legislation aimed at reducing sports-related concussions among youth athletes – is part of Brain Injury Association’s kickoff of a statewide “***Mind Your Brain Campaign...Because it Matters.***” The campaign will raise public awareness about Traumatic brain Injury (TBI) and the need for more support of prevention, early intervention and treatment efforts.

“More people suffer brain injuries each year than the total number of individuals diagnosed with breast cancer, HIV and spinal cord injuries combined,” said Valerie Breen, President and CEO of Brain Injury Association of Florida. “Nationwide, health care costs for TBI are in the billions of dollars annually, so investing in prevention and early intervention not only saves dollars, it saves lives.”

Breen also announced the Association’s support of proposed legislation, sponsored by Rep. Ronald “Doc” Renuart, R-Ponte Vedra Beach, and Sen. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, to educate youth athletes, coaches and parents about the warning signs for concussion and to protect injured athletes from getting back into play too soon. At least nine states have adopted similar legislation, with the flagship state, Washington, reporting a decrease in concussions among their student athletes and no significant impacts to schools in complying with the law.

Approximately 140,000 high school athletes nationwide suffer concussions each year, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations. More than 40 percent of young athletes return to play before they are fully recovered, reports the Center for Injury Research and Policy in Columbus, Ohio. Youth aged 15 to 19 years are among the highest risk group.

“We want student athletes to excel, on and off-the-field,” said Rep. Renuart. “That’s what this legislation is all about, making sure that when it comes to head injuries, parents know all the facts before their children are allowed to get back in the game.”

The legislation was developed in conjunction with the Sports Concussion Task Force, a statewide coalition including medical experts, sports athletic officials and health care providers. It would require the Florida High School Athletic Association to adopt bylaws or policies stipulating that a youth athlete suspected of sustaining a concussion during a game or practice would be immediately removed from play and return only after receiving written clearance by a medical professional. The bill would include organized youth athletics at government-owned parks and recreation facilities. Participants would have to sign an informed consent notice annually, and youth athletes, coaches, parents and other sports officials would be educated on the nature and risk of head injuries.

“This legislation will enable parents and student athletes to make informed decisions about any potential long-term consequences of head injuries before returning to the playing field,” Sen. Flores said. “We want to keep athletics a very healthy activity, brain-healthy.”

Gary Pigott, Senior Director of Athletics for the Florida High School Athletic Association, who served on the Sports Concussion Task Force, stated that “the FHSAA is always in support of changes that will further protect and keep our student-athletes safe.”

The National Football League -- which in recent years has instituted fines for violent helmet hits – also is supporting states’ efforts to protect young athletes. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell last May sent a letter to former Gov. Charlie Crist seeking support for legislation; a similar outreach is planned for Florida’s current administration, according to Kenneth Edmonds, Director of Government Relations & Public Policy for the National Football League.

“We thank Sen. Flores and Rep. Renuart for their leadership on what we in the NFL consider important legislation on a crucial subject,” Edmonds said. “Today’s NFL players and coaches are better educated on the dangers of concussions, and we believe that youth athletes – both male and female – also should be better educated and protected. HB 301 and SB 730 do just that.”

Also supporting the legislation are several brain injury resource advocates, including Adam Goldstein, President and CEO of Royal Caribbean International; his wife, Cheryl; and their 16-year-old son, David. An avid soccer player for more than a decade, David suffered a serious concussion in January 2010 when he collided head-to-head with another player during the district finals for his school team. It was his third head injury playing soccer in four years, but he had always bounced back.

“The second it happened, my hands went right to my head and I knew that things weren’t right,” David said. “But I was a freshman, coming in for our senior starting right back who had torn his ACL, and it was an important game against our school rival, so I played until the end of the game. What I realize now is that I shouldn’t have kept playing.”

Adam and Cheryl Goldstein were watching the game but didn’t see the moment when their son got hurt. And when David complained of constant headaches, nausea and fatigue the next day, his parents thought that he was getting the flu. Yet, David scrimmaged for his club team for two hours so as not to disappoint his coach. As weeks passed and David didn’t improve, the Goldsteins embarked on a frustrating, months-long journey of consultations with several doctors and specialists until they finally found the right help at the University of Miami’s and the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis Concussion Clinic.

Had Brain Injury Association's new one-stop Resource Center been in place at the time, the Goldsteins said, they likely could have found help for David sooner. They are pleased that the Center will be able to provide a critical lifeline to other families in accessing support services quickly – undoubtedly saving victims of concussions and other TBI survivors time and money while getting needed treatment to help speed their rehabilitation and recovery.

"We are conscientious parents but we just didn't know enough to assess the situation timely and find the right resources to get help," Cheryl said. "We don't want people to go through what we did. Brain Injury Association's Resource Center, along with their trained resource facilitators located across Florida, can lessen the burden for families affected by sports-related concussions and traumatic brain injury."

Today, David is healthy and playing soccer again. He wears protective headgear when he practices or plays and knows how to safeguard himself and his teammates against head injuries. He understands how to identify the warning signs of TBI and even has become a committed advocate for athlete education and concussion testing at all Miami-Dade public schools. He recently raised more than \$30,000 for the Kidz Neuroscience Center at the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis, which is assisting the Miami-Dade public schools with optional diagnostic testing for their athletes.

"I am a smarter player, I know how to reduce the risk, and I am not reckless," David said. "I support the sports concussion legislation because it is about education and trying to prevent serious or permanent brain damage by keeping an injured player from going back into the game too soon."

Breen said the Association's statewide outreach campaign will work over the coming months to raise public awareness about traumatic brain injury and the new one-stop Resource Center, which was made possible through a funding partnership with the Department of Health's Brain and Spinal Cord Injury Program. The state program is funded through a percentage of traffic-related fines and certain vehicle tag fees.

The campaign also will encourage the Legislature to boost resources for state and private partnership initiatives -- like the nonprofit Association's Resource Center -- that are designed to increase community-based access and support for TBI survivors and their families. Just over a fifth of the estimated 100,000 people who suffer a traumatic brain injury currently receive services from the state's Brain and Spinal Cord Injury Program, Breen said.

"Too many TBI survivors – from infants to teen athletes and even our eldest Floridians – are not getting the access they need to vital community services," Breen said. "Brain Injury Association of Florida will work with the Brain and Spinal Cord Injury Program to get more assistance to those who need it. Our goal is to inform, support, educate and advocate on behalf of all TBI survivors and their loved ones."

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Brain Injury Association of Florida is the only statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to informing, educating, supporting and advocating on behalf of all traumatic brain injury survivors and their families. It was founded in 1985 by the mother of a young man who sustained a traumatic brain injury during a car crash. All resources are provided free of charge to TBI survivors and their families. BIAF's helpline is at 800-992-3442 and has Resource Facilitation Coordinators located in offices across Florida who provide services customized to meet each person's need with a goal to help them find the necessary resources to rehabilitate and recover. Learn more at www.byyourside.org.