



# Kids Matter

Child Protection and Advocacy Law Section

Winter 2014

GEORGIA JUVENILE  
JUSTICE REFORM:  
WHY WE MUST REFORM USING  
EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES.

# From the Chair

By Nicki Noel Vaughan



Welcome to the Winter, 2014 issue of *Kids Matter*. This edition is particularly special, with articles pertinent to our moving into "The Year of the New Juvenile Code." We appreciate that Avery Niles, commissioner of DJJ, and Dr. Sharon Hill, director of DFCS, took time from their busy transitioning work to share their insights into Juvenile Justice Reform and the newly-formed Statewide Centralized Intake Communication Center for Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect, respectively. Additional articles about the Cold Case Project and Adoptions by Same Sex Couples provide interesting insights into less-frequently addressed issues. I hope you'll enjoy these articles, as well as the general information, and find it insightful and useful to your practice. Thanks, as always to our Editor, Tonya Boga, who welcomes anyone to contact her to volunteer to serve on the Editorial Board or to submit an article for publication.

## ANNUAL MEETING:

The Section will hold an Annual Meeting on Jan. 30, at 11:30 a.m. at the Bar Center. All members are urged to attend. This meeting will be held during the lunch hour of our annual January CLE, this year entitled, "Hang On! Laws Impacting Children are Changing Fast." Please come to the meeting whether you plan to attend the CLE or not. Feel free to bring your lunch, or, if you notify me at least 2 days ahead of time, we will have a box lunch available for you to purchase at a minimal cost.

## MEMBERSHIP:

One month into our second year, we already have 330 members, exceeding last years' membership level! Thank you all for your continued support.

## ACTIVITIES OF THE QUARTER:

This quarter has been busy and has offered many opportunities for growth of the section.

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## WEBINAR ON SCHOOL DISCIPLINE ISSUES

Beth Morris of Harben, Hartley & Hawkins, and Curry Hitchens of Georgia Legal Services presented an hour-and-a-half webinar on Oct. 24, 2013, on school discipline issues. A good question and answer session following the presentation added vitality to the webinar.

## EXPEDITED JUVENILE COURT APPEALS

This committee continues to study the feasibility of various ways to expedite the appeals of Juvenile Court Orders. Anyone interested in assisting with this work should talk to Karlise Grier or me for further information.

## CO-SPONSORSHIP OF CLE TRAINING ON NEW JUVENILE CODE

The Section continued to co-sponsor training on the New Juvenile Code with the Barton Child Law and Policy Center. Early fall sessions on Delinquency and CHINS held at Emory and broadcast through YouTube, reached a wide-range of Juvenile Court practitioners throughout Georgia. Many members of the Section presented segments of a CLE program entitled "Georgia's New Juvenile Code" on Nov. 14, 2013, at the Bar Center to provide additional and more specific information for practitioners. Please contact ICLE in Georgia for access to the course materials.

## GEORGIA BAR JOURNAL ARTICLE ON NEW JUVENILE CODE

The Section's article on the New Juvenile Code was not only published, but was also the Cover Page, of the December, 2013 issue of the Georgia Bar Journal, just in time for implementation of the law Jan. 1.

## WE WANT AND NEED YOUR HELP!

Thank you all for your continued interest and support of the section. Please try to attend the Annual Meeting on Jan. 30. If you want lunch, but are not going to attend the CLE Program, please email me at [nvaughan@hallcounty.org](mailto:nvaughan@hallcounty.org). We need your support and ideas about topics for upcoming newsletter articles, webinars, and CLE offerings. And we need to meet each other and make connections to strengthen the section and our practices. We hope to see you there.

The opinions expressed within *Kids Matter* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the State Bar, the Child Protection and Advocacy Section, the Section's executive committee or the editor.

# Georgia Juvenile Justice Reform:

## *Why We Must Reform Using Evidence-Based Practices.*

By Avery D. Niles, Commissioner, Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice

*"I hope that, years from now, my cumulative work with the legislature and others on justice reform will prove to be one of the rocks in my administration's Stonehenge, standing the test of time."*  
Nathan Deal, Governor of Georgia, May, 2013.

These words from Gov. Nathan Deal set the stage for historical and unprecedented changes for Georgia's Juvenile Justice System. Through the work and recommendations of Deal, Georgia Legislators and the Special Council on Criminal Justice Reform, HB 242 was passed; changing the course of juvenile justice forever. The passage of this House Bill provides Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) an awesome challenge and opportunity to change the way the other states will view Juvenile Justice in Georgia. In fiscal 2013, the Department of Juvenile Justice was appropriated \$300 million, nearly two-thirds of which was used to operate secure residential facilities at an average annual cost of approximately \$90,000 per bed. Despite such high expenditures, more than 65 percent of youth released from

youth development campuses, the state's secure placement facilities, are re-adjudicated delinquent or convicted of a criminal offense within three years of release, a rate that has increased since 2003. These statistics alone, provide the perfect platform for our agency to determine "how and why we must reform our system using evidence-based practices."

