



The AdvOCAtE

Georgia Office of the Child Advocate

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A Message from the *Child Advocate*

Jerry Bruce, Director | Georgia Office of the Child Advocate

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the inaugural edition of **The AdvOCate**. For those who may be less familiar with the Georgia Office of the Child Advocate, or with my role as its director, I would like to begin by offering a brief introduction. I assumed the role of Georgia's Child Advocate in June 2021 after more than 25 years working across child welfare, juvenile justice, and the courts. My professional experience includes service as a juvenile court judge, Special Assistant Attorney General for the Division of Family and Children Services, and Director of Georgia's Court Improvement Program. In each of those roles, one conclusion has remained consistent: children are best served when systems are coordinated, transparent, and accountable for how decisions are made.

The Georgia Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) exists to reinforce that standard. Established by the General Assembly in 2000, OCA provides independent oversight of persons, organizations, and agencies responsible for providing services to or caring for children who are victims of child abuse and neglect or whose domestic situation requires intervention by the state. We receive and review complaints, conduct investigations when appropriate, identify trends across cases and jurisdictions, and offer recommendations to strengthen policy and practice. We also support statewide child abuse protocols and training, including multidisciplinary dependency training designed to improve decision-making from removal through permanency.

I want to make clear that oversight is not about assigning fault. It is about ensuring systems perform as well as possible and adjusting when they do not. That is why OCA prioritizes being accessible and responsive. Anyone who desires to raise concerns or request assistance regarding children who are or have been involved with our child protective and child welfare agencies may contact our office through our online [Request for Assistance or Investigation portal](#), by phone, or by mail. Each submission is reviewed and screened by trained staff to determine what, if any, investigation is needed. For more on the OCA Complaints and Investigation process, see the OCA 101 section below.

A large part of our work relies on accurate, meaningful, and robust data collection and analysis. To that end, we partner regularly with courts, state agencies, and other stakeholders to ensure that our systems deliver policy and services based on evidence and trends to ensure the best outcomes for kids and families. In fact, in 2024 the General Assembly passed [Senate Bill 401](#) into law, strengthening statewide juvenile court data reporting in dependency cases involving foster care. I advocated for this legislation and worked on its drafting. Since its passage, juvenile courts have begun submitting standardized case data to the Administrative Office of the Courts for aggregation and reporting. OCA is working with that Office to review the data as it comes in and to assess how it can best inform oversight, policy discussions, and system improvement. More consistent data helps identify where statutory timelines are being met, and where additional attention, support, or problem-solving may be needed.

The OCA commitment to fact, clarity, improvement, and children also shapes how we engage with partners and how we approach our broader oversight responsibilities. The AdvOCate, this quarterly newsletter, is intended to expand such conversations because this work demands the most honest and effective collaboration we can offer. So, whether you are a lawmaker, commissioner, agency staff, provider, or simply an interested member of the child-wellbeing community, I look forward to working together to make sure that Georgia's kids have the safety, care and happiness that they deserve.

I am, as always, at your service.



Jerry Bruce, Director
Georgia Office of the Child Advocate



SB 401 (2024)

Strengthening Juvenile Court Data Reporting in Georgia

In 2024, the Georgia General Assembly enacted Senate Bill 401 to improve the quality, consistency, and availability of juvenile court data in dependency cases involving foster care. The law reflects a shared recognition that timely, reliable information is essential to effective oversight and decision-making on behalf of children.

SB 401 requires juvenile court clerks (or superior court clerks acting in that capacity) to collect and submit standardized data in dependency cases where a child is placed in foster care. Courts submit this information electronically through their local case management systems to the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) for inclusion in a centralized statewide database.

The law specifies key case milestones that must be reported, including a child’s entry into DFCS custody; filing of dependency petitions and case plans; appointment of attorneys and guardians ad litem; dates of required hearings (preliminary protective, adjudication, disposition, review, and permanency); termination of parental rights filings and continuances; and exit from foster care or case closure. Courts must upload this information at least weekly or at the maximum frequency their systems allow.

SB 401 also directs the Administrative Office of the Courts to aggregate the data and submit an annual, de-identified report organized by county to the General Assembly by April 15 each year, beginning in 2025.

These reports are intended to provide lawmakers and system leaders with a clearer statewide picture of dependency case progression.



