



## Georgians Coming Together— From A Distance!



By Rachel Davidson,  
OCA Director

**This time is certainly a challenging one,** to say

the least. It has created added stressors, new logistical concerns, and heightened concerns for potential abuse and neglect.

As schools closed and extracurricular activities have been canceled, DFCS realized a 50% drop in abuse and neglect reports. DFCS Director Tom Rawlings expressed concerns about not picking up on those cases that DFCS would ordinarily know about because of the good work of Georgia's mandated reporters. On the OFI side of the house, DFCS has had a significant increase in applications for food stamps and Medicaid coverage.

DFCS has been working hard to address these concerns and maintain as much continuity as possible when it comes to the services they provide, while also attempting to mitigate the risks to their staff. Courts are also adjusting to new practices, as they do their best to ensure safety concerns are addressed and permanency outcomes are not delayed.

As we are finding our new normal **See [TOGETHER](#), Page 8**

## Social Work Month



By Shantelle Whitehead, MSW,  
OCA Investigator

bring attention to the role that social

**OCA is** workers play in alleviating **celebrating Na-** personal and social issues.

**tional Professional Social** Social workers serve in sev-  
**Work Month** by showing eral different capacities,

gratitude and recognizing working as advocates, cham-  
social workers for the dedi- pions, advisors, leaders,

cation and empathy they counselors and facilitators in  
deliver nationwide. This schools, hospitals, business-

year's theme, "Social Work- es and government offices.

ers: Generations Strong" was In their roles, they provide

selected by the National As- empowerment and support  
sociation of Social Workers to people of all backgrounds

(NASW) and honors the posi- and cultures, while helping  
tive and important contribu- them navigate through life's

tions social workers have obstacles and worries. Daily,  
made to this nation over social workers are charged  
generations. By recognizing with being the voice for  
National Professional Social  
Work Month, OCA intends to **See [SOCIAL WORK](#) Page 2**

## >>>> YOUTH VOICE <<<<

The unedited voices of young people who have been in foster care and are leading the way to change!

## Passion in Action



By Eshontee Rowe,  
EmpowerMENT Policy  
Council Member

**Once upon a time,** there was a youth by the name of Shontee. Shontee was a bright, talented, and ambitious young lady, who just so happened to enter the foster care at fifteen and a half years old. She was the stereotypical teenager who enjoyed doing extracurricular such as marching band and glee club. She maintained a B average in school and had great things going for herself. Despite all the great things she had going for herself, she had one major issue. She liked to argue and fight. She fought and argued about things that she was passionate about such as respect and honoring your word. Don't get me wrong the things she was fighting for were things she believed in, but she had to learn how to

**See [VOICE](#), Page 5**



**Georgia DOE and DFCS Partner to Encourage Families to Use Student Tablets to Access SNAP, Medicaid, or TANF Benefits**

*Note: The press release below is from the Georgia Department of Human Services website [here](#). The idea explained below was generated by Mary Barrett Yancey (Clarke County DFCS Director) who partnered with her local school system. The idea is now being encouraged statewide.*

In an effort to ensure children have access to the nutrition and medical services they need during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Georgia Division of Family & Children Services (DFCS) and Department of Education (GDOE) are partnering to encourage families with school-age children to use district-issued student devices to access online SNAP, Medicaid or TANF applications rather than visit the local county office. Leaders from both agencies worked throughout the week to remove any barriers that prevented access to the programmatic websites so that parents can file an application online and avoid the need to fill out an application at the local county office.

"We welcomed the opportunity to work with DFCS to make it easier for our families to get the support they need to take care of their children during this difficult time," said Garry McGiboney, DOE Deputy Superintendent of School Safety and Climate. "Our primary goal as a division is to make sure that we do everything in our power to help families have access to the basic things they need to take care of their families in this time of need", says DFCS Division Director Tom Rawlings, "we are very grateful for the support of our part-

ners at DOE in making access to services easier to families while helping the local offices and families practice social distancing." While local county office lobbies may be temporarily closed, DFCS remains open for business and is encouraging families to access self-service options.

