



GEORGIA OFFICE *of the*
CHILD ADVOCATE



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,

As this issue of *The AdvOCate* reaches your inbox, Georgia has recently concluded another legislative session. Each year brings new proposals, new priorities, and important conversations about how best to serve children and families. Those discussions matter, but the responsibility to protect children and support their well-being extends far beyond any single legislative session, administration, or elected office.

Children's needs remain constant. They need safety, stability, permanency, opportunity, and connection. Meeting those needs requires strong systems, informed decision-making, and professionals who are committed to continual improvement regardless of the policy debates of the moment.

That is where the work of the Georgia Office of the Child Advocate fits in. Our role is to provide independent oversight, review concerns brought to our attention, identify opportunities for improvement, and help ensure that the experiences of children and families inform policy and practice. Effective oversight depends on accountability, transparency, collaboration, and a shared commitment to doing better for children.

It also depends on information. We created *The AdvOCate* not simply to share news about OCA, but to serve as a resource for the professionals, policymakers, advocates, and stakeholders who work in and around child protection. The articles in this issue highlight practical approaches, emerging initiatives, and lessons that can strengthen our collective work on behalf of children and families.

Protecting children is essential. Helping them thrive requires an informed and dedicated community working together to create better opportunities and better outcomes. Thank you for being part of that effort.

Jerry Bruce, Director
Georgia Office of the Child Advocate





Meet the Team:

Introducing Crystal Harmon Bice, Deputy Director

Few people arrive at the Office of the Child Advocate having seen Georgia's child welfare system from as many vantage points as Crystal Harmon Bice. She has been a capital defender, a solo practitioner, a Guardian ad Litem, a parent attorney, a Special Assistant Attorney General for DFCS, and a juvenile court judge. It is precisely that accumulated view from every angle of the system that drew OCA Director Jerry Bruce to invite her to join the team as OCA's new Deputy Director.

Bice earned her J.D. from Thomas Goode Jones School of Law at Faulkner University in 2008 and launched her career as a public defender in Paulding County, eventually serving as lead trial counsel in more than a thousand felony cases. She went on to the City of Atlanta Office of the Public Defender, then to the Georgia Public Defender Standards Council's Metro Conflict Office in Fulton County. In 2014, she joined the Georgia Capital Defender's Office, and it was there, in the mitigation work that defines death penalty defense, that the question driving the next phases of her career came into sharp focus.

According to Bice, capital defense requires a lawyer to reconstruct a life: every trauma, every institutional failure, every moment where a different intervention might have changed the outcome. After a while, she found herself seeing the same patterns, over and over. "What you see in all of those cases," she says, "is kind of like systematic failures for these young teenagers and these young children, where they're in all of these bad homes and bad situations, and there's a lot of times they come in contact with people who could have changed their path.



Crystal Harmon Bice, Deputy Director,
Georgia Office of the Child Advocate

And for whatever reason, it just doesn't happen. There's always a small glimmer of hope that seems to have been missed."

She left the Capital Defender's Office in 2018 when her mother was diagnosed with cancer and needed daily support. She opened her own practice in Carroll County and it was there that a juvenile case in Paulding County, one that "kind of mimicked one of [Bice's] capital cases," with a child who had grown up in the same neighborhood as a former client, redirected everything. After the hearing, the presiding guardian ad litem pulled her aside and told her plainly that she belonged in juvenile court. She took his caseload. From there came a sequence of appointments that would give her a working knowledge



of nearly every role the system offers: parent attorney, Special Assistant Attorney General for Polk County DFCS, and, ultimately, in August 2022, Chief Judge of Juvenile Court for the Tallapoosa Judicial Circuit.

On the bench in Haralson and Polk counties, Bice presided over the full range of juvenile matters: dependency, delinquency, CHINS, family treatment court, and the Juvenile Mental Health Court she founded, while serving on multiple committees of the Council of Juvenile Court Judges. She is also the author of Georgia Juvenile Practice and Procedure with Forms, published annually by Thomson Reuters and now in its third edition. When she returned to capital defense after leaving the judgeship, she found herself arriving at a conclusion that had become impossible to avoid.

"We're still missing it for a lot of these children," she says. "I mean, we've had capital cases where there are plenty of CPS referrals and time for intervention."

When Director Bruce offered her the Deputy Director role, she realized that at OCA, she could have greater impact by applying her skill and knowledge further upstream. "When we're investigating these cases, we're actually seeing how these policies and these laws are impacting the day-to-day life of these families and these children," she says, "and we're able to take that information back to the state legislature and the Governor's office and explain how this legislation is actually impacting families." That translation, from the particular to the systemic and back again, is precisely the work she has been circling her entire career.

Children whose behavior brings them to the attention of courts are not, Bice argues, problem children. "A lot of times it's not that they're children with bad behaviors that need to be addressed, but they're children who are trying to tell us that there's something wrong and that we need to fix it."

When those children are suspended from school, they are returned to the environment they were signaling distress about. When the court system fails them, the void is frequently filled by those seeking advantage. "When we're in the court system fighting over who doesn't want them," she says, "the gangs do, and they give them that sense of home and family that we aren't providing for them." The question she can now address at OCA is not how to manage those children more efficiently, but how to reach them before it ever comes to that.

In addition to her professional achievements, Bice is a mom, who is currently – and with some trepidation – anticipating her teen's imminent acquisition of a driver's license.

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A lot of times it's not that they're children with bad behaviors that need to be addressed, but they're children who are trying to tell us that there's something wrong and that we need to fix it.

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Effective Advocacy for Timely Permanency

Effective advocacy is essential to achieving timely permanency in dependency cases. From initial hearings through case closure, advocates play a critical role in ensuring accountability, protecting legal rights, and helping courts make informed decisions that move children and families toward lasting stability.





By the time a dependency case reaches a courtroom, information has been gathered, safety concerns assessed, placements identified, and families introduced to a system that can feel unfamiliar and overwhelming. What happens next depends in large part on the quality of advocacy each participant brings to the case.

Effective advocacy is a continuous process that begins when a case enters the system and continues until permanency is achieved and the case closes. The work includes investigating facts, maintaining communication with clients, evaluating services, monitoring compliance, preparing for hearings, and addressing problems before they become barriers to progress. When done well, advocacy helps courts make informed decisions and keeps cases moving toward timely permanency.

That process starts with a clear understanding of roles. The State bears the burden of proving dependency and presenting evidence in support of its position. This burden remains at every hearing and never shifts to the parents. Parent attorneys advocate for their clients' stated objectives and are bound by the duties of the attorney-client relationship. Attorneys representing children serve a similarly client-directed role, providing legal representation while maintaining duties of loyalty, communication, and confidentiality. Guardians ad litem and Court Appointed Special Advocates occupy a different position within the system. Their responsibility is to advocate for the child's best interests based on the facts of the case and the factors set forth in Georgia law. While their responsibilities differ, each role contributes information that helps courts evaluate the circumstances before them.