### *Understanding Juvenile Justice Reform*

As citizens of Georgia seek to understand HB 242-Juvenile Justice Reform, one must understand these new ways of dealing with juvenile crimes in no way jeopardize or weaken the agency's goal of providing public safety. The safety of Georgia's citizens is still the top priority of Deal and the Department of Juvenile Justice. "Safety is first." The law has a twofold goal of increasing public safety by focusing out-of-home facilities on higher risk, serious offenders and reducing recidivism by strengthening evidence-based community supervision and programs. Specific recommendations include creating a two-tier system for designated felonies, prohibiting detention of status offenders and certain misdemeanants, mandating the use of validated risk and needs assessment and detention assessment instruments prior to disposition, and a series of administrative and infrastructure changes to reinforce a performance-based system. HB 242 mandates that there is collection of specific data to enhance system accountability and monitoring of performance by the courts and juvenile justice agency. Finally, the HB 242 prescribes a method for implementing a reinvestment strategy to incentivize local jurisdictions to develop and support evidence based programs to serve children in the local community, rather than committing them to state custody. This is a win-win for Georgia's juvenile justice. The overall spirit of this reform is take the opportunity to invest in some of Georgia's most troubled young people, who still must be seen as some of the least of them. We must seek evidence-based programs and practice that will turn their lives around and give them the opportunity to be productive Georgians.

### *Why Evidence-Based Practices in Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice?*

The passage of House Bill 242 has provided a keen reality check for the Department of Juvenile Justice as we examine how we deliver services to juveniles entrusted in our care. Numerous bodies of research have echoed our sentiment that resources must be devoted to appropriate assessment of the high risk juvenile we will serve. As we solicited the advice and recommendations from national experts and current research data, we have come to realize our focal points must be on programs that focus on substance abuse, violence prevention and intervention, mental health, academic, residential stability and family history and relationships. National experts encourage our agency to look for the best fit of evidence-based programs, focus on reentry of youth into communities and homes, strengthen volunteers appropriate to work with our youth, determine alternative placements and programs and gathering feedback and direction from stakeholders through 360 surveys.



## Evidence-Based Programs

Our agency recently spent time understanding, gathering and working with world-renown, Dr. Mark Lipsey, researcher from the Vanderbilt University's Peabody Institute. Lipsey has conducted a number of studies from which our agency believes we can learn valuable lessons and approaches for guidance. Much attention has been given to his work title "Improving the Effectiveness of Juvenile Justice Programs." Lipsey gave specific guidance to DJJ leadership about the importance of recognizing programs effectiveness on juvenile recidivism. The fact that he provided guidance from his work that resulted from his performance of meta-analysis of 83 studies of interventions with institutionalized juvenile offenders and found that "recidivism effect sizes for the different treatment types were most consistently positive for interpersonal skills interventions and teaching family homes" (<http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesCorrectional.aspx>), provided our agency with specific recommendations for program planning and a framework for improving our strengths and weaknesses related to effective juvenile justice reform. From this work, DJJ has established a unit to oversee the implementation and the administration of programs and access to services. We are coordinating our efforts with our state and local partners to ensure our methodologies are consistent with best practices within a Juvenile Justice setting. It is essential to have the necessary wraparound services available when a youth is released from custody. We are working to ensure we identify all of the assessed risks and to target these risks as we simultaneously address the youth's criminogenic needs. During this process, we will focus on responsive issues/barriers to treatment such as education level, mental health, language barriers and more.

## Reentry of Youth to Communities and Homes

I am convinced that the public's belief of "lock'em up and throw away the key" no longer exists in Georgia. Reentry has been identified as a top priority for Deal and DJJ. We cannot afford to miss our opportunity to offer juveniles life-changing opportunities that will allow "hope and change" upon release. The ultimate outcome is that we either develop good reentry programs for our juveniles now or we will deal with them as adult offenders. Reentry programs are defined as reintegrative services that prepare out-of-home placed juveniles for reentry into the community. A comprehensive reentry process typically begins after sentencing, continues through incarceration and into the period of release back to the community." (<http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesCorrectional.aspx>).