Since the law took effect on July 1, 2024, implementation has focused on aligning local court practices with the new reporting requirements and establishing regular uploads to the statewide system. Juvenile courts are now submitting standardized data, and the Administrative Office of the Courts has begun reviewing and aggregating the information.

The Georgia Office of the Child Advocate is working with the Administrative Office of the Courts to review incoming data and explore tools (e.g., dashboards) that can help identify trends, monitor statutory timelines, and support problem-solving across jurisdictions. SB 401 moves Georgia closer to ensuring that decisions about children are based on complete, statewide information and made with urgency around permanency.

How the *Office of the Child Advocate* Reviews Complaints

The Georgia Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) receives, screens, and reviews complaints involving children and the child welfare system.

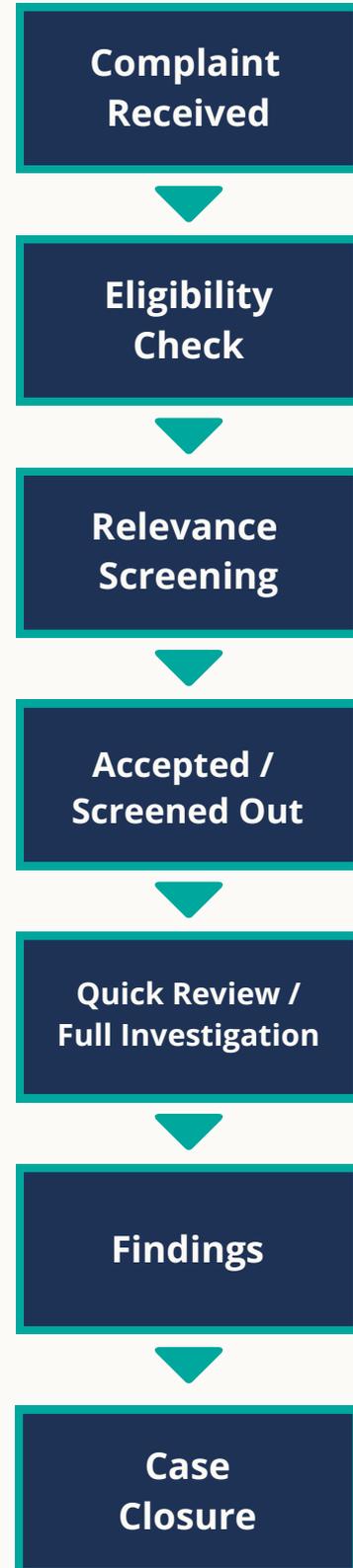
The goal of this process is to ensure that concerns related to child safety, well-being, and permanency are reviewed carefully and consistently.



Important Things to Know About OCA's Role

- OCA is an oversight agency, **not** a first responder.
- OCA does **not** provide direct services.
- OCA does **not** overturn juvenile court decisions
- OCA does **not** have enforcement authority to issue direct orders.
- **OCA's role is investigating, advising, and reporting:** working to solve issues in particular cases and informing agencies, the Governor, and the General Assembly about systemic issues affecting children.

Complaint Review Process



Complaint Intake and Screening

1. How a Complaint Is Received

Complaints may come to OCA in several ways, including:

- Phone calls
- An online complaint form on the OCA website
- Referrals from judges, legislators, or other individuals

Every complaint, regardless of how it is received, is logged and documented in OCA's internal system.

2. Initial Eligibility Check: DFCS Involvement

After a complaint is logged, OCA first determines whether it meets a basic eligibility requirement:

Has the child, child's parents, child's sibling or other caretaker had involvement with the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) within the past five years?

- If **no**, the complaint falls outside OCA's legal jurisdiction and is screened out.
- If **yes**, the complaint moves forward to the next step.

Every complaint begins with intake and a jurisdiction check to determine whether OCA has legal authority to review the concern.

3. Relevance Screening: What OCA Can Review

For complaints that meet the eligibility requirement, OCA next looks at whether the concern relates to one or more of the following areas:

- Child safety
- Child well-being
- Permanency (for example, delays in reunification, adoption, or children remaining in foster care for long periods)
- Quality legal representation or other court-related issues

These areas define OCA's core mission and authority.

If the complaint **does not** relate to these areas:

- OCA may provide information or referrals to appropriate resources (such as legal aid or benefits assistance).
- The interaction is documented.
- The complaint is closed.

If the complaint does relate to one or more of these areas:

- OCA accepts the complaint for further review.