Strong advocacy depends on far more than attendance at hearings. Attorneys and other advocates must understand their clients, maintain regular communication, and develop an independent understanding of the facts.

A conversation in the hallway before court is rarely enough to uncover concerns, answer questions, or prepare a client for decisions that may affect a family for years to come.

Meaningful communication builds trust, improves decision-making, and often reveals information that would otherwise remain hidden.



Children are parties to dependency proceedings and afforded important legal rights, including the right to counsel, the right to be heard, and, in most circumstances, the right to attend court proceedings. Older youth must also be involved in developing their case plans, and courts are required to consult with children in an age-appropriate manner when making permanency decisions. These requirements recognize that children often possess information essential to understanding their circumstances and planning for permanency.

The responsibility to develop the factual record belongs to every advocate involved in a case. Effective representation requires more than reviewing reports prepared by others. Attorneys and advocates must evaluate evidence independently, review documents, interview witnesses, and identify gaps in the information available to the court. That work often begins with the dependency petition itself. Allegations should be examined carefully, supporting evidence assessed, and unanswered questions identified early. Scientific and expert evidence deserves particular attention because its effective use, or challenge, often depends on preparation that begins well before a hearing takes place.



After dependency has been adjudicated, attention shifts to the case plan. More than a procedural requirement, the case plan serves as the roadmap for the work ahead. It should reflect the court's findings, identify the issues that brought the family before the court, establish realistic expectations, and connect families with services designed to address those concerns.

Advocates help ensure that case plans are more than completed forms. DFCS is required to create the case plan at a meeting for which the parents, a child over the age of 14, and the guardian ad litem are required to be given advance written notice. This meeting serves as an advocacy opportunity. Service requirements should be tied to identified needs, referrals should be timely, and expectations should be clear and as detailed for DFCS' responsibilities as for the parents' responsibilities. Generic requirements and poorly targeted services can create frustration without addressing the underlying issues affecting a family's ability to achieve permanency. A useful case plan provides a realistic path forward and establishes accountability for carrying it out.

Family time remains one of the most significant components of many dependency cases. Georgia law generally favors maintaining parent-child contact when it can be accomplished safely, and decisions to restrict that contact should be supported by specific findings and identifiable concerns.



As circumstances change, visitation arrangements should be reevaluated to ensure they continue to reflect the needs of the child and the goals of the case. Family time often provides valuable information about progress, relationships, and a family's readiness for the next stage of a permanency plan.

As a case moves forward, hearings provide an opportunity to assess whether plans are producing results. Effective review hearings focus on substance rather than process. Have services been provided? Have referrals been made? Are participants able to access the supports identified in the plan? What barriers remain? Answers to those questions often reveal whether a case is progressing or simply moving from one hearing to the next without meaningful change.

Closely tied to those discussions is the concept of reasonable efforts. Throughout the life of a dependency case, courts must evaluate whether DFCS has taken appropriate steps to prevent removal, support reunification, or achieve another approved permanency plan. The agency bears the burden of demonstrating those efforts, and advocates play an important role in ensuring that the evidence supports the findings being requested.

When services are delayed, referrals do not occur, or responsibilities go unmet, advocates have several tools available to address those concerns. Additional evidence may be requested, reasonable efforts may be challenged, and courts may be asked to establish more specific expectations or timelines. These interventions are not procedural exercises. They are mechanisms for identifying and resolving problems before they create additional delays for children and families.

The quality of a hearing often depends on the work completed beforehand. Meaningful hearings focus on barriers to permanency, draw on information from the individuals most familiar with the case, and establish clear next steps before participants leave the courtroom. Judicial engagement is particularly important.



Courts that actively monitor progress, inquire about obstacles, and establish clear expectations help create accountability and maintain momentum. Because time matters in dependency proceedings, unnecessary delays can have lasting consequences for children waiting for permanency.

Much of the most important advocacy occurs after a hearing has ended. Problems rarely emerge on a court schedule, and waiting months for the next review hearing can allow manageable concerns to become significant obstacles. Effective advocates address issues as they arise, using available tools such as written communication, status conferences, motions, and additional court review when necessary. They also ensure that court orders accurately reflect rulings, preserve issues for future review, and provide clear direction for everyone involved in the case.

Effective advocacy is a disciplined and ongoing practice. It requires role clarity, communication, independent case evaluation, meaningful participation by children, careful attention to case plans, oversight of reasonable efforts, and engagement between hearings. Together, these activities strengthen hearing quality, improve accountability, support compliance with statutory requirements, and help keep dependency cases moving toward timely permanency.





Section 1 — The four roles and what each requires

State / SAAG	Parent Attorney	Guardian ad Litem (GAL) / CASA	Child's Attorney
What this role does: The State initiates the dependency case by filing a petition alleging that a child has been abused, neglected, or is otherwise dependent. The State Assistant Attorney General (SAAG) represents the State's interest in child protection. Burden of proof: The State must prove all three elements by clear and convincing evidence: • The child was abused or neglected • The abuse or neglect was caused by parental fault or incapacity • Without removal, the child faces imminent risk of serious harm Ethics limit (RPC Rule 3.1(b)): The SAAG may not knowingly advance a claim that is unwarranted under existing law — even as petitioner. A good faith argument for changing the law is the only exception.	What this role does: The parent attorney represents the parent whose child has been removed or is at risk of removal. The attorney's job is to advocate for the parent's stated goals, which may include reunification, contesting the allegations, or negotiating case plan terms. Client-directed (RPC Rule 1.2): The attorney must follow the client's decisions about the objectives of representation. The attorney advises, but the parent decides the goals. Communication duty (RPC Rule 1.4): The attorney must keep the parent promptly informed, consult on strategy, and explain matters well enough that the parent can make informed decisions. Meeting only at hearings does not satisfy this obligation.	What this role does: The Guardian ad Litem (GAL) is the only participant in the case whose job is to advocate for the child's statutory best interests — not for any party's wishes, but for what the law determines is best for this child. A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) is a specially trained volunteer who serves as GAL. Georgia law requires using a CASA whenever one is available. Best interests standard (OCGA 15-11-105): The GAL must assess all facts using the statutory Best Interest Factors. The child's own wishes are one factor to consider, but they do not control the GAL's position. Key distinction: The GAL's communications with the child are not privileged and are not confidential from the other parties in the case	What this role does: The child's attorney represents the child as a client. Under OCGA 15-11-103(c), a child's attorney owes their client the duties imposed by the law of Georgia in an attorney-client relationship — the same duties owed to any client. Unlike the GAL, the child's attorney follows the child's expressed wishes, not a best-interests assessment. When wishes and best interests conflict: If the attorney concludes that the child's wishes and best interests are genuinely in conflict, the attorney must petition the court to be removed as GAL. The attorney cannot serve both roles at once. (Georgia Supreme Court Formal Advisory Opinion 16-2) Privilege: Communications between the child's attorney and the child are attorney-client privileged and may be disclosed only with the child's informed consent.