Our agency believes reentry services and aftercare programs for youth who are exiting custody can and will reduce recidivism. As we seek to provide supportive reentry services for youth in secured and community care our goals will include designing a comprehensive process that will improve family relationships, reintegrate youth into school, offer independent life skills, build resilient positive youth development to divert juveniles from harm and problematic behaviors.

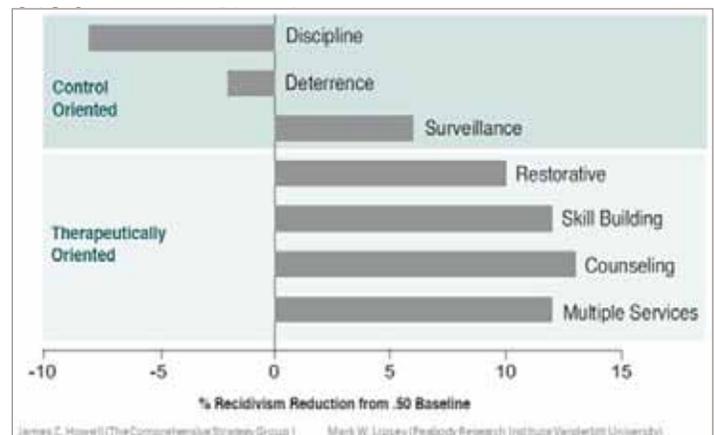
## Volunteers

As we move HB 242 forward, the expectation for our agency is to develop community partnerships that will support the efforts that begin while the child is in custody. These volunteer programs must include; but not be limited to; education, mentorships, faith based connections and civic groups. The community has a vested interest in the success of the youth because if they deal with issues that impact recidivism, it will allow for safer communities and more productive citizens. Our agency

is aggressively seeking partnerships with individuals and/or group of individuals who will help us offer the youth under our supervision hope and change through positive and consistent mentorships.

## Alternative Placements and Programs

Alternative placements and programs are highly important and necessary as we focus on how we address the needs of our offenders. This is not unique to Georgia as a goal for juvenile justice reform. It is advantageous for us to address issues in a community setting versus in secure confinement. HB 242 will require and mandate alternative placements and programs for our youthful offenders. Decisions concerning certain program placements of youth under supervision have to begin at entry and before exit from our facilities. Even though secure confinement seems appealing to some, research reflects a very different opinion to its effectiveness and ultimate outcome. Research gives clear evidence that discipline and deterrence alone do not have an impact on recidivism. The chart below demonstrates our agency's urgency in finding alternative placements and programs.



James C. Howell (The Comprehensive Strategy Group) Mark W. Lipsey (Peabody Research Institute Vanderbilt University)

## Conclusion

Finally, our goal is to continue working with our public and private partners to make Georgia safer and our children more prosperous. This is the forefront of our work. HB 242 will guide us in the right direction for change. Our commitment to proper implementation of HB 242 is imperative for our agency. It is the expectation of the citizens of Georgia that we reform our juvenile justice system. Our commitment to change in our judicial system will be unwavering. We are committed as an agency and as citizens of Georgia. The Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice is poised to become the national model for youth success.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CONTRIBUTE ARTICLES TO NEWSLETTER OR HAVE ANY IDEAS OR CONTENT SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE ISSUES, PLEASE CONTACT TONYA@GREATBEGINNINGSTALKING.US

# Adoptions by Same Sex Couples in Georgia

By Karlise Yvette Grier

Georgia constitutional and statutory laws do not specifically authorize or forbid adoptions by same-sex couples. "There is not any appellate opinion addressing same-sex adoptions in Georgia, even though they have been permitted at the trial court level in certain counties." *Wheeler v. Wheeler*, 281 Ga. 838, 642 S.E.2d 103 (Ga. 2007). Historically in Georgia, on a case-by-case basis, some superior court judges have permitted same-sex couples to adopt children, pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 19-8-6 (1999), which is generally known as the "step-parent" adoption statute. Code section 19-8-6 permits, under specified circumstances, the spouse of either parent to adopt a child whose legal father and legal mother are both living but are not still married. O.C.G.A. § 19-8-6 (a)(1). Code section 19-8-6 also permits, under specified circumstances, the spouse of a parent to adopt the child if the child has only one parent still living. O.C.G.A. § 19-8-6 (a)(2). In what is known as second-parent adoption cases, some Georgia judges, pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 19-8-6, have permitted the same-sex partner of a child's legal parent to adopt the child without terminating the parental rights of the child's legal parent.