**Self-service options include:**

**Food Stamp and Medicaid Benefits**

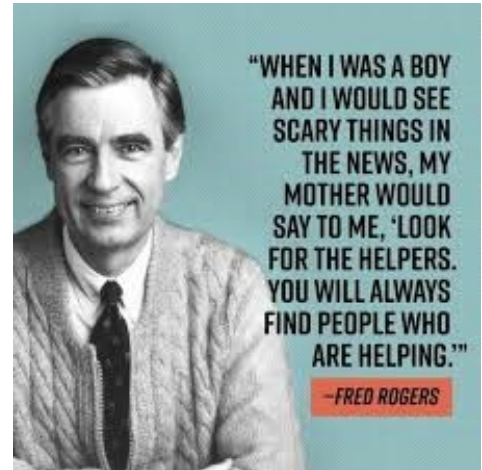
Visit: [gateway.ga.gov/access/](https://gateway.ga.gov/access/) (verification documents can also be uploaded and case status info is available for all benefits).

Download an Application: <https://dfcs.georgia.gov/services>.

**Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT)**

Visit: <https://www.connectebt.com/gaebtclient> or call: 888-421-3281 for updates. Those without internet access can contact the DFCS Customer Contact Center at 877-423-4746 for additional information or to request a paper application. Once completed, applications and any required verification can be mailed back to your local county DFCS office. County office locations are available online at <https://dfcs.georgia.gov/locations>.

Learn more about DFCS [here](#) and DOE [here](#).

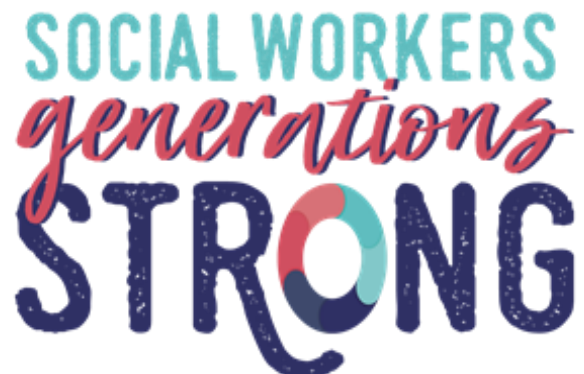


**Are you looking for a way to help? The Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) is looking for volunteers who have completed Mental Health First Aid training to provide support via a warm line. Email [MHFAvolunteer@dbhdd.ga.gov](mailto:MHFAvolunteer@dbhdd.ga.gov) by April 2, 2020 to express your interest.**

**Social Work, Cont'd...**

society's most vulnerable populations, including children and youth in foster care.

As a professional social worker myself, I can tell you that it takes someone very special to empathetically, and efficiently do this type of work. When things are in their most challenging state, it is usually a social worker who steps in to diffuse the chaos. Everyday social workers use their "super powers", to make a difference in the lives of the clients and community they serve. If you know a social worker who has chosen this field as their life's work let them know they are appreciated for all they do!





## PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE

USED TO SPEAK APPROPRIATELY AND RESPECTFULLY ABOUT AN INDIVIDUAL WITH A DISABILITY



INSTEAD OF THIS ...	TRY THIS ...
The disabled ...	Person with a disability
Normal person ...	Person without a disability
The blind ...	Person who is blind/visually impaired
Crippled, lame, deformed ...	Person with a physical disability
Has overcome his/her disability ...	Person who is successful, productive
<b>50 Million Americans Have a Disability</b>	<b>1 in 5 Americans is a Person with a Disability</b>

## #DDAwareness2020

March is celebrated as **Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month** with the goal to create awareness about developmental disabilities, teach the importance of inclusion within every aspect of life and to share the stories of individuals with a disability to show that a successful life is possible. This year's theme is "See Me for Me". With that, we would like to share information from the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) on People First Language. One way of promoting inclusion is communicating in a way that reflects knowledge and respect for all people. People First Language (PFL) achieves that goal of communication by choosing words that recognize the person first and foremost as the primary reference and not the disability.

The GCDD developed a guide to promote the usage of PFL that can be applied to use by professionals and the general public. The graphic on this page displays some simple ways to incorporate PFL in everyday use. For more information about PFL, visit the GCDD's website [here](#).

Not all people with disabilities agree on which language or terminology is preferred. Individuals will vary as to how they refer to themselves and how they would like you to refer to them. PFL is a great start to be more aware and intentional on how we communicate with each other.

## Stay connected!

What are some ways to connect during social distancing?



FaceTime  
(iPhones only)



Facebook  
Messenger



Google  
Hangouts



Google  
Duo



Skype



Zoom



WhatsApp



Slack



Viber

GEORGIA OFFICE  
OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

**State  
Holiday on  
April 10th**

Our office will be closed on Friday,  
April 10th to observe a state holiday.