Section 2 — The child's rights in court

Children are parties to dependency proceedings (OCGA 15-11-2(52)) — they have the following rights:

Right to an attorney at all stages of proceedings

A child has the right to legal representation from the beginning of the case through its conclusion, not only at certain hearings.

Right to be heard

Courts must give children a meaningful opportunity to express their views. Older children in particular often have important perspectives on the case plan and their circumstances.

Right to be present in court

A child's presence at hearings may only be waived by the child's own attorney, and only at the child's express direction. No other party — including the parent, the GAL, or the judge — can waive this right on the child's behalf. (*Kesterson v. Jarrett*, 291 Ga. 380 (2012)). The Uniform Rules of the Juvenile Courts specifies that a child has the right to be present at any hearing virtually. This right, as well as the right to attend in person, must be explained to the child in an age-appropriate manner.

Limits on exclusion

A court may exclude a child from part of a hearing only after making a specific evidentiary finding that being present would harm the child. A general concern is not sufficient — the harm must be identified on the record.

Consultation at permanency hearing

The court is required by statute to consult with the child in an age-appropriate manner at the permanency hearing. Children age 14 and older must also be involved in developing the case plan.

Substituted judgment: when a child cannot speak for themselves (ABA Model Act on Child Representation)

When a child is too young or otherwise unable to express a preference, the child's attorney cannot simply substitute their own judgment about what is best for the child — that is the GAL's job.

Instead, the attorney must apply the substituted judgment standard: make a good faith effort to determine what the child would decide if they were capable of making an adequately considered decision. This involves consulting with professionals who know the child, observing the child in their environment, and gathering information about the child's values and experiences.

This is critically different from a best-interests analysis.

Determining best interests is the judicial officer's job, not the attorney's. The attorney's job under substituted judgment is to represent what this particular child would want — not what an objective observer would decide is best.

Privilege rules: who can keep what confidential

Child's attorney ↔ child: PRIVILEGED

Communications between the child and their attorney are protected by attorney-client privilege. They may be disclosed only with the child's informed consent. This means other parties — including the GAL, the State, and parent attorneys — cannot demand to know what the child told their lawyer.

GAL ↔ child: NOT privileged

Communications between the GAL and the child do not carry attorney-client privilege and are not confidential from the other parties to the case. What the child tells the GAL can be disclosed to the court and to the parties.

This distinction matters: a child who wants something kept private should understand that telling the GAL is not the same as telling their attorney. [Note: CASAs act always and only as GALs. Their roles and responsibilities are exactly the same under the Juvenile Code.]



Section 3 — Evaluating the petition and building an independent case strategy

Evaluating the petition (OCGA 15-11-152)

The petition is the document that starts the dependency case. Under OCGA 15-11-152, it must set forth the facts plainly and with particularity — specifically enough that the parties and the court can understand exactly what is alleged and why the child is said to be within the court's jurisdiction.

What a petition may NOT do:

- Rest on general grounds or vague language
- Consist of mere legal conclusions without supporting facts
- Use placeholder language like "other causes of dependency as may be proven at trial"

Evaluating a petition — ask:

What witnesses and documents would be needed to establish each alleged ground? Then go find them. Assess the strength of each allegation based on that investigation, and ask whether there is other evidence — favorable or unfavorable — that has not yet been identified.

Scientific evidence requires special attention:

Expert or scientific evidence requires a specific foundational showing under Georgia Evidence Rule 702. It is impossible to challenge or rely on such evidence effectively without reviewing it in advance of the hearing.

Independent case evaluation — the obligation of every advocate

A common mistake in dependency practice is assuming that case evaluation is the State's job alone. It is not. Every advocate — the parent attorney, the child's attorney, and the GAL — has an independent obligation to evaluate the facts and develop their own strategy.

Why independent evaluation matters:

Each party and the GAL has a unique view of the evidence and the circumstances. Relying solely on the State's presentation means you may miss facts that support your client's position, contradict the allegations, or reveal gaps in the State's case.

Every advocate must:

- Conduct their own assessment of all relevant facts and circumstances
- Review all documents independently — do not rely on summaries or representations from other parties
- Speak directly to witnesses before hearings
- Actively look for evidence not yet identified by anyone else

Do not let other parties strategize your case for you. Do not wait to be reactive. Advance preparation is what separates effective advocacy from just showing up.

Section 4 — Case plan advocacy and review (OCGA 15-11-200)

Evaluating the petition (OCGA 15-11-152)

The case plan is not simply a form DFCS fills out. It is the court-approved roadmap for the case going forward, and its contents must be grounded in the court's findings at adjudication. Every advocate should scrutinize the proposed plan before the dispositional hearing.

Ask the following:

- Is each plan requirement tied to a specific finding of fact from the adjudication order? Requirements that appear without a factual basis should be challenged.
- Is the rationale for each requirement clearly stated? Vague requirements are hard to complete and hard to enforce.
- Are time frames specific and realistic — not just "6 months" across the board?
- Are service providers identified by name, or at minimum by type? When will referrals be made?
- Did DFCS provide 5 days' written notice of the case plan meeting to the parent/guardian, the child (if 14 or older), the child's attorney, and the GAL?
- Does the court report include dissenting recommendations and the parent's or guardian's own recommendations, as required by OCGA 15-11-200(b)?
- If a concurrent plan is proposed (both reunification and permanent placement), is it properly disclosed to all parties and submitted for court approval? (OCGA 15-11-202(i))

Independent case evaluation — the obligation of every advocate

Once the case plan is in place, every review hearing is an opportunity to hold all parties accountable for their obligations under it. Do not simply accept a case manager's report at face value. Do your own pre-hearing preparation.

Ask the following:

- Have required referrals actually been made? By whom, and when?
- Are the services that were referred actually tailored to address the specific issues identified in the adjudication order? Generic services that don't match the findings are insufficient.
- Do the referred services have demonstrated efficacy for the issues they are supposed to address? Services that are not evidence-based carry no guarantee they will work.
- Has the client actually received the services? If not, why not — is the barrier on the client's side or DFCS's side?
- What is the current status and progress of any ongoing treatment?
- Is family time progressing toward unsupervised contact? If not, is there a specific, documented reason?
- Do any case plan requirements need to be modified based on new information or changed circumstances?
- If there is a concurrent plan, is DFCS demonstrating reasonable efforts on both the reunification track and the permanent placement track?



On family time:

The statutory presumption is for unsupervised visits. If the plan requires supervised contact, the court must make specific findings explaining what harm unsupervised visits would cause. Substance use alone — without evidence that it affects the parent's ability to supervise or interact with the child — is not a valid basis for restricting visits.