This screening step defines OCA's legal scope and ensures consistency across cases.

4. Acceptance and Communication with the Complainant

When a complaint is accepted:

- OCA sends a case acceptance letter to the constituent who submitted the complaint if the case is assigned for investigation. Note that a case acceptance letter is not sent for a case receiving a Quick Review (See “Quick Reviews” When Appropriate’ below.)
- OCA may contact the complainant to request clarification or additional information, if needed.

5. Case Review and Investigation

Once accepted, OCA conducts a thorough review of the case. This may include:

- Reviewing DFCS records and data systems
- Reviewing court orders and case information
- Examining information from other systems, such as court or case management databases
- Consulting with external partners when appropriate (for example, guardians ad litem)

This review is comprehensive and focused on understanding what occurred and whether standards were met.



6. “Quick Reviews” When Appropriate

In some situations, a complaint may not clearly meet all criteria for a full investigation, but still raises enough concern to warrant a closer look.

In these cases: OCA conducts a “Quick Review,” which is a limited review of records.

- The purpose is to determine whether a deeper investigation is necessary or whether the issue may be resolved quickly without a full investigation.

After a quick review:

- If no further action is warranted, findings are documented and the case is closed.
- If additional concerns are identified, the case is assigned for a full review.
- If the issue can be resolved quickly without a full investigation, steps are taken to address the issue in an expedited fashion (e.g. a call or email to a case manager or attorney).

7. Findings and Documentation

At the **conclusion** of a full review, OCA determines whether there were:

- Violations of law
- Violations of DFCS policy
- Issues involving poor or problematic practice

When issues are identified:

- OCA documents its findings internally.
- A findings letter is sent to the complainant.
- Depending on the seriousness of the issue, OCA may communicate concerns and recommendations to DFCS at the county, regional, or state level.
- All actions taken during the review are recorded in OCA’s internal data system.

8. Case Closure

Once review and communication are complete:

- The case is formally documented.
- The case is closed.
- All complaints—whether accepted, screened out, or resolved through a quick review—are recorded and retained as part of OCA’s oversight function.

Why This Process Matters

This screening and review process helps ensure that:

- Concerns about children are reviewed consistently
- Serious safety, well-being, and permanency issues are identified
- Patterns and systemic problems can be elevated for broader policy attention