## Opinion: State Can Do More to Help Challenged Foster Kids

*(This article was originally published by the AJC on March 11, 2020.)*



*By Chelsea Magee  
Director of Foster  
and Adoption  
Advocacy, Georgia  
Life Alliance*

**Most people use Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat** or a host of other social media to show the best of what's going on in their lives. The truth is, life isn't always pretty. And for children who grow up in homes where they are neglected, abused, or their parents are substance abusers, life is a game of survival.

With Gov. Brian Kemp and Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan pledging this year to make foster kids and those who age out of the system a top priority for the state of Georgia, I thought it was about time to tell the story of what it is like for some of us who had to be removed from our parents' care and placed in foster homes.

I am now a 34-year-old adult, but I still have many scars because of parents who just weren't capable of leaving their demons behind and putting their children first. I was one of those foster kids.

Like many foster children, my biological parents got married too young, divorced and moved on. When I was 7 years old, I was adopted. That's where the terror began.

I was never really accepted by this family, which wanted to have their own children. I was demoralized, humiliated, denied food, required to sleep in a

cold garage, not given proper clothing, verbally abused and severely beaten. I was made to quit school at age 14 under false premises of changing schools so teachers and counselors would stop asking questions about why I was so thin and what was happening to me at home.

When I was 16, I was taken into state custody, but unfortunately was also abused by one of my foster parents – a member of my extended family. By the time I left the foster care system, I found my birth mother and stayed with her until I earned a high school diploma at an alternative school when I was 19.

I eventually moved to Athens and took some online courses before a series of jobs led to me Atlanta, where I now work for a wonderful company in the financial services industry.

Growing up in a highly dysfunctional home is nothing I would wish on anyone. In 2019, there were 13,900 kids in foster care in Georgia. I am one of the rare foster kids who has not wound up in poverty or turned to crime or drugs.

Seventy-one percent of girls become pregnant in the first year that they age out of the foster care system.

Less than 11 percent who age out of the system earn that high school diploma or GED. I was determined to get mine. I wanted to make something of my life after being told I was worthless for years.

Having a mentor who could have pointed me in the right direction would have

helped. So many of us former foster kids truly are searching and need someone with wisdom. Thankfully, I found a solid church family that gave me love and support. Too often foster kids don't have support, and they turn to drugs, prostitution or crime.

We also need advice on how to balance a checkbook, create a budget, do the laundry, grocery shop – all the life skills young people take for granted. Job training, including career counseling, would be a tremendous boost when so many of us are insecure, don't know what job to pursue, or how to make a living.

As state lawmakers meet this winter, they are considering a host of ideas to help foster kids and foster families, including incentives for adoption, speeding up their cases in court and creating harsh criminal penalties for sexual abuse of foster kids. As a child who aged out of the system, I can tell you it would also be wonderful if the state encouraged recruiting mentors for former foster kids. Additional educational options could certainly help those who never graduated or perform well in public schools and need special attention.

Foster kids have come from some of the most painful experiences you can imagine. We have emotional battle scars that last a lifetime. Anything we can do to prevent this cycle from repeating itself is not only an act of love and compassion but a worthy act of preserving our society.



**VOICE, cont'd...**

put the boxing gloves down and use her passionate expression in another way. When this young lady was introduced to Georgia EmpowerMENT, she didn't know the impact it would have on her life.

Now I'm glad to say that I have retired the boxing gloves and how I learned to turn my passion into a purpose to help create change for my brothers and sisters who are currently navigating through the foster care system. I'm helping to set the example that despite the things that happened in my childhood, I will defy the odds and I will be successful. I will be graduating from Albany State University with my bachelor's degree in Music in May, but I can't take all the credit for my success. I have been blessed to have a strong support system which includes Georgia EmpowerMENT. Georgia EmpowerMENT is an initiative founded by former and current foster youth, who are working with community leaders to change the foster care system. Georgia EmpowerMENT also strives to help youth transition successfully into adulthood. Georgia EmpowerMENT has helped me develop professionally as well. I have learned public speaking skills, administrative skills, and leadership skills just to name a few. I'm currently serving as the Regional Impact Coordinator for Region 10 and the Vice President of the Policy Council.

