

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF
FLORIDA, FORT MYERS DIVISION

**Halyn Leon Varela v. Warden, Florida Soft Side South, U.S. Attorney
General**

No. 2:26-cv-403-KCD-DNF, United States District Court for the Middle District of Florida, Fort Myers Division
(February 20, 2026)

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Middle District of Florida dismissed without prejudice a § 2241 habeas petition filed by Kelsie Leon on behalf of detained petitioner Halyn Leon Varela. The court held that Leon had not established next-friend standing and, even if she had, could not represent Varela because she was not alleged to be an attorney.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Middle District of Florida, Fort Myers Division
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Kyle C. Dudek
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Middle District of Florida, Fort Myers Division
DECIDED	February 20, 2026
DOCKET	2:26-cv-403-KCD-DNF
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	A petition for a writ of habeas corpus under 28 U.S.C. § 2241 was filed by Kelsie Leon on behalf of detained noncitizen Halyn Leon Varela. The district court dismissed the petition without prejudice because Kelsie Leon did not establish next-friend standing and was not authorized to represent Varela without counsel.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court applied the legal requirements governing next-friend standing and a nonlawyer's ability to represent another person in a habeas action.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unpublished district court order; limited persuasive value
PARTIES	Halyn Leon Varela v. Warden, Florida Soft Side South, U.S. Attorney General

TOPICS

federal habeas corpus

standing

immigration detention

subject matter jurisdiction

civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

Federal habeas corpus

Immigration detention

Civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Kelsie Leon established next-friend standing to file a habeas petition on Varela's behalf.
2. Whether Leon could represent Varela in the action even if next-friend status existed.

HOLDINGS

1. A would-be next friend must adequately explain why next-friend designation is necessary and demonstrate dedication to the interests of the person seeking habeas relief. Because Leon alleged neither mental incompetence nor denial of access to the courts and offered no other basis for special protection, she lacked next-friend standing to initiate the petition.
2. Even if next-friend status existed, a nonlawyer may not represent another person in the action without being represented by counsel.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“To demonstrate “next friend” status is warranted, the would-be next friend must (1) provide an adequate explanation for the necessity of the designation, such as the real party’s mental incompetence or lack of access to the courts and (2) show she is “truly dedicated to the interests” of the real party.”

“Because Leon does not demonstrate the propriety of “next friend” status, she lacks standing to initiate this action on Valera’s behalf.”

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Varela was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. His spouse, Kelsie Leon, filed a § 2241 habeas petition on his behalf, but the petition did not allege that Varela was mentally incompetent or denied access to the courts. Leon also did not claim to be a lawyer.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Kelsie Leon filed the § 2241 petition on behalf of Varela, who was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The district court concluded that Leon failed to demonstrate the necessity of next-friend status and therefore lacked standing to initiate the action. The court also concluded that, even assuming next-friend status, Leon could not represent Varela because she was not alleged to be a lawyer. The petition was dismissed without prejudice, judgment was ordered entered, pending motions were terminated as moot, and the case was closed.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- Whitmore v. Arkansas, 495 U.S. 149, 162-63 (1990)
- Francis v. Warden, FCC Coleman-USP, 246 F. App'x 621, 622 (11th Cir. 2007)
- Weber v. Garza, 570 F.2d 511, 514 (5th Cir. 1978)
- Marcia Turner v. Neptune Towing & Recovery, Inc., No. 8:09-CV-1071-T-27AEP, 2011 WL 2981786, at *2 (M.D. Fla. July 22, 2011)
- Bey on behalf of Baxter v. Fla., No. 4:24CV517/MW/ZCB, 2025 WL 301425, at *1 n.2 (N.D. Fla. Jan. 6, 2025)

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