



# **Georgia Office of the Child Advocate for the Protection of Children**

## **2017 Annual Report**

**(Brief version without appendices)**

**Tom C. Rawlings, Director  
State Office of the Child Advocate**



## OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE

**Nathan Deal**  
Governor

**Tom C. Rawlings**  
Director

January 9, 2018

### **By Hand Delivery**

Hon. Nathan Deal  
Governor, State of Georgia

Hon. Casey Cagle  
Lieutenant Governor  
Georgia State Senate

Hon. P. Harris Hines  
Chief Justice  
Georgia Supreme Court

Hon. David Ralston  
Speaker  
Georgia House of Representatives

RE: Transmittal of 2017 Annual Report  
Office of the Child Advocate

Dear Governor Deal, Chief Justice Hines, Lt. Gov. Cagle, and Speaker Ralston:

On behalf of the Office of the Child Advocate, I am pleased to provide you with this report of the work done by our office over the past year – work that each of you has made possible.

Over the past year, our office has worked in tandem with DFCS, the courts, and the child advocacy community to find ways of improving our state's effectiveness at combating child abuse and neglect. I remain encouraged at the extent to which leaders in our state show such a willingness to work across the lines of agencies and branches of government.

As the report reflects, we were able to initiate this year a multi-disciplinary training and networking conference that brought together juvenile court judges, child welfare attorneys, DFCS staff and leadership, and a host of professionals who work with children. It is this kind of cross-disciplinary cooperation that we continue to strive for in 2018.

We especially want to thank Governor Deal for the work of his Children's Mental Health Commission and commend its recommendations to the legislature. We also hope that, working together, we will find ways to expand the sharing of educational, medical, and

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January 9, 2018

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law enforcement data among DFCS and our child-serving agencies so that we can better predict child abuse and prevent its recurrence.

Thank you for the leadership you show and for the opportunity to work with you.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom C. Rawlings', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Tom C. Rawlings  
Director, OCA



# 2017 OCA Advisory Board Members

**Render Heard**, Tifton Judicial Circuit (Juvenile Court Judge)

**Laura Eubanks**, Gwinnett County Public Schools  
(Social Worker)

**Lisa Jones**, Southwestern Judicial Circuit Judge  
(Juvenile Court Judge)

**Jose Rodriguez**, WellStar Kennestone Pediatric Associates  
(Pediatrician)

**Brad Ray**, Executive Director CASA (Court Appointed  
Special Advocates)



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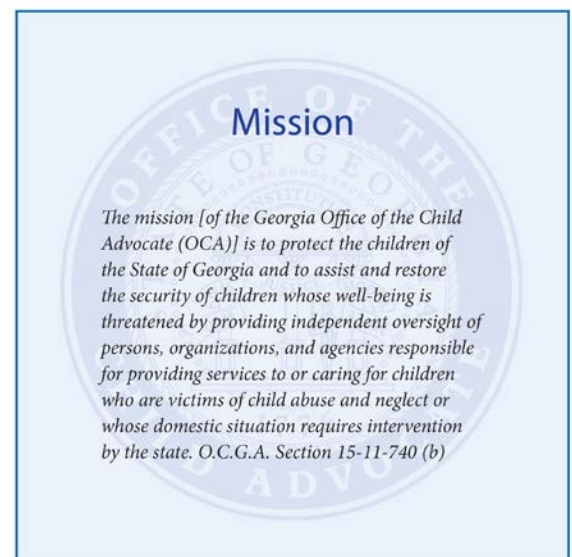
***OMBUDSMAN*** \ 'äm-, бүdz-mən \ [noun]:  
***One that investigates, reports on, and helps settle complaints.***

**“The word "Ombudsman" can be found in Old Swedish as the word *umbudsmann* (accusative) and as *umbuds man*, meaning "representative." The modern meaning of the term emerged when the Swedish Parliament appointed an Ombudsman in 1809 to safeguard the rights of citizens through establishment of a supervisory agency independent of the executive branch.”**

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## **OCA’s Mission**

When the Legislature created this agency in 2000, it intended the office to serve as an independent ombudsman for Georgia’s child protection system. “It is the intent of the General Assembly that the mission of protection of the children of this state should have the greatest legislative and executive priority,” the legislators declared. Thus, the agency’s primary mission is “to protect the children of the State of Georgia and to assist and restore the security of children whose well-being is threatened by providing independent oversight of persons, organizations, and agencies responsible for providing services to or caring for children who are victims of child abuse and neglect or whose domestic situation requires intervention by the State.”<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> [http://federalombuds.ed.gov/federalombuds/ombuds\\_FAQs.html](http://federalombuds.ed.gov/federalombuds/ombuds_FAQs.html)

<sup>2</sup> OCGA § 15-11-740 (b). The Act establishing our office is in Appendix A.