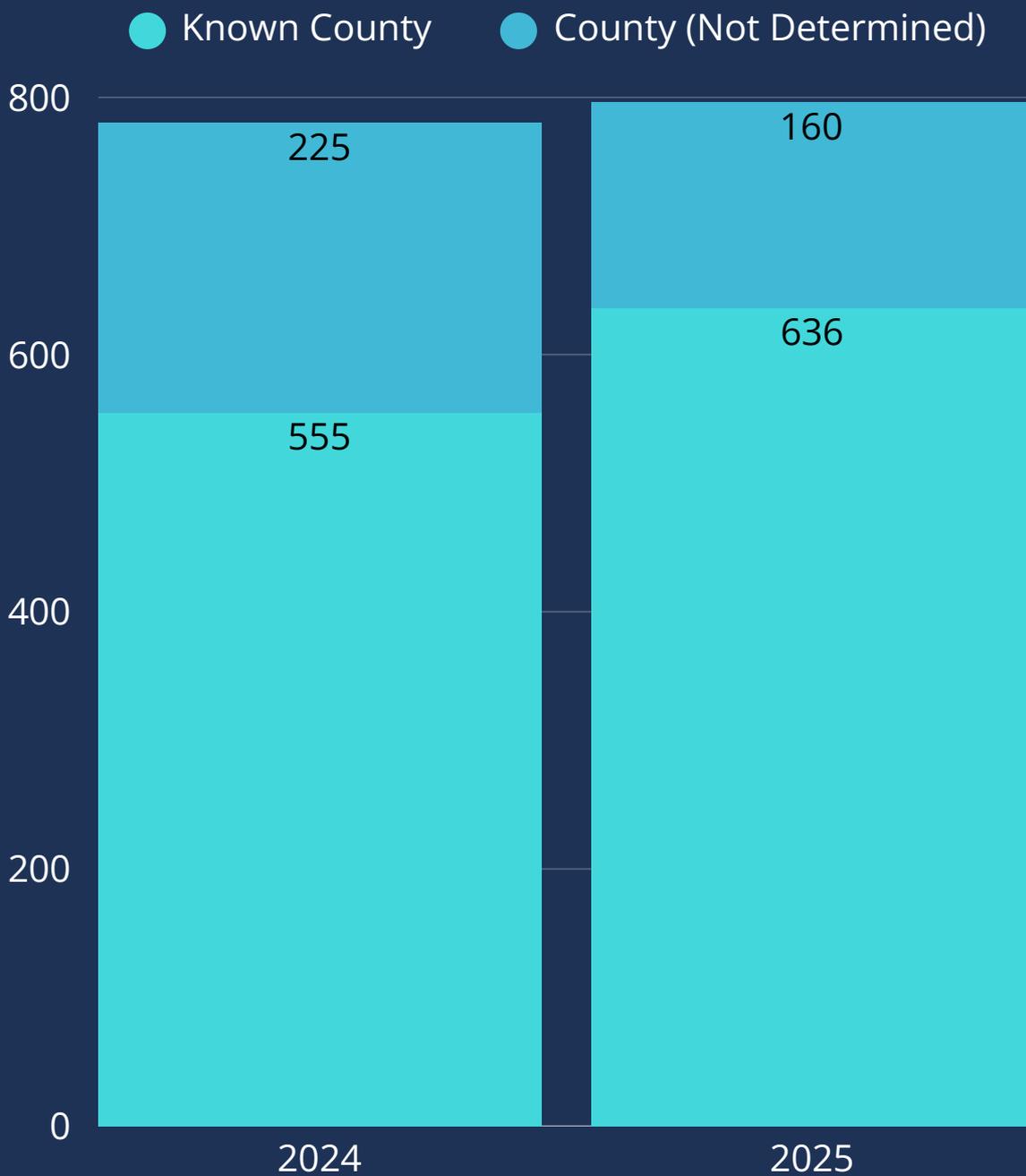
OCA Complaint Portal





Complaints & Cases Overview 2024-2025

Referrals Received by OCA (2024-2025)





Referrals by County (A - E)

County	2024	2025	County	2024	2025
Appling	0	1	Chatham	20	25
Bacon	2	0	Chattahoochee	0	2
Baker	0	1	Chattooga	2	2
Baldwin	1	3	Cherokee	25	15
Banks	1	0	Clarke	4	6
Barrow	9	2	Clayton	19	17
Bartow	8	4	Clinch	1	2
Ben Hill	5	5	Cobb	28	31
Berrien	1	2	Coffee	0	3
Bibb	10	17	Colquitt	3	2
Bleckley	0	1	Columbia	4	7
Brantley	4	5	Cook	0	1
Brooks	0	1	Coweta	5	11
Bryan	2	2	Crawford	1	0
Bulloch	3	4	Crisp	2	4
Burke	0	2	Dawson	5	5
Butts	1	0	DeKalb	34	42
Camden	3	6	Dodge	2	1
Candler	2	0	Dougherty	3	9
Carroll	7	7	Douglas	14	13
Catoosa	5	7	Echols	3	0
Charlton	1	2	Effingham	5	2



Referrals by County (F - M)

County	2024	2025	County	2024	2025
Fannin	3	1	Jasper	0	4
Fayette	5	7	Jeff Davis	0	1
Floyd	6	3	Jefferson	3	3
Forsyth	8	5	Jenkins	1	1
Franklin	3	2	Jones	1	0
Fulton	45	72	Lamar	0	1
Gilmer	3	1	Lanier	1	0
Glascocock	1	0	Laurens	1	1
Glynn	2	8	Lee	0	2
Gordon	3	3	Liberty	5	4
Grady	0	1	Lincoln	0	1
Greene	2	0	Long	3	6
Gwinnett	28	29	Lowndes	9	6
Habersham	3	3	Lumpkin	9	4
Hall	8	18	Madison	1	0
Hancock	0	1	Marion	1	0
Haralson	2	0	McDuffie	1	0
Harris	4	3	Meriwether	0	1
Hart	2	1	Mitchell	2	2
Heard	2	3	Monroe	1	0
Henry	16	17	Morgan	0	1
Houston	12	12	Murray	5	4



Referrals by County (M - W)