On one occasion, the Supreme Court of Georgia had the opportunity to consider the validity of adoptions by same-sex couples in Georgia, and the Supreme Court – without a written opinion – declined to do so. See *Wheeler*, 281 Ga. at 838. Justice Carly, in a dissenting opinion joined by Justice Melton, stated: "I am . . . at a loss to comprehend why the majority would deny the petition for certiorari in this case of gravity and public importance, which also presents an issue of first impression." *Id.* In his dissenting opinion in *Wheeler*, Justice Carly discussed the situation faced by same-sex couples in Georgia who decide to proceed with a second-parent adoption. As Justice Carly explained:

*Before a trial court may find "that a second parent adoption is in a child's best interests, it must first determine whether it has the power to grant such an adoption under the existing adoption statutes." [Cit.] "Since adoption is a right which did not exist at common law, and is statutory in nature, it must be strictly construed in favor of the natural parents and meticulously*

*followed. [Cits.]... As the trial court recognized, however, the petitioner for adoption in this case has never occupied the status of a stepparent under Georgia law. Under certain conditions, a child who has only one living parent "may be adopted by the spouse of that parent..." [Cits.] However, [the petitioner] is not the spouse of [the child's only one living parent], as "[m]arriages between persons of the same sex are prohibited in this state." OCGA § 19-3-3.1 (a). See also Ga. Const. of 1983, Art. I, Sec. IV, Par. 1 (a) (approved in 2004)[.]"*

In 2012, the Court of Appeals had the opportunity to consider the adoption of a child by person in a same-sex relationship. In *Bates v. Bates*, 317 Ga. App. 339, 730 S.E.2d 482, 486 (2012), the Court of Appeals upheld a second-parent adoption based on the legal theory of res judicata but specifically stated, "We decide nothing in this case about whether Georgia law permits a 'second parent' adoption." *Id.* at 344. Therefore, the law regarding the validity of second-parent adoptions in Georgia remains unclear.

On June 26, 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court in a 5-4 decision in *United States v. Windsor*, 570 U.S. (2013) (Docket No. 12-307, invalidated a section of the Defense of Marriage Act, Pub. L. 104-199, (DOMA) that denied federal benefits to married gays and lesbians. See generally 1 U.S.C. § 7 (ruled unconstitutional in *Windsor*). Nevertheless, the U.S. Supreme Court decision left intact the provisions of DOMA that shields states from having to recognize same-sex marriages from other states. See generally 28 U.S.C. § 1738C (left intact by *Windsor*). Accordingly, in Georgia even if a same-sex couple is legally married in another state, DOMA allows Georgia courts to refuse to recognize one person as the spouse of the other under Georgia law. See, e.g. *Burns v. Burns*, 253 Ga. 600, 560 S.E.2d 47 (2002). See also 28 U.S.C. § 1738C and O.C.G.A. § 19-3-3.1 (1996).

The Court of Appeals in *Burns* affirmed a trial court decision that found the mother in contempt for cohabitating with a female companion. The sole issue in that case was whether the trial court erred in enforcing a consent decree pursuant to a divorce between the parties in which they agreed that no child visitations would occur during any time the party being visited cohabited with or had overnight stays with any adult to whom that party was not legally married or related within the second degree. *Burns*, 253 Ga. at 600. On appeal, the mother contended that she and her female companion were married in the state of Vermont and pursuant to the full faith and credit doctrine they were married in Georgia as well. *Burns*, 253 Ga. at 601. The Georgia Court of Appeals determined that the mother and her companion were not legally married in Vermont, but had only entered into a civil union. Accordingly, the Court of Appeals held that the trial court did not err in its conclusion that the mother's cohabitation with her companion was a violation of a valid visitation order and constituted contempt. *Burns*, 253 Ga. at 601-602.

Practitioners who represent clients in second-parent adoptions should carefully consider Georgia's Rules of Professional Conduct



prior to engaging in the representation of both partners in a second-parent adoption because of the potential conflict of interest inherent in such cases. In particular, Rule 1.7 of the Georgia Rules of Professional Conduct states: "If client informed consent is permissible a lawyer may represent a client notwithstanding a significant risk of material and adverse effect if each affected client or former client gives informed consent, confirmed in writing, to the representation. . . ." (Emphasis supplied). Therefore, in adoptions in which both partners may adopt a child, such as the adoption of a child from the DFCS, it may be the best practice for one attorney to represent the first parent in the agency adoption from the Department and for a different attorney to represent the second parent in the second-parent adoption since the validity of the second-parent adoption remains unclear under Georgia law.

