



Office of the Child Advocate

3312 Northside Drive, Suite D-250
Macon, GA 31210

478-757-2661 or 1-800-254-2064
www.gachildadvocate.org



First Lady's Children's Cabinet: Providing Leadership for Child Welfare

By Tom C. Rawlings
State Child Advocate for the Protection of Children

Sometimes – just sometimes – the solution to the difficult problems of our state is *not* a new law, or a new policy, or new funding. Sometimes the solution can be found simply by making people sit down with each other and address the problem.

That revelation came to me yesterday as I was sitting in a meeting of the First Lady's Children's Cabinet. Georgia's First Lady, Mary Perdue, created the cabinet in 2004 to ensure our state agencies are working together to serve the needs of our state's children. The heads of all the state agencies whose work affects children meet regularly to coordinate policies and practices across agencies and to cooperate on filling the gaps in our child welfare system.

A simple idea: get folks with similar responsibilities to talk to one another.

The issue in front of us was coordinating behavioral health services for children in the community, both to help them obtain residential therapy when necessary and to help transition them back to their homes when appropriate. These are the children who are often simultaneously involved with DFCS, juvenile justice, mental health, and special education. Their mental illnesses and severe emotional disturbances may be leading them down the path to therapeutic residential treatment or juvenile detention, or they may already have been down that path and need to come back home while continuing to receive care.

As I've written in this column before, this coordinating task is done quite well by KidsNet and similar "systems of care" models we have in some parts of the state. KidsNet brings together all the local agencies that serve these children and gets them working together to see what services children with behavioral health issues need and how best to deliver those services.

The question Mrs. Perdue asked us to consider: Is there a way to replicate that system of care across the state, so that children from Chickamauga to St. Mary's can benefit?

After being in child welfare for eight years and state government the last year, I had some vague expectations of what solutions might be proposed: new laws, new policies, or new funding. I was wrong.

As it turns out, we already have the legal and policy structure in place to make this system of care model work for every county in the state. As far back as 1990, the Legislature mandated that local interagency planning teams with representatives from child protective services, juvenile justice, special education, the courts, public health, mental health, and others meet regularly to staff cases involving children with severe behavioral issues and develop cross-agency treatment plans for those children. For those interested, the legal mandate for these teams is found at OCGA § 49-5-220 *et seq.* Some form of these local committees has been in existence since the early 1970s, when they were originally known as "troubled children committees." When I was on the juvenile court bench, we called them "MATCH" committees.

Money is not the issue, either. These interagency planning teams are staffed by those who already have a responsibility to make the system work for these most troubled children. So what's the missing element? If we already have the laws and the personnel in place, why aren't these local interagency panels working well everywhere? Why did Mrs. Perdue need her children's cabinet to sit down and address the issue?

The answer is that even when you have the law on your side and the personnel in place, what you still have is government. And as President Reagan once quipped, "Government is like a baby: an alimentary canal with a big appetite at one end and no sense of responsibility at the other."

For government to have that sense of responsibility requires leadership, and sometimes leadership means making people sit down and pay serious attention to an issue. Mrs. Perdue, through the Children's Cabinet, is providing that leadership. Over the coming months, she will be putting her authority behind an effort to train, empower, and reinvigorate the local interagency panels. Her leadership will help create what all children with behavioral issues should have: a coordinated system of care in which local public servants, child advocacy groups, and families work together to ensure children receive the treatment they need.

Whether it's convening a meeting of agency heads or bringing local communities together around the same table, what Mrs. Perdue is providing is leadership. And more than new laws, new policies, or new money, that's the one thing our child welfare system needs most.

For more on the First Lady's Children's Cabinet, visit www.georgia-kids.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