County	2024	2025	County	2024	2025
Muscogee	12	24	Telfair	0	1
Newton	3	7	Thomas	3	6
Oconee	3	1	Tift	2	1
Oglethorpe	1	0	Toombs	1	1
Paulding	9	12	Towns	1	0
Peach	0	1	Treutlen	2	0
Pierce	4	2	Troup	2	3
Pike	0	2	Turner	0	4
Polk	2	2	Twiggs	0	1
Pulaski	2	0	Union	3	2
Putnam	2	2	Upson	1	0
Quitman	2	0	Walker	0	3
Rabun	0	3	Walton	5	6
Richmond	17	16	Ware	4	6
Rockdale	5	6	Warren	2	0
Screven	2	1	Washington	4	0
Spalding	1	6	Wayne	2	1
Stephens	1	2	White	2	2
Sumter	1	1	Whitfield	0	4
Talbot	3	1	Wilcox	0	1
Tattnall	2	1			
Taylor	2	0			

Better Outcomes for Children through Quality Legal Representation

The Quality Legal Representation (QLR) Program is a central component of Georgia's strategy to improve outcomes for children involved in dependency proceedings by strengthening the quality and consistency of legal advocacy. Administered by the Georgia Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), the program focuses on the systems that support children's attorneys and the role effective representation plays in safety, permanency, and well-being.

Georgia law guarantees children with open dependency cases the right to client-directed legal representation. Research consistently shows that early appointment of trained, well-supported attorneys is associated with faster permanency, more individualized case planning, stronger party engagement, and reduced time in foster care. The QLR program is dedicated to these outcomes by equipping their lawyers to more ethically and effectively protect their rights.



Better Outcomes for Children through Quality Legal Representation

How the Program is Funded and Structured

The QLR Program leverages federal Title IV-E legal representation reimbursements authorized by the U.S. Children’s Bureau in 2019. These funds allow states to claim federal matching dollars for certain legal costs associated with child welfare proceedings, including attorney time, supervision, training, and multidisciplinary supports. In Georgia, eligible expenditures are reimbursed at a base rate of 50 percent, adjusted monthly by the state’s foster care eligibility rate, which typically falls in the mid-30 percent range.

Under federal rules, the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) is the sole Title IV-E claimant. OCA functions as an intermediary, managing claims, distributing funds, and supporting implementation, while maintaining a clear separation between funding administration and attorney performance. The majority of reimbursed funds are passed through to participating local jurisdictions, with a small portion retained for program administration and sustainability.

What QLR Sites Do

Counties and multi-county jurisdictions participate voluntarily as QLR Sites. Each site completes a structured needs assessment and develops a Quality Enhancement Plan that identifies strategies tailored to local conditions. Those strategies may include attorney recruitment and retention, supervision and mentorship, caseload management, specialized training, multidisciplinary supports such as social workers or investigators, improved client engagement tools, and appellate advocacy capacity.

QLR Sites are responsible for monitoring use of funds and reporting quarterly on expenditures, activities, and early indicators of impact. OCA provides technical assistance, training, and support, while also managing the complex federal claiming process through a contracted specialist.



These funds allow states to claim federal matching dollars for legal costs associated with child welfare proceedings.

Better Outcomes for Children through Quality Legal Representation

Current Sites and Program Expansion

The program began as a pilot in Chatham County, where a dedicated child representation model was implemented with full-time attorneys and multidisciplinary support. Since implementation, the median length of stay in foster care declined significantly, while oversight, quality control, and attorney specialization increased. These results helped establish proof of concept for the program.

Building on that foundation, additional Georgia jurisdictions are now participating in the QLR Program at various stages of development. Some have completed needs assessments and Quality Enhancement Plans; others are in early onboarding or initial claiming phases. This phased approach reflects OCA's emphasis on building local capacity, maintaining attorney independence, and ensuring that new sites implement quality measures alongside funding access.

A 2024 statewide analysis conducted by OCA estimates that at least \$10 million in Title IV-E legal reimbursements could be available annually based on current county expenditures. The program's current scale represents only a portion of that potential, underscoring both the opportunity and the importance of deliberate expansion.

Why This Matters Systemically

The QLR Program is built to work within the child welfare system, not alongside it. The State is currently collecting data as part of a comprehensive evaluation to understand what is working, where improvements are needed, and how the program can continue to drive better outcomes for children and families.

By linking funding to data, oversight, and clear quality standards, Georgia can strengthen accountability across courts, agencies, and local governments. As the program expands, strengthening local capacity and supporting timely, informed legal decision-making statewide will remain a central priority for the Office of the Child Advocate and its community partners.

When *Everyone* Understands

Clear Roles. Shared Goals. Faster Decisions.

