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### Making the Hard Choices: Forging a New Juvenile Code for Georgia

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Georgia's juvenile code is the legal framework for how we treat our state's abused, neglected, delinquent, mentally ill, and uncontrollable children. The fact is that this framework is as rusty and obsolete as my grandfather's mule-drawn hay rake, the one he abandoned in an old cow pasture 80 years ago and that now is hemmed in by a grove of trees.

For several years now our state's juvenile court judges, child advocates, attorneys, and legislators have all recognized our need for a new juvenile code that reflects the many changes that have occurred in our country since the last juvenile code was enacted over 40 years ago. We have learned much in four decades about how children develop, what families need to thrive, and how best to turn troubled children into productive and responsible adults.

We have set up revision commissions, study committees, and round tables to discuss how best to take this body of law and reform it. While well-intentioned, these efforts have met with little success. Instead, it seems, the final results largely have been calls for further study and further research.

The situation calls to mind that of Will Barrett, the talented underachieving character in one of my favorite Walker Percy novels, *The Last Gentleman*. Barrett has so many options that he's frozen into inaction. As the novel opens, we find him neglecting his real talents and working as a janitor in a New York City department store. As Percy describes him, Will "had to know everything before he could do anything."

Like Will Barrett, our juvenile court judges and child welfare attorneys are making do with what we have because we all dread the fractious policy debates and hard policy, structure, and fiscal choices required to enact a fresh, modern juvenile code. The minute one revision is suggested, someone will raise questions about it. As experience shows, making policy and legislative changes that affect children is time-consuming, stressful, and emotionally draining. But someone has to get the ball rolling.

Thankfully, we have a new coalition of child advocacy groups who are willing to face the challenge head-on. Last week, after several years of hard work by members of the State Bar's Younger Lawyers Division, a proposed model juvenile code for Georgia was unveiled. This model code seeks to clarify our current law and proposes many new policies affecting the rights of our children and our responsibilities to them.

Over the next few months, an organization named JustGeorgia -- a coalition of child advocates from the Georgia Appleseed Foundation, Voices for Georgia's Children, and Emory's Barton Child Law and Policy Clinic -- will be using that model code as a springboard for debate on the structure of our child welfare system. Just what rights should our abused, neglected, and troubled children have? How should we protect them? What are our responsibilities to treat them and to assist their families in caring for them?

Over the past week, I have been reading through the proposed model code. The amount of work that has gone into this project is tremendous, and its primary authors -- Soledad McGrath, Professor Lucy McGough, and Judge Velma Tilley -- deserve our heartfelt thanks. In my reading, there have been times when I've thought, "Why didn't we think of that before?" At other times I've scratched my head and said, "I'm not sure how well that idea will go over." But whether its provisions delight you or infuriate you, this model code is a document that will help guide our conversations as we have the tough policy and legislative debates we must have if we are ever to create a modern, cohesive set of law for our state's child welfare system.

In *The Last Gentleman*, Will Barrett finally overcomes the fears that paralyze him, and he finally learns that life is about making choices. As another character in the novel tells him, "It is better to do something than do nothing." The drafters of this model code know the time for study and debate has ended. It is now time to make the choices that will ultimately decide how we treat children in this state. It's time to do something.

JustGeorgia is seeking your input on the proposed model code. You can read the proposals, and learn more about the coalition's work, at [www.justgeorgia.org](http://www.justgeorgia.org). Please take the time to join the debate. And if you'd like to know more about how you can help Georgia's abused and neglected children, visit our website at [www.gachildadvocate.org](http://www.gachildadvocate.org).