

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PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unpublished district court order; limited persuasive value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)

OPINION

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

PER CURIAM.

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

MIDDLE DISTRICT OF FLORIDA

FORT MYERS DIVISION

HALYN LEON VARELA,

Plaintiff, Case No. 2:26-cv-403-KCD-DNF v.

WARDEN, FLORIDA SOFT SIDE

SOUTH, U.S. ATTORNEY

GENERAL,

Defendants. /

ORDER

Before the Court is a Petition for Writ of Habeas Corpus Under 28 U.S.C. § 2241 filed by Kelsie Leon, on behalf of Halyn Leon Varela, who is being detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. (Doc. 1.) An “[a]pplication for a writ of habeas corpus shall be in writing signed and verified by the person for whose relief it is intended or by someone acting in his behalf.” 28 U.S.C. § 2242. The latter part of this provision codifies the common law tradition of permitting a “next friend” to litigate on behalf of a person who, because of incompetence, is unable to initiate a habeas action himself. See *Whitmore v. Arkansas*, 495 U.S. 149, 162 (1990). But “[n]ext friend’ standing is by no means granted automatically[.]” *Id.* at 163. 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. *Id.* Leon has not met this standard. Although she is Valera’s spouse, there is no allegation that Valera is mentally incompetent or has been denied access to the courts. Even so, this Court sees numerous pro se petitioners in immigration custody

seeking relief who face the same conditions as Valera and are able to litigate their petition. At bottom, Leon offers nothing to show that Valera warrants any special protection by a next friend to litigate on his behalf. Because Leon does not demonstrate the propriety of “next friend” status, she lacks standing to initiate this action on Valera’s behalf. See *Francis v. Warden, FCC Coleman-USP*, 246 F. App’x 621, 622 (11th Cir. 2007) (“Absent ‘next friend’ status, an individual lacks Article III standing to file a petition on another’s behalf, thus stripping the district court of jurisdiction to consider the petition.”); *Weber v. Garza*, 570 F.2d 511, 514 (5th Cir. 1978) (“[W]hen the application for habeas corpus filed by a would be ‘next friend’ does not set forth an adequate reason or explanation of the necessity for resort to the ‘next friend’ device, the court is without jurisdiction to consider the petition.”). What is more, even if there was next-friend status, Leon does not claim to be a lawyer. So she cannot represent Valera in this action. See *Weber*, 570 F.2d at 514; *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) “Under Rule 17(c), a representative does not have the right to appear on behalf of a minor or an incompetent person unless that representative is represented by counsel.”); *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). Accordingly, it is ORDERED:

1. The Petition (Doc. 1) is DISMISSED without prejudice.
 2. The Clerk shall enter judgment dismissing this case without prejudice, terminate any pending motions as moot, and close the case.
 3. The Clerk is directed to send a copy of this Order to Kelsie Leon, 1377 7th Avenue, DeLand, FL 32724. ENTERED in Fort Myers, Florida on February 20, 2026.
- Kyle C. Dudek os ot United States District Judge