Note:

Keep in touch with service providers between hearings. They can tell you where things stand and help you anticipate what evidence will be presented before you arrive in court.

Section 5 — Reasonable efforts: what they mean and what to do when DFCS falls short

Reasonable efforts: what they mean and what to do when DFCS falls short (OCGA 15-11-202(d))

"Reasonable efforts" refers to the steps DFCS is required to take to prevent removal, reunify the family, or achieve another permanent plan for the child. Federal law requires courts to make a finding about reasonable efforts at every stage of the proceedings. As Judge Len Edwards has observed, this finding is among the most powerful tools given to dependency courts by federal legislation — it is not a rubber stamp.

Under OCGA 15-11-202(d), courts must actively review the appropriateness of DFCS's reasonable efforts at every hearing. The burden of proving reasonable efforts falls on DFCS — the court does not need to find that no efforts were made, only that the evidence presented is insufficient to establish that reasonable efforts occurred.

When DFCS is not meeting its obligations, advocates have real tools:

- Move for a finding of insufficient reasonable efforts at any stage. You do not need to wait for a scheduled hearing to raise this.
- Ask the court to adjourn the hearing and require DFCS to produce specific evidence of what steps it has taken before the hearing resumes. This puts the burden squarely on DFCS in real time.
- Ask the court to list on the record the specific actions DFCS must complete before the next hearing, and to require proof of those actions at that time. Vague orders are hard to enforce; specific ones are not.
- File a written motion between hearings detailing exactly what DFCS has failed to do. This creates a formal record and compels a response.
- A CASA, as a lay GAL, can request a reasonable efforts review hearing without filing a written motion — the request itself is sufficient to bring the issue before the court.

On concurrent planning:

When DFCS is simultaneously pursuing reunification and a permanent placement away from the parent (concurrent planning), both plans must be disclosed to all parties, approved by the court, and supported by separate reasonable efforts. The court's review must cover efforts under both tracks. If DFCS is only working one plan while nominally claiming to work both, that is a reasonable efforts issue.



Section 6 — Keeping cases moving: hearings, continuances, and between-hearing action

Meaningful hearings

A meaningful hearing is not simply a status update from the case manager. Research consistently shows that more engaged judicial oversight produces faster permanency and better outcomes for children.

A meaningful hearing includes:

- On-the-record discussion of the specific barriers preventing permanency, not just a general summary of case status
- Testimony from the professionals actually providing mental health, substance use, trauma, or other services — not just a report about what those providers said
- Oral advocacy by attorneys for all parties and by the GAL — this is not optional and is what makes the hearing function as a legal proceeding
- Clear, time-limited expectations for what each party must accomplish before the next hearing, stated on the record

The judge's role:

At the start of every hearing, the judge should ask all represented parties whether they had a sufficient opportunity to speak with their attorney before the hearing. (NCJFCJ Enhanced Resource Guidelines, p. 227). Judicial engagement beginning at the Preliminary Protective Hearing is one of the strongest predictors of timely permanency.

Continuances (OCGA 15-11-110)

Time matters profoundly in dependency cases. Every continuance extends a child's time in temporary placement. The law reflects this: continuances are not freely given.

The standard:

Continuances may be granted only upon a showing of good cause, and only for the period of time shown to be necessary by the evidence presented at the hearing on the motion.

What does NOT constitute good cause:

- Attorney convenience or scheduling conflicts
- A stipulation or agreement between counsel
- The convenience of the parties

What the court must do:

Whenever a continuance is granted, the facts that require it must be entered in the court record. The court must also give substantial weight to the child's need for prompt resolution, the importance of stability, and the well-documented harm that prolonged temporary placement causes to children.

What the court must do:

Whenever a continuance is granted, the facts that require it must be entered in the court record. The court must also give substantial weight to the child's need for prompt resolution, the importance of stability, and the well-documented harm that prolonged temporary placement causes to children.

Between hearings

Effective advocacy does not stop when you leave the courtroom. What happens between hearings often determines what is possible at the next one.

When a party is not complying:

Do not wait until the next scheduled hearing to address non-compliance. First, communicate in writing to the responsible party and their attorney, identifying specifically what has not been done and what is needed. Written communication creates a record and sometimes prompts action without court involvement.

When writing doesn't work:

Request a status conference or review hearing. File a motion that details what has not been done. The court can then address the issue before it grows into a larger barrier to permanency.

Contempt (OCGA 15-11-31):

When a party is willfully disobeying a court order, contempt is a legitimate tool. The court may impose up to 20 days of imprisonment or a fine up to \$1,000. Due process requires reasonable notice and an on-the-record hearing before contempt can be found.

Missing court orders:

Do not wait for the SAAG or the court to produce a written order. Draft a proposed order yourself and offer it at the next hearing. For uncontested matters, circulate a draft to the other parties and present it for signature at the hearing.

Preserving the appeal:

If a ruling goes against you, lay the groundwork for an appeal immediately. State your legal objection clearly on the record. Ask the court to explain its reasoning for adverse rulings. Offer to draft the order yourself. If you do not handle appeals, connect in advance with dependency attorneys who do — the window to appeal is short.



Georgia's 2026 Legislative Session: What It Means for Children in the Child Welfare System

The 2026 legislative session brought important changes that will affect children, families, and professionals across Georgia's child welfare system. From expanded protections for foster caregivers to new education, safety, and accountability measures, here's a look at the key laws and budget decisions that will shape child welfare in the year ahead.





The 2026 Georgia General Assembly session, which adjourned on April 2 (*Sine Die*) as the final session of the 158th biennium, produced a mixed record for children involved in the state's child welfare system. Significant legislation advanced on foster care, school enrollment, school

records transfers, autism services, child abuse accountability, and the protection of children from exploitation. The appropriations picture was more complicated, leaving some of the session's most meaningful provisions contingent on future budget action.

The most consequential piece of child welfare legislation this session was the Foster Placements Bill of Rights ([House Bill 256](#)), signed into law and confirmed on the Governor's signed legislation list. In addition to expanding the existing foster parent protections to encompass relative caregivers and fictive kin, the bill ensures that all foster placements have the right to apply a reasonable and prudent parenting standard when making decisions about extracurricular activities, to request a certified volunteer advocate at meetings with the Department of Human Services (DHS), and to seek independent legal counsel regarding their placement status. The bill also duplicates an existing requirement that all Juvenile Code (court) proceedings be recorded and clarifies that parties and DHS have access to those recordings without a court order. For more information on the nuances of this new law, see the featured article and chart on pages **X-XX** of this newsletter.

