



Office of the Child Advocate

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Governor Consolidates Child Welfare Agencies

By Tom C. Rawlings
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Governor Perdue this week announced a legislative initiative designed to make our child-serving agencies work more effectively and efficiently, and the Office of the Child Advocate is proud to be a part of that initiative.

Legislative approval of the Children and Family Services Strengthening Act of 2008 will solidify the Governor's plans to bring the Office of Child Advocate (OCA), the Office of Child Fatality Review (OCFR), the Children and Youth Coordinating Council (CYCC), and the Children's Trust Fund Commission (CTCF) under one roof. OCA and OCFR will form a single agency dedicated to collecting data and research designed to prevent child abuse and child injury. That agency will share office space with the combined CTFC and CYCC, which will use that data to target a continuum of funding for children at risk of abuse and delinquency, from infancy through adolescence.

"By combining the expertise of our staff and citizen boards, we will now be able to target the entire family cycle, from the at-risk infant to the troubled teen," said Jen Bennecke, who will serve as Executive Director of the newly created funding organization to be called the Governor's Office for Children and Families (GOCF). The bill has already met with approval from legislative leaders whose focus is child welfare and families.

So what can a mere restructuring of some agencies really do to help children? The answer is that the right structure can create accountability by making it clear to state child welfare officials that they are responsible for all the state's children in need. When the person who is collecting the data on child injury knows the data may be used to fund a prevention program, he or she is more likely to make sure the data is useful and accurate.

Similarly, by enabling prevention funders to look at the entire spectrum of at-risk children, you assure they don't focus merely on the young child or the delinquent teen. The neglected toddler is the *same* child likely to become the disruptive middle schooler or the troubled adolescent. If life doesn't separate these children into categories, why should the state?

At OCA, we are looking forward to combining our staff skills and resources with those of the Office of Child Fatality Review. Under the direction of Eva Pattillo, OCFR has made great strides in ensuring that county- and state-level fatality review panels are evaluating consistently the causes of death of children in Georgia. OCFR has been able to compile excellent data on those causes. We will be able to combine that data with our own inquiries into the causes of negative outcomes for children involved with the child protective services system. And together, we will be able to paint a better picture for policymakers and our friends at GOCF as to the causes of and, especially, potential effective approaches to prevent child injury, abuse, and death.

Additionally, the Office of Child Fatality Review and OCA have very similar missions of providing programs to evaluate child injury cases. The two agencies are already partners in the annual "Building Successful Teams" conference, at which over 700 law enforcement and child protective services experts from around the state learn the latest information and research that will enable them to better prevent, investigate, and prosecute child abuse. Our other educational and training programs for investigating child abuse, such as OCA's "Finding Words" seminars and OCFR's Child Fatality Investigation Program, will complement each other.

Perhaps most importantly, Governor Perdue's initiative will make the job of local child advocacy professionals and organizations easier. As one District Attorney told me recently, he is required to deal with all four of these agencies and will appreciate the chance to have more of a "one-stop shop." The reform will also help create cohesive, coordinated planning for child abuse prevention at the state and local levels, says Pam Brown, Program Director of Prevent Child Abuse Georgia.

Everyone knows the old joke about the statements one can never trust, including "The check's in the mail." One of those statements, of course, is: "I'm with the government, and I'm here to help you." But in truth, state government can be a help to local communities and volunteer organizations as they plan for, fund, and implement effective programs to improve the lives of at-risk children and families. In the area of children's services, Governor Perdue's initiative brings those state-level planning, funding, and implementation resources together so that local communities will have better access to these services.

If you'd like to know more about this initiative, contact us at www.gachildadvocate.org. Or visit the websites of the other agencies with which we'll soon be working more closely:

- Children and Youth Coordinating Council: www.cycc.state.ga.us
- Child Fatality Review: www.gacfr.dhr.georgia.gov
- Children's Trust Fund Commission: www.gactfc.com

Tom Rawlings, Georgia's Child Advocate for the Protection of Children, was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to assure quality and efficiency in Georgia's child protective systems. The Office of Child Advocate is a resource for those interested in the welfare of our state's neglected and abused children. Tom can be reached through the OCA website at www.gachildadvocate.org