The statutes creating OCA envisioned that the bulk of our work would involve investigating and responding to complaints regarding children who are, or whose families have been, the subject of a DFCS report within the prior five years.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the bulk of our work involves responding to concerns lodged by parents, children, relatives, foster parents, and child welfare professionals regarding the way the agency or its contractors have handled a child protection case. We use these complaints and our resulting investigations not only to address the issue that may have arisen but also as a way of identifying trends within the child protection system. Then, carrying out our other main statutory mandates to collaborate with the child welfare community and to recommend changes in practice, we proactively take on projects designed to improve child safety, the child protection process, and outcomes for Georgia's abused and neglected children.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, the General Assembly has entrusted to this agency a number of other statutorily-mandated roles. OCA monitors statewide the creation and implementation of local child abuse protocols, which are designed to ensure the appropriate multidisciplinary investigation and handling of child abuse cases, especially those involving sexual and serious physical abuse. We are also charged with training those local teams, and we annually update a statewide model child abuse protocol.<sup>5</sup> The State Child Advocate serves as a member of the Statewide Child Fatality Review Committee, which is itself tasked with studying and finding ways to reduce the deaths of Georgia's children.<sup>6</sup> Guardians ad litem who safeguard the best interests of children in juvenile court must be certified through training approved by the Office of the Child Advocate.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> OCGA §§ 15-11-741, 15-11-742.

<sup>4</sup> OCGA § 15-11-743.

<sup>5</sup> OCGA § 19-15-2; see Appendix C for the summary of our protocol training this past year.

<sup>6</sup> OCGA § 19-5-4; for more information on the Child Fatality Review Committee, visit <https://gbi.georgia.gov/CFR>

<sup>7</sup> OCGA § 15-11-104 (f).



## 2017 Changes at OCA

OCA’s 2017 year opened with the appointment by Governor Deal of a new State Child Advocate, Tom Rawlings, who returned to the position in which he served under Governor Sonny Perdue from 2007-2010. Ashley Willcott, who had served as State Child Advocate from 2013-2016, returned to private child welfare law practice but remains very involved with OCA as the lead attorney on the Cold Case Project.<sup>8</sup> Director Rawlings brought in a new Deputy Director, Rachel Davidson, a skilled child welfare attorney who previously represented children in dependency proceedings and served in critical roles at the State Division of Family and Children Services, including a position as liaison between the agency and the juvenile courts. Diana Summers, whose expertise lies in administration, grants, and data management and analysis, rounded out the new leadership team.



Davidson

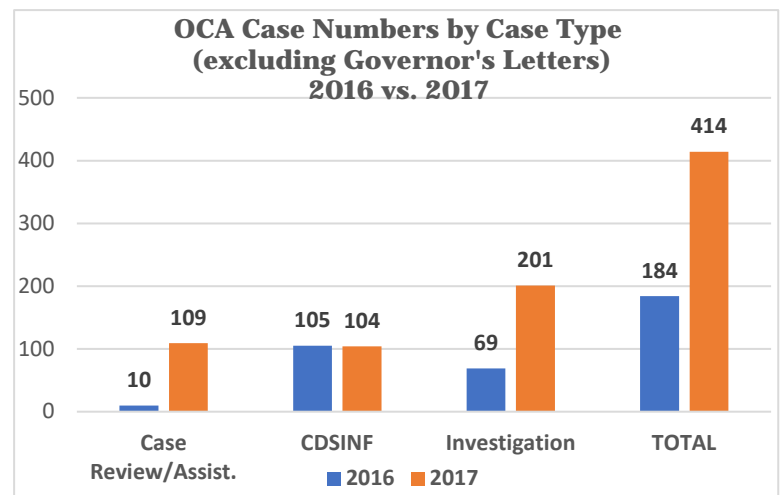


Rawlings

With the exception of new leadership, however, OCA’s experienced team of investigators remained in place: Chuck Pittman, Vickie White, Ryan Sanford, Renee Moore, and Shantelle Whitehead.