Following prior year-end concerns regarding a significant funding shortfall for the Division of Family Services within DHS, the legislature added \$81.09 million for Out-of-Home Care in the amended FY26 budget to address utilization growth and increased costs of care, with priority given to reunification services, assessments, and specialized services for high-acuity youth.

The legislature also restored \$924,800 in AFY26 to cancel state office contract reductions for supportive services and implement funds to place foster youth closer to their biological families, as directed in the FY26 budget. The FY27 budget added another \$50 million in baseline funds for Out-of-Home Care utilization growth.

Other noteworthy 2026 legislation relevant to the child welfare field is as follows:

[Senate Bill 431](#), signed into law on May 11, requires receiving K-12 public schools to enroll a foster care student within three school business days of receiving a completed registration form. The bill establishes a formal process for reporting noncompliance, authorizes the Department of Education to require corrective action plans from school systems that fail to meet the standard, and directs RESA student affairs officers and the DOE to prepare annual reports on enrollment disputes and noncompliance.





[HB 943](#) and [SB 402](#), both with identical language, were signed into law on May 12. These bills require DFCS to develop a five-year pilot program to provide autism spectrum disorder screenings, clinical evaluations, and services for children in foster care, with priority given to children diagnosed with ADHD or reactive attachment disorder, or who have been prescribed psychotropic medication. The program, dependent on appropriations, would launch in three regional service areas and expand into additional regions annually, with DFCS submitting written annual reports to specified state leadership beginning one year after operation commences. The program requires future budget action for funding.

[SB 383](#), signed into law on May 6, revises the scope and purpose of local child fatality review to focus on identifying opportunities for intervention and recommending measures to prevent future deaths. It adds a local school system representative to review committee membership, updates definitions to include sudden infant death syndrome, sudden unexplained infant death, and sleep-related infant death, and requires the committee chairperson to convene every 30 days to review reports and investigate circumstances of all child deaths meeting the review criteria.

[SB 587](#), signed into law on May 11, allows courts to issue orders to locate the parent or guardian of an alleged child abuse victim when a child is moved to an unknown location during an open investigation. The bill also requires the Prosecuting Attorneys Council to create and maintain a statewide animal cruelty database, to be operational by January 1, 2027, subject to appropriations.

Trey's Law ([HB 1187](#)), signed into law on May 12, bans nondisclosure agreements that have the purpose or effect of concealing details relating to a claim of childhood sexual abuse, voiding any such provision as contrary to public policy.

Parties may still keep other provisions of a settlement confidential, including amount and payment terms, but may not enforce a nondisclosure provision without first obtaining a final declaratory judgment that the agreement is enforceable.

[SB 542](#), signed into law on May 11, creates new criminal offenses for clergy members who engage in sexually explicit conduct or sexual contact through coercion or intimidation with someone in a pastoral counseling or spiritual authority relationship. A first-degree offense carries imprisonment of one to 25 years; a second-degree offense is a misdemeanor of a high and aggravated nature for a first conviction. The statute of limitations is 15 years.



[SB 547](#), signed into law on May 6, reclassifies both pimping and pandering as felonies punishable by one to ten years of imprisonment, regardless of whether it is a first or subsequent offense, removing prior provisions that treated first offenses as high and aggravated misdemeanors.



[SB 570](#), signed into law on May 11, requires hotels and third-party managed short-term rental properties to ensure their employees complete annual training on identifying and reporting suspected human trafficking, with fines of \$500 for a first violation, \$1,000 for a second, and \$2,000 for subsequent violations.

The Family Justice Center Act ([HB 1283](#)), signed into law on May 12, establishes a framework for multiagency centers providing coordinated services to victims of family violence, sexual assault, child abuse, elder abuse, human trafficking, and associated crimes. Centers may be organized by a county or municipal government, a district attorney's office, or a designated nonprofit corporation. The Criminal Justice Coordinating Council may administer grants for the establishment and support of these centers, prioritizing proposals with broad multidisciplinary collaboration and measurable outcomes. The bill also provides that no information shared by a victim within a Family Justice Center will be disclosed without informed written consent, and requires law enforcement to maintain unreported sexual assault evidence for ten years from the date of collection.

The governor vetoed two bills of relevance to this audience: [HB 1409](#) and [HB 1192](#). HB 1409 would have added firefighters and animal service workers to the list of mandated reporters of child abuse, created

a secure web-based reporting system for mandatory reporters, required reports to be filed within 24 hours, and improved protocols for military families. The Governor's veto rationale acknowledged that DFCS must improve its current system but stated that the bill's operational requirements were so narrowly specified that they would preclude DFCS from competitively procuring solutions, and that implementation of statutory requirements is properly the domain of the executive branch.

HB 1192 would have required funds appropriated to DCH and DHS and designated for specific purposes to be maintained in separate accounts, not commingled with other funds, and used only for their designated purposes. The Governor's veto explanation stated that while the General Assembly can exercise significant oversight through the appropriations process, this requirement went beyond such authority and interjected the legislature into the operational oversight of executive branch agencies.

There will be significant and relevant policy exploration in the interim. The Joint Study Committee on Escalating Costs in Georgia's Foster Care System (SR 622), which includes members from the Senate, House, DHS, DJJ, and related organizations, is charged with examining the rising costs of DFCS out-of-home services and recommending necessary action. The Senate Study Committee on Adoption and Permanency Affordability (SR 771) was also created to examine primary cost drivers, state and federal regulatory requirements, existing barriers faced by middle-income families, and potential legislative options to promote timely, safe, and affordable permanency for children. Both study committees are expected to commence late summer to early fall and to deliver findings before the next legislative session. Considering that the 159th General Assembly will follow a full statewide election, those findings, along with the funding decisions left unresolved this year, are likely to shape much of the child welfare agenda in 2027.





The Evolution of Foster Placement Provider Rights: **House Bill 256**

House Bill 256 marks one of the most significant updates to Georgia's foster care laws in recent years, expanding rights and protections for caregivers across the child welfare system. Learn how the new Foster Placements Bill of Rights strengthens caregiver participation, access to information, and support for children in care.





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overnor Brian Kemp recently signed House Bill 256, legislation that makes several significant changes to Georgia's child welfare and juvenile court laws. The measure expands caregiver rights, broadens access to information, creates new protections during

investigations and disputes, and extends many statutory rights beyond traditional foster parents to include relative caregivers and fictive kin.

One of the bill's most notable changes is the transformation of Georgia's Foster Parents Bill of Rights into a broader Foster Placements Bill of Rights. Prior law focused primarily on licensed foster parents. HB 256 expands many of those same rights to relative caregivers and fictive kin, reflecting the reality that many children in foster care are placed with grandparents, other relatives, or trusted adults who have longstanding relationships with the child or family.