The Policy Council is a group that consists of twenty current and former youth leaders who are working with community partners and local state officials to change and improve policy that affects youth in our welfare system. Our goal is to have child welfare administrators and workers, foster parents, group home workers, child advocates and attorneys, the business and faith community, other youth *See VOICE, Page 9*



**Welcome to the Team!**

Julia Presuel recently joined the OCA team as an investigator to provide assistance in processing our investigations. Welcome to the team, Julia! We are happy to have you!



**Receiving HOPE Center**

The Receiving HOPE Center is a safe environment where all their needs are met and assessments are completed at one location. While at this residential facility, survivors will receive medical care, academic support, therapeutic and stabilization services for up to 90 days before moving to a long-term placement.

**Wellspring Living**  
1040 Boulevard SE, Suite M  
Atlanta GA 30312  
(404) 948-4673



**Criteria:**  
Ages: 12-17  
All Genders  
Trafficked Victims

**Exclusionary Criteria:**  
Pregnancy  
Medically Fragile  
IQ below 70

**To make a referral:**  
Email: [RHCrefferrals@wellspringliving.org](mailto:RHCrefferrals@wellspringliving.org)  
Phone: 470-467-3669





## MARCH IS READING MONTH

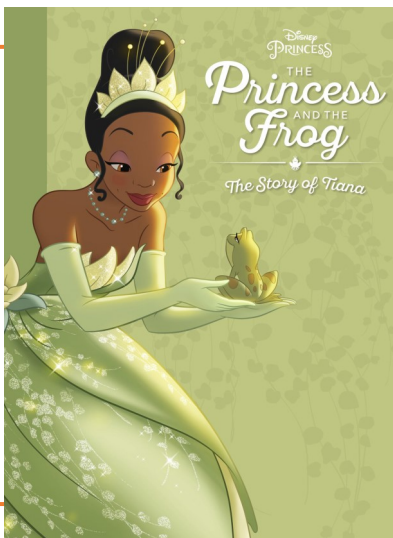
### WHAT ARE YOUR FAVORITE CHILDREN'S BOOKS?

*"My son with dyslexia really enjoyed reading Leo the Late Bloomer by Robert Kraus. It's a sweet picture book about a tiger that develops and learns at his own pace. At an early age, my son sensed he was different from his peers and felt reassured by Leo's journey. For fun, we read The Book With No Pictures by BJ Novak. It's great to hear the kids let loose with big belly laughs!" — OCA Investigator Julia Presuel*



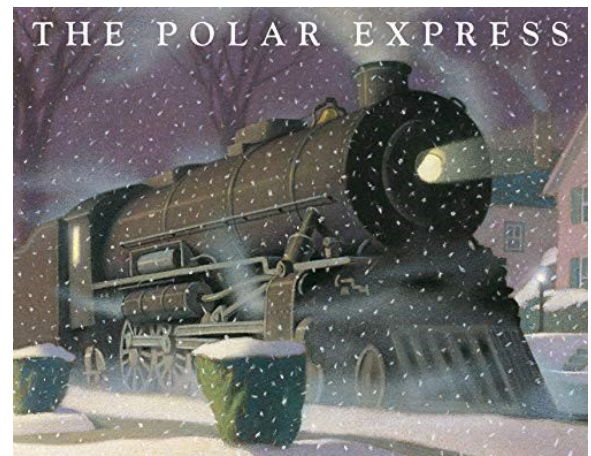
**The  
Book  
With  
No  
Pictures**

B.J. Novak



*"A children's book I enjoy reading to my daughter is Disney's, 'The Princess and The Frog'. We enjoy reading about the Princess and her Prince exploring throughout the bayou as frogs and meeting new friends." — OCA Investigator Shantelle Whitehead*

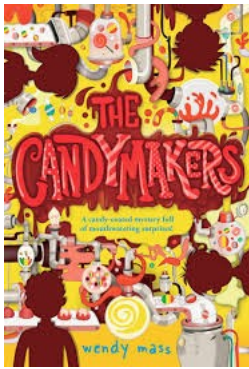
*"The Polar Express by Chris Van Allsburg has been a favorite children's book to read. In a world where we meet people from different walks of life, this book reminds us that we are all human beings that need joy and love no matter where we live or come from. The book teaches us to appreciate what we have, respect others, follow our hearts, and to believe in ourselves. Although it's a Christmas classic, the lessons we learn apply to our everyday lives no matter our age." — OCA Deputy Director Jansen Head*