## Responding to Complaints and Concerns

Concerns and complaints from the public come to OCA in a number of ways. The public may call us at (404) 656-4200 and speak with our intake staff to file a complaint, and many of our reports come through our online complaint form.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, we receive calls from judges, legislators, and agency officials who have concerns about a case or who call on behalf of a child or constituent. Our agency is also notified of letters, emails, and calls that Governor Deal’s office receives and that are most often handled by DFCS’ internal constituent services staff. Should these concerns not be



<sup>8</sup> See Cold Case Project discussion, pp. 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> <https://oca.georgia.gov/webform/request-oca-assistance-or-investigation>



resolved within DFCS, we from time to time will undertake an investigation related to the concern.

Between January 2017 and the end of November 2017, OCA opened a total of 291 new cases (see figures 1 and 2). Many of these cases (103, or 35%) involved situations in which OCA reviewed a death, near fatality, or serious injury that occurred to a child whose family had involvement with DFCS within the five years prior to the significant incident. We review these cases to determine whether the agency’s prior involvement with the family was sufficient and whether the agency could reasonably have taken measures to prevent a subsequent incident of abuse or neglect. For several years, OCA has facilitated the group of DFCS staff, service providers, and other professionals who review these cases.

In the majority of these serious incidents, we find the child’s death or injury to be unrelated to the family’s prior involvement with the child protection agency. For example, DFCS may become involved with the family of a medically fragile newborn not due to allegations of abuse or neglect but rather because the family needs additional support to care for that child. If the child later dies from the medical condition, the case is one that DFCS and OCA will consider for possible review.

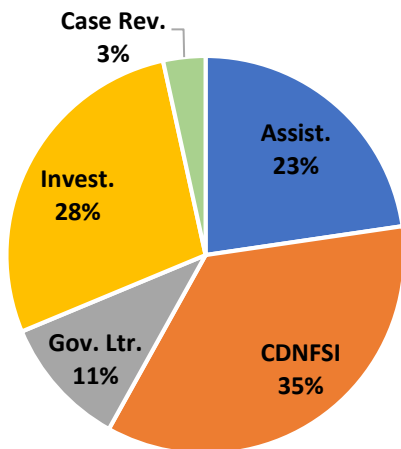


Figure 1: Types of cases opened in 2017 through 11/30, by percentage

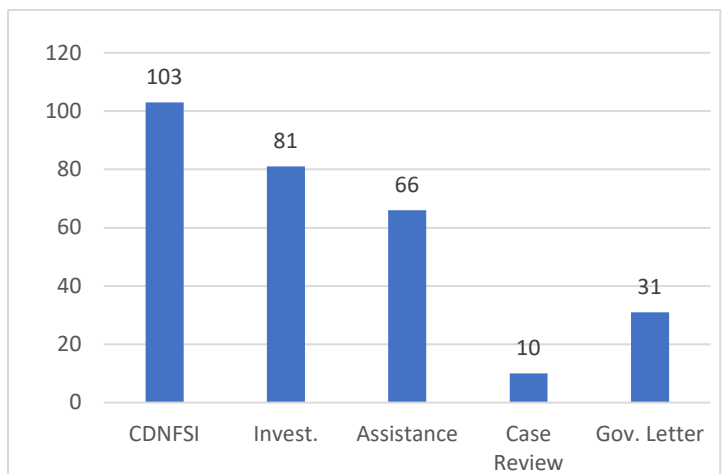


Figure 2: Number and type of cases opened by OCA in 2017 (through 11/30)

During the first 11 months of 2017, OCA responded to a number of complaints by investigating, providing a constituent with information and assistance, or by simply



reviewing the case to ensure all was well. In its review of complaints and cases, OCA attempts to determine whether there were problems in the implementation of child protection policy or errors in practice. Of the 241 cases we opened and closed through November 30, 2017, we found policy violations in 10% and noted child welfare practice deficiencies in 24%. The leading issues we found were problems in providing adequate assessment of a child or family's situation and problems in providing adequate services to families. The most common complaints we received from the public involved insufficient investigations of child abuse complaints and concerns regarding child placement.