Across the United States and its territories, the debate regarding the validity of second-parent adoptions continues. In February 2013, it was reported that the Supreme Tribunal in Puerto Rico upheld that U.S. territory's ban on adoption by gay and lesbian people in a 5-4 decision. See <http://www.advocate.com/society/law/2013/02/20/puerto-rico-supreme-court-upholds-gay-adoption-ban> (viewed on Dec. 30, 2013). In 2012, a Kansas appellate court ruled that the state does not allow second parent adoptions in a case involving a divorced heterosexual couple. See *In re Adoption of I.M.*, 288 P.3d 864 (Kan. App. 2012). Advocates seeking arguments in support of second-parent adoptions may find legal arguments supporting this position in law review articles such as Suzanne Bryant, *Second Parent Adoption: A Model Brief*, 2 Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy 233 (1995). See also Jason C. Beekman, Note, *Same-Sex Second-Parent Adoption and Intestacy Law: Applying the Sharon S. Model of "Simultaneous" Adoption to Parent-Child Provisions of the Uniform Probate Code*, 96 Cornell L. Rev. 139 (2010).

Because this is an area of law that is quickly evolving, practitioners are encouraged to regularly check for new legal authority across the United States and its territories on second-parent adoption to ensure they are advancing the most current legal arguments to the court about the best interests of the child.

The section will hold an Annual Meeting on Jan. 30, 2014, at 11:30 a.m. at the Bar Center. All members are urged to attend. This meeting will be held during the lunch hour of our annual January CLE.

The State Bar has three offices to serve you.



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# The Cold Case Project:

## Improvement Work in the Child Welfare System

by Michelle Barclay

*"I learned that the world of men as it exists today is a bureaucracy. This is an obvious truth, of course, though it is also one the ignorance of which causes great suffering.*

*But moreover, I discovered, in the only way that a man ever really learns anything important, the real skill that is required to succeed in a bureaucracy. I mean really succeed: do good, make a difference, serve. I discovered the key. This key is not efficiency, or probity, or insight, or wisdom. It is not political cunning, interpersonal skills, raw IQ, loyalty, vision, or any of the qualities that the bureaucratic world calls virtues, and tests for. The key is a certain capacity that underlies all these qualities, rather the way that an ability to breathe and pump blood underlies all thought and action.*

*The underlying bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human. To breathe, so to speak, without air.*

*The key is the ability, whether innate or conditioned, to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be, in a word, unborable.*

*It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish."*

– David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*

The Georgia Cold Case Project is in the middle of its fourth year. It is a joint project of both the executive, Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) and judicial branches, Supreme Court of Georgia Committee on Justice for Children (I4C) and is supported with funding and expertise from Casey Family Programs (the nation's largest operating foundation solely focused on reducing the need for foster care). The project works to

1. find children in the Georgia foster care system who have been in foster care for a long time and who are statistically-predicted to age out of foster care without permanency;
2. have an expert team review these cases and try to change the poor predicted outcome for each child; and
3. make all efforts to learn from the children's cases in order to make systemic improvements.

While changing a possible bad outcome for a child can be quite exciting, the day to day work of the Cold Case Project is not. Over the past four years, the Cold Case teams, mostly made up of lawyers, spend hours and hours carefully reading, recording information and discrepancies in a file, writing up reports, updating spreadsheets, tracking tasks and periodically reporting out to a larger group. This tedious work is what it takes to change and improve systems that, in turn, can improve care and lives.

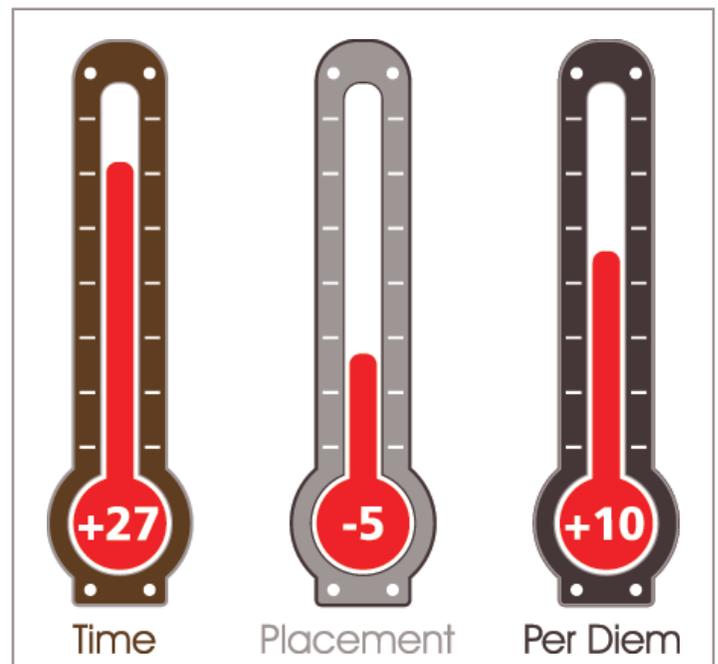
When a committed group of people in Georgia's child welfare system decided to start the Cold Case Project, we looked to the Quality Assurance (QA) teams who work in our nations' hospitals.