The legislation also creates a new statutory right for foster placements to access certain records concerning a child in their care. While child welfare agencies have long maintained records containing information such as medical history, educational records, social history, and case plans, caregivers often received information through agency discretion or individual case practices. HB 256 establishes a formal process allowing foster placements to request access to those records directly from the state agency with custody of the child. Agencies must respond to written requests within 14 days, subject to existing state and federal confidentiality requirements.

Another major change involves participation and advocacy. Previous law allowed a more limited role for advocates during certain investigations involving foster parents.

HB 256 creates a new Certified Volunteer Advocate structure and gives foster placements the right to request that an advocate approved by the Office of the Child Advocate be present during investigations, service planning meetings, administrative hearings, grievance proceedings, adoption-related meetings, and other interactions with the department. The law also grants foster placements the right to a fair, timely, and impartial investigation of complaints involving their home and expressly recognizes their right to due process during those investigations.

The legislation adds several protections that did not previously appear in Georgia statute. Foster placements now have an explicit right to seek independent legal counsel regarding their status and participation in the child welfare system. The bill also prohibits retaliation or discrimination against foster placements for filing complaints or grievances with the Department of Human Services or the Division of Family and Children Services.

HB 256 further strengthens caregiver participation in decision-making. Existing rights involving placement discussions, case planning, visitation planning, hearing notifications, reimbursement information, and service coordination are expanded beyond licensed foster parents to include other categories of caregivers covered by the new law. Relative caregivers and fictive kin who previously may have participated through agency practice now have a stronger statutory basis for involvement.



The bill also incorporates the "reasonable and prudent parent standard" into the Foster Placements Bill of Rights. Although Georgia regulations already recognized this concept, HB 256 elevates it into statute. The provision authorizes foster placements to make everyday parenting decisions regarding extracurricular activities, cultural experiences, social opportunities, enrichment activities, and other age-appropriate experiences intended to support normal childhood development.

In addition to the child welfare provisions, HB 256 makes important changes to juvenile court records. Georgia law already required proceedings to be recorded, but the bill clarifies that all proceedings under the Juvenile Code must be recorded. The legislation also creates an express right for parties to obtain the complete record of a juvenile court proceeding without first obtaining a court order. This represents a change from prior practice, where access to recordings or transcripts could vary by court or circumstance.

Whether through expanded access to records, increased involvement in case planning, or the ability to seek support from a Certified Volunteer Advocate, HB 256 creates or codifies pathways which are vital for meaningful caregiver engagement, all with the ultimate goal of ensuring that the children in their care have the resources and support they need to thrive.





House Bill 256: Changes to the Foster Parents' Bill of Rights

The chart below provides a section-by-section overview of House Bill 256, highlighting the changes to existing law, their practical impact, and key implementation considerations. Use it as a quick reference to understand how the legislation expands rights and responsibilities for foster placements, agencies, and courts.





Bill Section	Current Law / Citation	Change Made by HB 256	Practical Impact	Implementation Notes
Section 1	O.C.G.A. § 15-11-17(c)	Clarifies that all proceedings under Chapter 11 must be recorded.	Eliminates ambiguity about which juvenile proceedings require recording and strengthens preservation of the record for appeals and oversight.	Juvenile courts should review local recording procedures and ensure complete recording coverage for all covered proceedings.
Section 2	O.C.G.A. § 15-11-19 (new subsections (c) and (d))	Creates an express right for parties to obtain the full and complete record of any juvenile proceeding without a court order. Also grants the same right to the Department in proceedings where participation is authorized.	Reduces delay and motion practice related to obtaining recordings and transcripts. Improves appeals, case planning, and agency oversight.	Courts and clerks will need standardized release procedures. Clarification may be needed regarding which agency qualifies as "the department."
Section 3	O.C.G.A. § 15-11-19 (new subsections (c) and (d))	Renames the Foster Parents Bill of Rights as the Foster Placements Bill of Rights.	Signals expansion of statutory rights beyond licensed foster parents to include broader caregiver categories.	DHS, DFCS, providers, and contractors will need to update manuals, contracts, forms, and training materials.
Section 4	O.C.G.A. § 49-5-41(h) (new)	Grants foster placements the right to reasonable access to nonidentifying information from a child's record, with certain exclusions for outside-source documents protected under state or federal law. Requires a written response from the agency within 14 days, permits the foster placement to share the information with a Certified Volunteer Advocate, and subjects both the foster placement and advocate to penalties for unauthorized use under § 49-5-44..	Significantly increases caregiver access to information needed for health care, education, behavioral health treatment, and case planning.	DFCS and providers must establish records-request, redaction, confidentiality, and tracking procedures consistent with federal and state privacy laws.
Section 5	O.C.G.A. § 49-5-281	Adds definitions for Certified Volunteer Advocate, Foster Placement, Relative Caregiver, Fictive Kin, and Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard.	Brings Georgia's statutory language into alignment with modern kinship care practice and broadens who may exercise statutory rights.	Existing DFCS kinship care policies and training materials should be harmonized with the new definitions.



Bill Section	Current Law / Citation	Change Made by HB 256	Practical Impact	Implementation Notes
Section 5	O.C.G.A. § 49-5-281 and related practice rules	Extends many existing foster-parent rights to all foster placements, including relative caregivers and fictive kin.	Expands participation in case planning, visitation planning, hearings, service discussions, and placement decisions.	Caseworkers, attorneys, and providers will require training regarding which rights now extend to kinship caregivers.
Section 5	O.C.G.A. § 49-5-281 (new right)	Creates an explicit right to use the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard for extracurricular, social, cultural, enrichment, and skill-building activities.	Supports normalcy and allows caregivers greater discretion in everyday parenting decisions.	Agencies should integrate this provision into existing normalcy and prudent-parenting policies.
Section 5	O.C.G.A. § 49-5-281 (new advocate provisions)	Creates a right to a fair, timely, and impartial investigation and permits a Certified Volunteer Advocate to attend investigations.	Increases procedural protections for caregivers during investigations and complaint reviews.	OCA is creating certification standards, confidentiality requirements, training, and oversight procedures.
Section 5	O.C.G.A. § 49-5-281 (new rights)	Permits caregivers to request a Certified Volunteer Advocate at meetings with DFCS, creates anti-retaliation protections, and explicitly permits independent legal counsel.	Strengthens caregiver leverage and procedural protections during disputes, grievances, investigations, and placement matters.	DFCS grievance forms, notices, and procedures should be revised to reflect these rights.
Section 5	O.C.G.A. § 49-5-281 grievance provisions	Revises grievance procedure language to reflect the expanded "foster placements" definition, replaces the specific reference to the Adoptive and Foster Parent Association of Georgia with the broader category of foster placement advocacy organizations, and updates the compliance deadline to July 1, 2026. The grievance process remains the exclusive administrative remedy for violations of this article.	Broadens the pool of organizations involved in developing grievance procedures to reflect the bill's expanded caregiver definitions. The exclusive administrative remedy provision is retained, meaning foster placements must exhaust the grievance process before seeking other relief.	DHS, DFCS, OCA, and providers should update grievance manuals, forms, and related procedures to reflect the expanded "foster placements" terminology and the updated July 1, 2026 deadline.