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) became involved in this case shortly before a youth turned 18, following a constituent complaint raising concerns about the youth's transition out of foster care. At the time, the youth had been in state custody for more than four years and had experienced more than ten placements.

The youth had documented mental-health and behavioral needs and was residing in a foster home that could provide care through age 18, but not beyond. Independent living placements were discussed; however, the youth did not yet meet eligibility criteria to live independently in the community. Returning to the parental home was also considered, but only if appropriate services and supports remained in place.

Under Georgia policy, youth who meet eligibility criteria may elect to remain in foster care after age 18 through a Voluntary Placement Agreement (VPA) and continue receiving services. In this case, the young person met those eligibility requirements, but as the birthday approached, the likelihood of the youth leaving care without a clear plan—or without fully understanding what supports were available—was high. Given their complicated experience in foster care, the youth was understandably disillusioned with “the system” and conflicted about any continued state involvement in their life.



The complaint focused on whether the youth had been provided sufficient information and opportunity to understand the services available through a VPA before making a decision with potentially serious long-term consequences. Regardless of whether the youth signed a VPA, Medicaid coverage would remain in place. However, signing a VPA would allow the youth to continue receiving extended foster care services and coordinated behavioral-health supports, even while attempting to return to the parental home.

Without those structured services, there was a heightened risk that living arrangements could become unstable, given the youth's history and diagnoses.

The OCA investigator focused on collaborative policy application and practice consistency. Without clearer communication and coordination, the youth risked exiting care without fully understanding the scope of available supports, despite meeting eligibility criteria. To assess how best to address the complaint, the investigator participated in meetings with DFCS leadership and staff, CASA, the youth's attorney, independent living and behavioral-health providers, and the youth's family. Separately, DFCS staff engaged in internal consultations, including with the DFCS General Counsel's Office, to ensure appropriate legal and policy alignment—all within an extremely short timeframe.

Ultimately, concerns were elevated to county leadership, resulting in a shared understanding of the youth's needs and an alignment of practice. A coordinated plan was confirmed: the youth could elect to sign a Voluntary Placement Agreement, continue receiving extended foster care services and behavioral-health supports, and retain Medicaid coverage into early adulthood.

The county further confirmed that if the youth attempted to return home and that arrangement proved unsuccessful, DFCS-assisted placement and services could resume.

With these commitments in place, services were confirmed, education-related needs were addressed, and the court scheduled a post-18 review hearing to support implementation and accountability. "When everyone comes to the table willing to listen, the outcome changes," the investigator said. "That's when policy starts working the way it's meant to."

The case concluded without a formal finding of policy violation. Instead, it resulted in alignment between policy and practice, ensuring that a youth eligible for extended foster care services transitioned into adulthood with continuity and support.

"Our job is to make sure policy is applied in a way that makes sense for the youth in front of us."

“

“Young people shouldn't lose support because the system moved faster than they could understand,”

OCA staff explained.

”

Barton Child Law & Policy Center

Celebrating **25 Years** of Child Advocacy

In December 2025, the Barton Child Law and Policy Center at Emory University School of Law held an anniversary event that brought together alumni, faculty, students, community partners, and supporters. The celebration honored 25 years of legal advocacy, policy work, and transformational education, a legacy rooted in a deep commitment to justice for children involved with Georgia’s juvenile court, child welfare, and youth justice systems.

Founded in March 2000, the Barton Child Law and Policy Center emerged from a shared recognition that Georgia needed stronger, more consistent legal advocacy for children. Its creation followed a tragic child death in Atlanta in the late 1990s, which galvanized advocates and philanthropic leaders to invest in lasting, systemic reform. Founding donors Andy and Michelle Barclay, drawing on proceeds from the sale of the Barton family farm and working in partnership with Emory Law, helped establish a permanent home for child advocacy. Building on Emory Law’s earlier summer child advocacy project, the Center was launched as a year-round clinic expanding access to high-quality legal representation, policy development, and professional training for law students and graduates.



Jerry Bruce, Director
Georgia Office of the Child Advocate



Child Advocacy
Barton Center

Over its first two decades, the Center broadened its reach, adding specialized clinical offerings such as the Barton Juvenile Defender Clinic in 2006 and, later, an appellate clinic to address gaps at every stage of advocacy. In 2010, its name was formally expanded to reflect its broader mission: the Barton Child Law and Policy Center. Today, Barton integrates classroom theory with real-world practice, preparing emerging child advocates while advancing reforms that improve children's lives.