These QA teams do constant surveillance and monitoring of hospital infection rates, mistakes and general functioning of the health system. When mistakes are found, a team reviews and either corrects the mistake or works to put processes in place to prevent the mistake or the problem in the future. Hospitals have labeled certain mistakes as "Never Events," which are a list of inexcusable actions in a health care setting, the "kind of mistake that should never happen." Never events still occur in hospitals, but it is the constant QA monitoring (i.e. boring) efforts that are the best hope of preventing and reducing the frequency of these events". Child welfare systems have not regularly had this level of rigor and discipline in checking, double checking and then triple checking the work being done within the system. But we are trying to start now with a team of experts who work the cold case list.

B's case can best illustrate the process of the Cold Case Project. B's records appeared on the Georgia Cold Case list in 2010 at age 16. Of the 7000 children in Georgia's foster care system on any given day, a computer statistical model can easily find the children who appear to be in real trouble for aging out without permanency. The current predictive factors, these have changed over time, are:

1. length of time in care (longer=colder)
2. placement type (the more institutional=colder);and
3. per diem rate (high per diem=colder).

These factors alone to do not predict cold cases, it is the combination of these 3 factors together that are highly predictive of a child's case being cold.



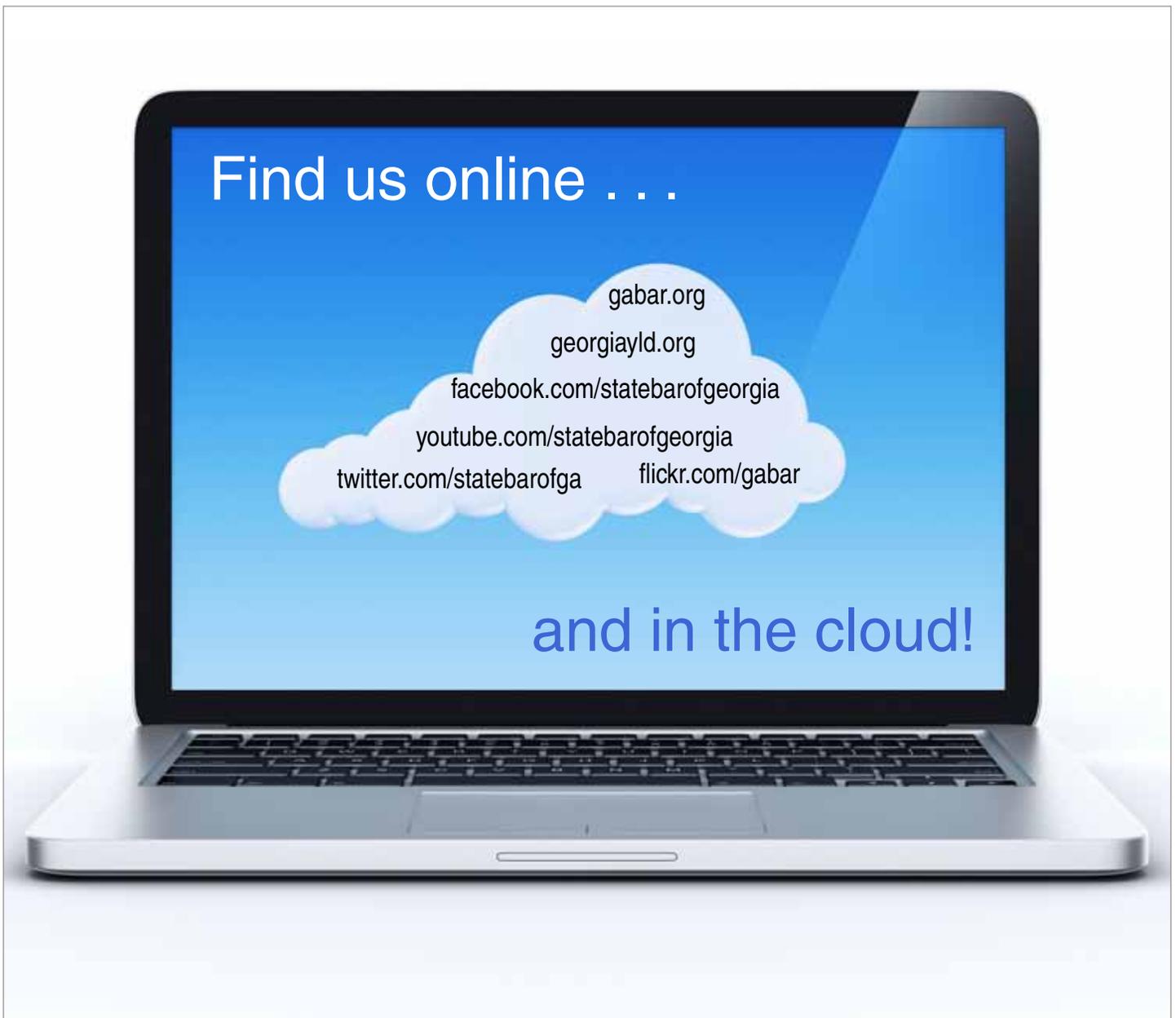
B was on the list because his adoptive parents abandoned him at the age of 11 and he had spent seven years in a group home at a fairly high per diem with no human connections outside of the employees of the child welfare system. After B's large case file was reviewed, summarized and conferenced, consensus was reached that B's original adoptive file should be opened (it had occurred in another state) to see what had happened to B's biological family. The effort to open B's file took over seven months, with legal hurdles and objections, which appeared to go beyond the law's requirements for opening an adoption file. Once B's biological parents were found, along with a big network of extended family, B's mother immediately got in touch with B and today they are building a relationship. B's case manager said B is doing better just by knowing his mother, his family and his human connections, stating recently, "I can see now that B really needed to belong to somebody in order to feel better."