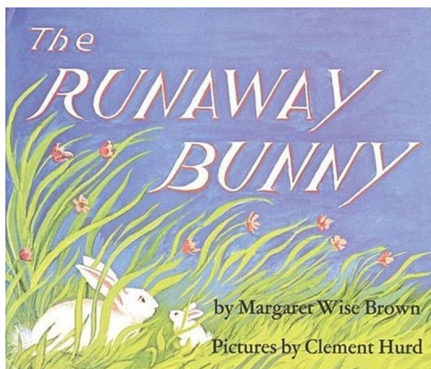
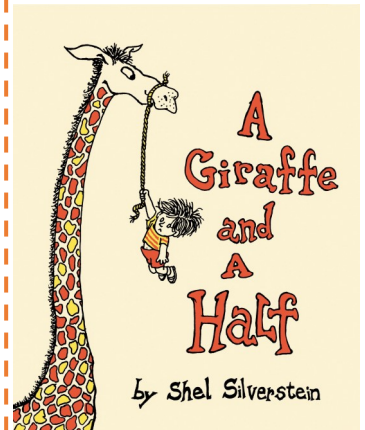


## MARCH IS READING MONTH

### WHAT ARE YOUR FAVORITE CHILDREN'S BOOKS?

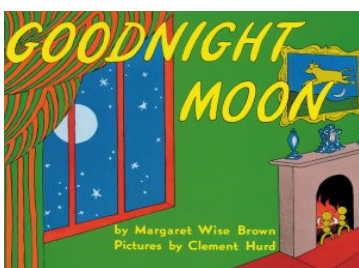


*"I have so many favorites, both as a child and a mom! Two current favorites in our house are "The Candymakers", by Wendy Mass, and "A Giraffe and A Half", by Shel Silverstein. My 4th grade son and I just finished "The Candymakers". We were both eager to keep reading to find out what would happen next! We enjoyed it so much we are about to start reading the sequel, "The Candymakers and The Great Chocolate Chase". Shel Silverstein is a highly regarded author in our house. So it comes as no surprise that my 1st grade daughter (who happens to love giraffes!) is a fan of "A Giraffe and A Half". In fact, she recently read it via FaceTime to a friend as a way to stay connected while practicing social distancing. Her friend also thought it was fun and silly!" - OCA Director Rachel Davidson*

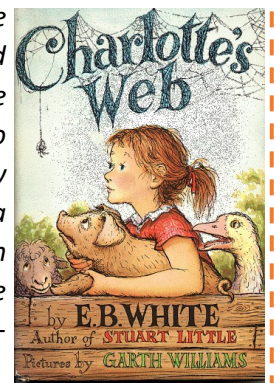


*"A book that I remember from my childhood is the Runaway Bunny. I liked that no matter where the little bunny went or how far away he tried to run, the bunny's mother would always be there and catch up to the little bunny. I like that it reassures children that their parents love them and will always be there." — OCA Investigator Ryan Sanford*

*"Favorites from a mom: I actually have many but my favorite two are: Goodnight Moon and Charlotte's Web. Goodnight Moon- This book became the most important part of our day, after reading it every night and able to recite from memory I got to hear "goodnight mommy- goodnight daddy" and for a moment time stood still as we read this favorite together. (We still have the book, the corners are frayed and pages are loose but would not take anything for it)! Charlotte's Web-This book reminded me*



*and taught my children about unconditional love. I would like to believe that my children's love of reading came from our many visits to the library and the excitement of getting to pick out a new book and even though they are grown up, they are both avid readers (consistently telling me about new books they are reading) which I hope will continue for many years to come." — OCA Senior Investigator Renee Moore*





**Together, Cont'd...**

during this pandemic, it has been reassuring to learn of the multitude of ways people have been supporting each other as they work through solving new logistical concerns. Some of the silver linings include:

- Additional food stamp funding is available (Click [here](#) for more information.)
- Virtual contacts have been approved by DFCS for their staff and providers when there are no immediate safety concerns at issue
- Foster parents are reporting positive interactions with biological parents during virtual visits
- ILP youth, including those in college, have been provided necessary supports
- Restaurants, schools, and communities have created opportunities for those that are food insecure to have food available during this time
- DFCS and DOE have partnered to encourage families with school-age children to use district-issued student devices to access DFCS' online services (Shout out to Clarke County DFCS Director Mary Barrett Yancey for helping to create this solution! See page 2 for more information.)
- Partners and communities are helping ensure parents and families are supported with school supplies and virtual assistance as they navigate virtual learning
- Broadband providers are offering various options for Georgians to connect to the internet. (Click [here](#) for more information.)

