



Office of the Child Advocate

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Justice for Children Summits

By: Tom C. Rawlings, Director

Over the past 18 months, the Office of Child Advocate has had the privilege of partnering with the Supreme Court's Committee on Justice for Children in facilitating "Justice for Children Summits" around our state. State DFCS is also a partner for these summits. This program has proved to be an excellent way for local juvenile courts, child welfare agencies, attorneys, and stakeholders to determine just how well the system is working for abused and neglected children and their families.

For each summit, the local juvenile court judge invites a list of participants that encompass all juvenile court stakeholders involved in deprivation cases. Regular participants at these summits include DFCS staff at all levels, juvenile court judges, service providers, Court-Appointed Special Advocates, and attorneys who represent parents, children, and DFCS. Other stakeholders such as foster parents, educators, clergy, elected officials, and other community service and support agencies also attend to learn more about how they can improve their local child welfare system.

Summits are designed to be interactive. The goal is to highlight areas of strength in particular jurisdiction and tackle areas of challenge in practice, policy and relationships in order to focus improvement efforts. Participants acquire substantive knowledge and forge stronger relationships and networks with their colleagues and community partners.

In 2007, the Committee on Justice for Children sponsored 12 summits reaching stakeholders in 30 counties. This year, 9 more are either scheduled or have already been held. Typical of the local reaction is that of Judge Mark Murphy, juvenile court judge for the Tallapoosa Circuit in West Georgia. "It's not often that I attend a day long seminar where I learn new things from each speaker and come away with remarkable insight. This program proved to be an exception," Judge Murphy stated. "We were able to see specifically the areas where we are doing well as a community. We also saw other areas of concern and were able to make concrete plans to move forward to address these areas."

At each summit, speakers give substantive presentations on social work and legal topics. The participants review the actual performance data showing the outcomes and trends for both the court and the local child welfare agencies. The goal is to spur the local participants to work more closely together on areas that need improvement. After the Summit is over, the jurisdiction will continue to receive data updates each six months to help the participants implement their action plans, track their progress, and further refine their strategies and goals for improvement.

One key to the success of these summits is the judicial leadership provided by Supreme Court Chief Justice Leah Ward Sears and Justice Harris P. Hines, who always offer the stakeholders their welcome and their appreciation for the work being done at the local level.

The Committee on Justice for Children is financed through a federal grant designed to improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for abused and neglected children involved with the juvenile courts. The Committee on Justice for Children plans to conduct a Summit in each of the state's 46 judicial circuits within the next four years.

These summits, and the successes they are producing, further emphasize that keeping our children safe and sound in Georgia is not just a job for one agency, or one branch of government. Rather, it requires coordination among the Courts, the Legislature, and the Executive branch, and it requires that each player work hard to understand both the goals and the limitations of the others. Thanks to the leadership of the Supreme Court and the state's many juvenile court judges, these summits are helping create that coordination and understanding on the local level.

If you'd like to know more about the work of the Committee on Justice for Children visit www.gajusticeforchildren.org. Many of the statistics presented in these summits use come from safety and permanency data collected by state DFCS and submitted to the federal government. To have a summit in your circuit, please contact the Justice for Children Training Coordinator, Regina Roberts at robertr@gaoc.us. You can review this safety and permanency data at <http://www.fosteringcourtimprovement.org/>. Click on "Georgia" under the "state websites" section.

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 the 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