Our goal for the CCP is that a case like B's will become a "never event" for our child welfare system. No child should wait seven years for our child welfare system to help him find permanent human

connections. There are many lessons in B's case that teach us how to prevent similar cases as well as better respond to adoption disruptions, which are rare events, and yet they do happen. By Dec. 30, 2013, 250 children's cases from the cold case list will be reviewed and revived in Georgia. We know we need to catch these cases earlier than seven years and that is our plan for the future, to review not only cold cases but cool cases. It is not rocket science nor is it special work. It is just hours and hours of not exciting, but extremely important, quality assurance monitoring, attention to detail, reviewing and checking back and back and back. These are the steps that will get our systems to a place where children's needs are better served. Our next step for CCP is to institutionalize the work so it will keep going and will no longer be a special project, but just part of routine business.

For annual reports on the Cold Case Project, see: [www.gajusticeforchildren.org](http://www.gajusticeforchildren.org)

For an article about other states replicating the Cold Case Project, see [http://www.youthtoday.org/view\\_article.cfm?article\\_id=5965](http://www.youthtoday.org/view_article.cfm?article_id=5965)



# New Statewide Centralized Intake Communication Center for Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

by Sharon L. Hill, Ph.D., Director, Division of Family and Children Services

Ensuring the safety and well-being of vulnerable children is the most critical mission of the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS). On average, DFCS receives approximately 70,000 reports of abuse and neglect of children each year. This represents over 100,000 children who are suspected of being maltreated. The majority of reports are made by mandated reporters such as schools, law enforcement, medical professionals, etc. These reports are taken and assessed by Child Protective Services (CPS) intake staff who determine whether the reports are screened in, indicating that based on information from the reporter, there is an allegation of maltreatment. Once screened in, the reports are then sent to other CPS staff to either investigate the allegations or provide Family Support Services. Cases in which there are potential safety concerns to the child are investigated with the first face-to-face contact required within 24 hours of receipt of the report. Family Support Services are provided to families in which there is an allegation of maltreatment; however, the child is safe in their current living environment. If there are no allegations of maltreatment, the case is screened out but could be referred for community services.

In an effort to improve the uniformity, standardization and assessment of these critical reports, DFCS has begun the process of implementing a 24/7, statewide centralized intake communication center for reporting possible abuse and neglect of children. DFCS began implementation in Sept. 2013 and is scheduled to have the system operational statewide by spring 2014.

The statewide Centralized Intake replaces a local county-based system in which reports are made to individual county offices. In this new system, there will be one number, 1-855-GA CHILD to make abuse/neglect reports. The Center will be staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week (including holidays) by trained child welfare staff located across the state.