The anniversary event, held at Emory's Convocation Hall, featured remarks from legal visionaries who reflected on the Center's enduring role in shaping child welfare and juvenile justice practice across the state. Notable speakers included Emory Law Dean Richard Freer, Georgia House Representative Mary Margaret Oliver, and others, each underscoring Barton's influence, not only as a training ground for young lawyers, but as a respected voice in legislative and judicial arenas. Keynote remarks delivered by Jerry Bruce, Director of the Georgia Office of the Child Advocate, framed the Center's work as a shared mission rooted in steadfast legal principles and sustained collaboration.



L to R: Andy Barton, Founding Donor; Melissa Carter, Executive Director, Barton Child Law and Policy Center; Michelle Barclay, Founding Donor.



Mary Margaret Oliver, Representative, GA House District 84

Barton Child Law & Policy Center

Celebrating **25 Years** of Child Advocacy

Bruce noted, “[Barton] gives a larger context for current issues and grounds pending decisions in a foundation of perspective that is as rare as it is accurate.” He continued, “Its motivation is always fidelity to law and best practices, held up to the light of evidence, reliable data, and larger experience.”

As Barton enters its third decade, the Center’s vision endures: to protect the legal rights and interests of children, to inspire excellence among professionals, and to equip the next generation of child advocates with the skills and passion necessary to effect systemic change.



L to R: Anthony Stover, Youth Engagement Coordinator, EmpowerMENT, Michelle Barclay, Founding Donor.



Left to right: Marche Williams, Managing Senior Director, Barton Center Dominique Vining, Director of Development, Barton Center Shree'ca Lott, Program Coordinator, Barton Center

2025 Georgia Child Welfare Summit

Advancing collaboration across Georgia's child welfare community.

Over 500 child welfare professionals from across Georgia convened on December 3–5, 2025, for The Summit: Georgia's Child Welfare Conference at the Alpharetta Conference Center. The event featured keynote speakers, workshops, and panels focused on improving outcomes for children and families.



GA CASA attendees celebrate collaboration and commitment to kids at the 2025 Child Welfare Summit.

Over 500 child welfare professionals from across Georgia convened on December 3-5, 2025, for The Summit: Georgia's Child Welfare Conference at the Alpharetta Conference Center. Supreme Court Justice [Charlie Bethel](#), chair of Georgia's Committee on Justice for Children (J4C), opened the Summit with remarks highlighting the service of the [2025 Justice P. Harris Hines Award honorees: Quandula Wright](#), a Department of Family and Children Services supervisor, and [Ashley Stinson](#), a child welfare attorney. [Kim Dvorchak](#), CEO of the [National Association of Counsel for Children](#), delivered the Wednesday keynote, emphasizing high-quality legal representation and noting the foster-care-to-prison pipeline – in her experience, about 90% of youth facing serious charges had lengthy foster care histories. The conference closed Friday with a keynote by leadership coach [Hakim A. Lakhdar](#), who engaged attendees on self-leadership and translating insights into action after two days of intensive sessions.

The Summit featured multidisciplinary workshops and panels on core child welfare issues. Sessions covered improving legal representation for parents and children, accelerating permanency outcomes, strengthening cross-system collaboration (among courts, child welfare agencies, education, and providers), and leveraging data to drive decisions. State leaders also highlighted new initiatives, including a new phase of the Quality Legal Representation (QLR) program launched in 2025 to strengthen advocacy for children and families (See page 17). Short-form video documentaries also presented stories covering the meaningful work of [MorningStar Children and Family Services](#) and the [Georgia Council for Recovery CARES Program](#).



2025 Georgia Child Welfare Summit — Hosts



Jerry Bruce, Director
Georgia Office of the Child Advocate



Emma Hetherington
Director & Clinical Associate Professor,
Wilbanks CEASE Clinic, University of
Georgia School of Law



Jennifer King, Executive Director,
Georgia CASA



Diana Rugh Johnson, CIP Director,
Supreme Court of Georgia's
Committee on Justice for Children



Brenda King Woodard, General
Counsel / Ethics Officer, Georgia
Department of Behavioral Health
and Developmental Disabilities



Melissa Carter, Executive Director,
Barton Child Law and Policy Center



Michael Waller, Executive Director,
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CONTACT US

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