Bill Section	Current Law / Citation	Change Made by HB 256	Practical Impact	Implementation Notes
Section 6	Effective Date Section	Act becomes effective upon gubernatorial approval or upon becoming law.	No delayed implementation period.	Immediate guidance and training recommended.
Section 7	Repealer Clause	Repeals conflicting laws.	Standard statutory cleanup provision.	Agencies should identify and revise inconsistent policies and contracts.

* At its core, **HB 256** is about ensuring that the adults caring for children in Georgia's foster system have the clarity, access, and support they need to help those children thrive.



What Does Attorney Independence Mean?

Attorney independence is a cornerstone of quality legal representation for children in dependency cases, ensuring advocates can act solely in their clients' best interests. This edition's QLR Corner explores why independence matters, how it strengthens outcomes for children and families, and the role it plays in Georgia's Quality Legal Representation Program.





When we talk about quality legal representation for children in dependency cases, the conversation often turns to training, caseloads, and compensation. Those things matter — but they are only part of the picture.

Drawing on recommendations from the Georgia Child Representation Steering Committee, lessons learned from the pilot program in Chatham County, and best practices from the National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC) and the American Bar Association (ABA), the Quality Legal Representation (QLR) Program identified eight essential components of high-quality dependency representation. Attorney independence from courts and external influences is among them. Other essential components which support quality legal representation include multidisciplinary team support, specialization and ongoing professional development, job stability and competitive compensation, access to high-quality training and practice tools, reasonable caseload limits, adherence to national standards of practice, and robust supervisory structures. These elements now guide what OCA looks for when working with participating jurisdictions to build or improve their dependency legal representation systems.

Relative to attorney independence, jurisdictions that consider QLR recommendations see the difference:



When attorneys are empowered to advocate fully and freely for their clients, outcomes improve for children, families, and courts alike.

The QLR Program partners with jurisdictions across Georgia to assess and strengthen all eight components, and attorney independence is one of the most powerful levers available for driving that improvement.

A Little about the Georgia Child Representation Steering Committee

In 2024, OCA convened a year-long Child Representation Steering Committee comprised of child welfare law and policy experts from across Georgia. The committee's charge was to research, analyze, and develop recommendations for a statewide framework for dependency legal representation that could deliver the benefits of a well-structured system while preserving local flexibility and autonomy. To inform its work, the Steering Committee examined successful dependency representation programs in Georgia and other states, identified the core components that contributed to their effectiveness, and issued a final white paper in January 2025. That document and the recommendations within became an essential part of the foundation for how the QLR Program defines and measures quality.

What Do We Mean by Attorney Independence?

The QLR Program's Needs Assessment tool, which every new jurisdiction completes before developing its Quality Enhancement Plan, devotes an entire section to attorney independence. It asks who hires and fires dependency attorneys, who selects attorneys for individual cases and on what basis, who reviews and approves attorney invoices, and how attorneys are employed and released. It asks for an organizational chart showing where dependency attorneys sit within the structure of the county and the court. The Needs Assessment, as a whole, is described by OCA as a tool to help counties identify "strengths and opportunities for improvement" across all categories of quality legal representation, with attorney independence an important priority within those categories.



To effectively ensure meaningful attorney independence, the following four elements are commonly recommended: a system that separates hiring, appointment, payment, and oversight of attorneys into a department independent of the court; full-time positions dedicated to dependency representation and supervised by a child welfare law specialist; an independent governing committee to oversee hiring and firing, practice standards, training and qualification requirements, and performance review processes; and a written policy manual for the dependency legal services program. None of these require a large county or a large budget, but rather a deliberate decision to treat dependency legal services as a distinct function with its own structure, standards, and accountability.

Judges and attorneys in the dependency system share a deep commitment to the well-being of the children and families before them, and that common purpose is the foundation for everything that follows. The structures governing attorney appointment, payment, and oversight exist to support attorneys in delivering the quality of representation their clients deserve — and when those structures work well, everyone in the courtroom benefits.

How the QLR Program Supports Jurisdictions

Once a jurisdiction is onboarded into the QLR Program, OCA works collaboratively with the site to assess its strengths and identify opportunities to enhance the quality of legal representation provided to children and parents in dependency proceedings. The county develops the Quality Enhancement Plan with support from OCA to implement specific strategies that address the opportunities identified in the assessment. Title IV-E legal reinvestment can fund a range of structural reforms in service of that goal. That includes creating an independent governing committee, developing full-time positions supervised by a child welfare law specialist, and developing a written policy manual for the dependency legal services program.

Georgia law guarantees every child with an open dependency case the right to client-directed legal representation. A guarantee is only as strong as the conditions that allow it to be honored, which is why attention to attorney independence is crucial for the children OCA seeks to protect.



*For more information about the QLR Program or to explore participation, contact OCA at mschweizer@oca.ga.gov

A Place to Call Home

For nearly two years, one medically fragile child knew only the walls of a hospital while a devoted foster family waited for the chance to bring her home. This story highlights how persistence, collaboration, and unwavering advocacy helped turn uncertainty into permanency—and gave one little girl the future she deserved.





When the Office of the Child Advocate became involved, the child at the center of the case had spent almost her entire life in a hospital. Born with complex medical needs, she entered the hospital as an infant and remained there for nearly two years, undergoing multiple surgeries and receiving around-the-clock care. Her parents were unable to care for her, and despite the efforts of countless professionals, permanency remained out of reach. Finding a family willing and able to care for a medically fragile child is never easy. The child needed a specialized therapeutic foster home, and one had been identified. Yet months passed without a placement. What stood out most to the OCA investigator was not the delay itself, but the people waiting on the other side of it.

Yet, while questions about placement continued, the prospective foster parents kept showing up. They sat beside the child's hospital bed for hours. They brought specialized supplies. They attended surgeries. They celebrated birthdays. They bonded with a child they had no assurance would ever come home with them.

"This child had no one that was coming to the hospital to just hold her or bond with her," the investigator recalled. "The nurses and the doctors were giving her a birthday party, and these foster parents were going, not knowing if this child was ever going to be placed with them." In one particularly memorable moment, the child underwent a seven-hour surgery. "These foster parents never left the hospital," the investigator said. "I don't know that I could have done it." This foster family was specifically trained to care for medically fragile children, had extensive experience supporting children with significant needs, clearly cared about the child,



and had the commitment needed to show up again and again. So why the delay in placement?