DFCS strongly believes that a Centralized Intake system will enhance Georgia's ability to achieve its mission of protecting vulnerable children because of a number of potential benefits. The move from a county-based child abuse/neglect reporting system to a statewide centralized one provides an opportunity for DFCS to:

- Gain uniformity and consistency in the application of child welfare policy and practice throughout the state. Since all intake staff will be receiving training, oversight and supervision from one management team, there will be a greater opportunity for a standard way of assessing reports of abuse and neglect. One goal of centralized intake is to ensure consistent interpretation of what constitutes child maltreatment across the state, rather than each county interpreting the abuse and neglect allegations in their own way. Quite often, these different interpretations result in an allegation being screened in and viewed as abuse or neglect in one county but screened out in another.
- Dedicate child welfare staff to function exclusively as intake workers and only be responsible for receiving and assessing reports of abuse/neglect. In a county based system, many child welfare staff performing the intake function often have other duties based on the needs of the local office. Now, all staff functioning as intake workers will receive training in how to interview reporters in order to obtain the best information possible in order to make a decision about whether the report should be screened in or screened out. This allows them the ability to become specialists or subject matter experts in this critical area of Child Welfare. For many years now, States have recognized that it is imperative to ensure individuals responding to reports of abuse/neglect be highly trained and highly skilled in order to ensure the best and most appropriate decision about the safety of the child is made.
- Utilize more advanced telecommunication technology to improve the handling of reports of abuse/neglect. All intake staff will be receiving calls on one telecommunication platform. When a call comes in, the system is searching for the next available agent to respond to the call. This system allows DFCS to track the calls as they come in and provide metrics such as total calls each day, length of time the caller had to wait before an agent responded, length of time spent on the call, and number of calls abandoned (ones in which the reporter hung up prior to the call being answered). In addition, Centralized Intake provides the ability for management staff to monitor calls in real time to ensure they are being handled properly as well as improve the skills of our intake staff.



- Develop Virtual Call Centers throughout the State. Through Centralized Intake, DFCS staff can continue to work in offices located throughout the State while still being connected to the same telecommunications platform. The virtual capacity also includes the ability for staff to work from home and respond to calls. We have found this to be significant for overnight work as well as weekends and holidays. Because the virtual capacity allows staff to work from any location, they would be able to continue to work even in the event there are system outages or other problems in a particular DFCS office.
- Standardize the training, mentoring, and supervision of intake staff. As stated above, all child welfare intake staff will receive the same initial and ongoing trainings based on curriculum developed with the assistance of the Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center and the National Resource Center for Child Protective Services. This curriculum includes a standard set of questions and statements that the intake staff must have a response to in order to appropriately assess the direction the report should take, such as screen in versus screen out, or investigation versus Family Support Services. Reporters should now expect calls to be lengthier through this process because more questions will need to be asked and responded to prior to completing the call. Again, this is to ensure DFCS has the best information possible to make decisions regarding the safety of children in Georgia.
- Enhance the quality assurance and case review process to better assess DFCS outcomes in the area of child safety. A robust quality assurance process is an integral part of assessing the effectiveness of any program or process. The technology available allows quality assurance staff the ability to monitor calls in real time and assess the workers' performance on each monitored call. Using quality assurance information, appropriate plans for staff improvements can be made when necessary.

DFCS can now develop performance metrics, such as quality of interview between intake staff and reporter; caller hold times, rate of abandoned calls (those in which reporter hung up before intake staff answered the phone), etc. These kinds of metrics are not possible under a county-based system.

In Sept. 2011, Georgia created a statewide After Hours Call Center to improve the receipt of reports after 5 p.m. weekdays after the local offices closed until 8 a.m. when offices reopened, on weekends and holidays. The number of reports received during those times increased exponentially which validated the need to move to this system.

In the two and a half months since DFCS began implementation of the statewide 24/7 centralized intake center, the number of reports taken as well as the number of reports assigned for investigations have increased from previous years during this time frame.

The implementation of the Centralized Intake System has met with a number of challenges which have become lessons learned and led to strategies to mitigate potential risks. There has been a system outage, telephone and computer, which inhibited our ability to respond to calls in a timely manner. DFCS has developed contingency plans as well as purchased additional equipment to ensure the system continues to operate in the event of outages or other emergencies that may be confined to a particular location. As our stakeholders and the public became aware of the Centralized Center, the call volume increased. In addition, there was heavy media coverage of two horrific child deaths at the hands of parents and caretakers which also led to more calls. DFCS is hiring additional intake staff and supervisors to work in the Centralized Intake Unit and anticipates they will be on board by early Spring.

DFCS is firmly grounded in the belief that all children have the right to be safe, healthy, educated, nurtured, and protected. Therefore, we are committed to establishing policies, practices and systems that bring the greatest potential to realize that belief. Georgia's children deserve nothing less than our best.

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