While this pandemic has brought a lot of challenges for all of us in such a short time, it is nonetheless reassuring to see Georgians coming together and thinking creatively for the greater good. In doing so, let's be creative in the ways we can fill in for our mandated reporters where they're unable to during this time. Engage with neighbors and friends and offer support as you're able, such as by helping someone apply for food stamps, virtually reading to a child in another household, having a meal delivered to a family, or sharing suggestions on dealing with stressors and mental health struggles.

DFCS Director Tom Rawlings shared, "Our number one priority is to make sure children stay safe. Now, more than ever, DFCS needs individuals and communities to be vigilant and raise their voices for children. We can't rely on mandated reporters alone. Where you are able, connect with and check in on your neighbors and friends (from a safe distance!), especially those that might be under additional stress. If you are concerned about a child's safety, please call 1-800-GACHILD. There is no punishment for making a report of possible abuse or neglect, if done in good faith."

All of our first responders deserve our deepest appreciation as they put their lives on the line to protect others, including children. As difficult as it is, let's all continue to do our part to help flatten the curve while also keeping children safe.

**Upcoming Events:**



- ✓ **April 2:** Webinar on "Technology and CSEC: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" provided by Children's Healthcare of Atlanta (CHOA). More info [here](#).
- ✓ **April 7 and 21:** Webinar on "Mental Health 101" provided by Mental Health America of Georgia. More info [here](#) and [here](#).
- ✓ **April 9 and 23:** Webinar on "Building Resilience in Youth" provided by Mental Health America of Georgia. More info [here](#) and [here](#).
- ✓ **April 20:** Free Virtual Resilience Documentary Screening and Panel provided by Prevent Child Abuse Georgia. More info [here](#).
- ✓ **April 23:** Webinar on "Talking to Children about Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: A Guide to Children's Books to Help Start the Conversation" provided by CHOA. More info [here](#).





**April is Child Abuse Prevention Month!**



**Staying Connected!**

MAKES #GREATCHILDHOODS HAPPEN



**#WearBlueDay on Friday, April 3rd!**

BLUE JEANS.  
BLUE SOCKS.  
BLUE SHIRT.  
**#WEARBLUEDAY ROCKS!**

Support #GreatChildhoods this  
Friday, 4/3/20!



Georgia Office of the Child Advocate  
**Rachel Davidson, Director**  
7 MLK Jr. Blvd, Ste. 347  
Atlanta, GA 30334

For general inquiries, assistance, or to file a complaint, please contact us by phone at (404) 656-4200 or on our website at <https://oca.georgia.gov/webform/request-oca-assistance-or-investigation>

To submit an article, photo, or event for the newsletter, please contact Deputy Director Jansen Head at [jhead@oca.ga.gov](mailto:jhead@oca.ga.gov).

**VOICE, cont'd...**

in and formerly in foster care and other community members hear our voices and join us in advocating for positive changes in the foster care system in the State of Georgia. Georgia EmpowerMENT's policy council is composed of six advocacy workgroups that align with the Georgia Youth Opportunities Initiative. Our workgroup topics consist of Pregnancy Prevention and Parenting Supports, Education and Economic Security, Permanency, Well Being, Race, Ethnic, Equity & Inclusion, and Housing. Our members of our council have sat on various panels, training, focus groups, and national work with the Jim Casey Initiative. BTW We love our community partners and appreciate the opportunities that are given to us. We have had group calls explaining and breaking down proposed bills and evaluate if we should help push it or not such as SB368 which we wanted to die. We have even had one of members get a shout out on Twitter from the Lieutenant Governor of Georgia who is in support of Senate Bill 335. As you can see, we're working hard to help change the foster system for the better. The Policy Council has events that are planned such as our Annual Capitol Day, but unfortunately due to the global pandemic, we have postponed our events. We want to ensure that we are practicing social distancing to decline the spread of the Coronavirus but be on the lookout for future events.

**Join us on Social Media!**



Facebook: @GeorgiaOfficeoftheChildAdvocate



Twitter: @georgia\_oca



Instagram: @georgia\_oca



LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/gaoca/>



YouTube: "Georgia OCA"