While OCA does not make placement decisions, the investigator played a critical role in moving the case toward permanency. Over many months, she continued asking questions about barriers to placement, sought clarity about concerns that had been raised regarding the identified foster family, and elevated those concerns to state-level decision-makers when answers remained unclear. She maintained communication with the prospective foster parents, gathered information about their experience caring for medically fragile children, and helped facilitate a collaborative effort that included medical providers, community stakeholders, advocates, and child welfare professionals.

Letters of support were collected, additional information was reviewed, and decision-makers were encouraged to take a fresh look at the family's qualifications, track record, and strong community support network.





Through persistence, collaboration, and a focus on the child's best interests, OCA helped ensure that all relevant information was considered as the case moved toward resolution.

Fortunately, months of persistence eventually paid off. The child was finally placed with the family that had been waiting for her all along. "I was sent pictures of this precious, precious baby," the investigator said. "She is absolutely thriving with these foster parents." Today, the child is surrounded not only by dedicated caregivers, but also by a community ready to support her future. Doctors remain optimistic about her long-term outlook and believe she may eventually outgrow some of the intensive medical interventions she once required.

For OCA, the outcome represents more than a successful placement. It represents what can happen when advocacy, collaboration, and persistence come together on behalf of a child who cannot advocate for herself. Thus, after nearly two years in a hospital, one little girl finally has what every child deserves: a place to call home.





Backstory: The Chief Justice P. Harris Hines Award

The Chief Justice P. Harris Hines Award recognizes the dedication of attorneys and case managers who make a lasting difference in the lives of Georgia's children and families. Learn the story behind the award, the legacy of the justice who inspired it, and why honoring excellence in dependency practice continues to matter today.

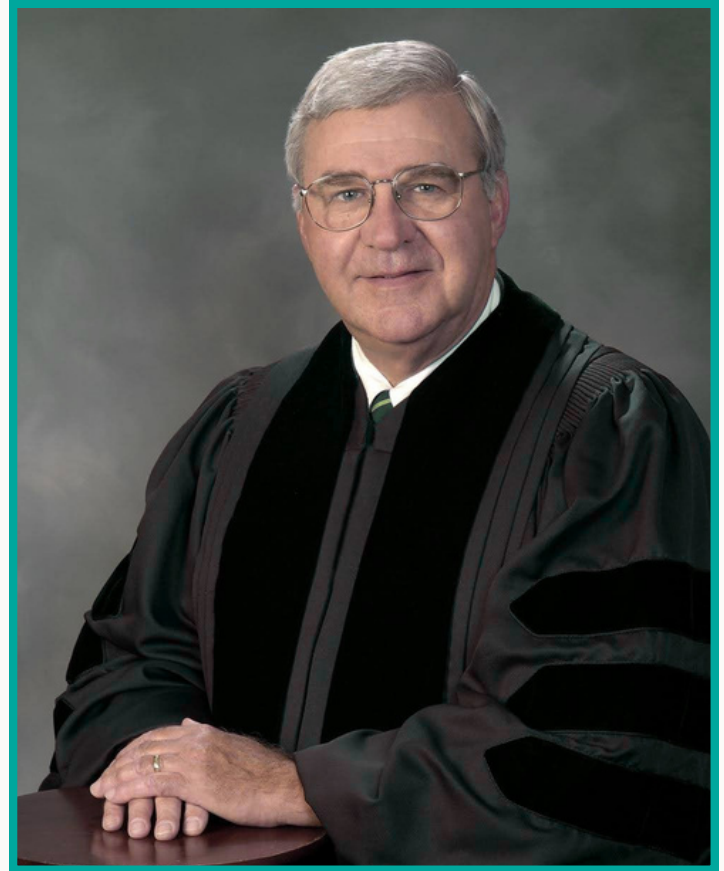




Every year at the State Bar of Georgia's annual meeting, the state's highest court publicly recognizes two people who have devoted themselves to some of the hardest and least celebrated work in the legal system. One is an attorney. One is a DFCS case manager. Both are honored for the steady commitment they bring to children and families in Georgia's dependency courts. The award that brings them to that stage is named for a justice who spent much of his career trying to make those courts work as they should.

Preston Harris Hines was born in Atlanta in 1943 and spent his entire professional life in Georgia's courts. Governor Jimmy Carter appointed him to Cobb County's State Court in 1974. He moved to the Cobb Superior Court bench in 1982, and Governor Zell Miller appointed him to the Georgia Supreme Court in 1995. His colleagues elected him Chief Justice in 2016, making him the first Cobb County resident to hold the position. He retired in August 2018 after more than 50 years in the law. Two months later, he was killed in a car accident on I-85 while returning home from hearing his eight-year-old granddaughter sing in a church choir. He was 75.

During his years on the Supreme Court, Justice Hines chaired the court's Committee on Justice for Children for 16 years and focused on improving what happened to children in juvenile courts. Under his leadership, the committee launched a Cold Case Project that helped more than 300 children in foster care find permanent families. He pushed for stronger training in child welfare law for judges and attorneys, funded scholarships to national conferences, and championed the Child Welfare Law Specialist certification, which 45 Georgia attorneys had earned by the time of his death. He did not treat these issues as abstract policy questions. He saw them as problems the system could solve with enough expertise, persistence, and commitment.



Chief Justice P. Harris Hines (1943–2018)

Georgia Supreme Court; Former Chief Justice of Georgia

The Chief Justice P. Harris Hines Awards were created in 2017 by the Georgia Supreme Court's Committee on Justice for Children, in partnership with Georgia's Office of the Child Advocate and the Georgia Bar's Child Protection and Advocacy Section. They were established during Justice Hines' lifetime, in recognition of what his leadership had meant to the field. After his death, they also came to stand as a living memorial, linking his name each year to the work he cared about most.

Each year, one attorney and one case manager are honored for service to children that reflects Justice Hines' high standard for child welfare work. The attorney category includes parent, child, and agency attorneys alike, reflecting his belief that children are better served when every party has strong representation.



The award includes case managers for the same reason. Justice Hines understood that a child's experience in the welfare system depends on more than what happens in court. An attorney may prevail at a hearing, but a case manager often helps determine whether a family stays together or a child finds permanency. Nominations are accepted from anyone who knows a Georgia practitioner doing exceptional work in the dependency system, and the awards are presented each June at the State Bar's annual meeting.

Children who come before Georgia's dependency courts rarely have much control over what happens to them. Justice Hines spent his career pushing for a system in which the people making those decisions were capable, prepared, and held to a high standard. The award in his name is one way that work continues.



"I'm not going to let somebody tell me, 'Statistically you're always going to have this bad situation over here, and therefore, Harris, what you're doing is not really going to make a difference.' You may not be able to help everybody, but you can light a candle in your little part of the world. You can work to make that better. And if enough people work to make that better, you can do a lot of good."

— Harris Hines, 2015



OCA accepts nominations for the annual Chief Justice P. Harris Hines Award—
Visit oca.georgia.gov for more information.



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