Under its new director, OCA has put an emphasis on timely resolution of complaints and on cutting down the amount of time a case remains open. As a result of this new focus, we were able to cut our caseload from 417 open cases at the beginning of January to 231 open cases at the beginning of December. The amount of time our cases remain open reflects their level of difficulty. When we are reviewing a file or reviewing a child death or serious injury, we find it takes between 11 and 17 days to finalize our assessment. Cases in which we are providing assistance to a family, a provider, a child, or the public remain open around a month. Investigations, in which we are digging more deeply into the case to find the cause for an alleged problem and a solution to that problem, remain open for an average of two months.



*Governor Deal with incoming and outgoing OCA Staff at  
Director Rawlings' Swearing-in, January 2017*



## Major Projects 2017

As a small ombudsman agency, OCA cannot (and should not) attempt to involve itself in every aspect of Georgia’s child protection and child welfare system. Rather, we must prioritize efforts that we believe will have the greatest impact to improve the system, its efficiency, and its effectiveness. In 2017, we continued or began a number of projects through which we could bring our expertise to bear to improve outcomes for children and which involved working across disciplines and agencies to improve Georgia’s child protection system. These included:

- **The Cold Case Project;**
- **The Peer Review Project;**
- **The Summit, Georgia’s Child Protection Conference;** and
- **Child Abuse Protocol Development and Training.**

### **The Cold Case Project**

Since 2009, OCA has collaborated with the Supreme Court of Georgia’s Committee and DFCS to review and resolve some of the most difficult cases in our child welfare system: those in which children have lingered in foster care for long periods of time without returning to a safe home or finding a safe, stable, permanent family.

The “Cold Case” Project (“CCP”) – so named because it addresses children whose search for permanent, safe, stable families has grown “cold” and whose cases need an injection of new heat and energy – is driven by a software algorithm that mines DFCS’ database to find those children who have been in foster care for long periods of time and who are likely to age out of the system without permanency. CCP Fellows – experienced child welfare attorneys – then review the cases, schedule meetings or permanency roundtables with all DFCS staff, attorneys, therapists and the children and families involved, and search for ways to ensure that children do not age out of foster care without a permanent family setting.

### A COLD CASE PROJECT SUCCESS STORY

Cold Case Project fellows worked with “Tim,” a teenager who had spent 54 months in care, had gone through 11 different placements, and who had significant behavioral health issues.

Although both parents’ rights had been terminated, Tim’s father remained in contact with him, and Tim wanted to return to his father.

CCP staff worked to strengthen the bond between Tim and his father, ensuring that the father had special training to learn how to address Tim’s needs.

The Court reviewed the case and reinstated the legal relationship between Tim and his father, restoring a family for Tim.



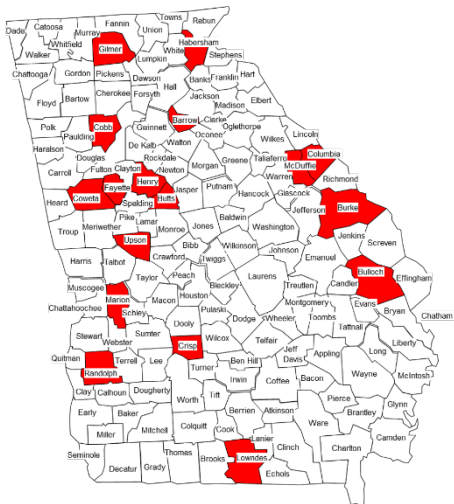
The project is led by Ashley Willcott, and this year’s fellows were Kristi Lovelace, Amanda Dean, Kellie Rogers, Diana Rugh-Johnson, Karlise Grier, Rosalind Zolicoffer, Jane Okrasinki, Mary Hermann, Vicky Wallace, and Michelle Vereen.

In 2017, CCP staff and fellows reviewed more than 235 new files and conducted over 160 “roundtable” staffings. In past years, we have found this work to substantially increase positive outcomes for children. The 2017 Cold Case Project Report will be issued in 2018, and the 2016 report is available online.<sup>10</sup>

**The Peer Review Project**

In 2017, OCA continued a valuable project we have undertaken for several years to improve juvenile court processes and outcomes. Working with Jerry Bruce (a former juvenile court judge who serves as Program Attorney for the Supreme Court’s

Committee on Justice for Children) and a number of highly-experienced and certified child welfare attorneys, OCA in 2017 visited juvenile courts in 17 different jurisdictions. At OCA, we are cognizant of the fact that protecting a child’s rights to be heard, to be protected, and to live in a safe, stable family is the vital role of the juvenile courts and the attorneys who represent parties in those courts. Our Peer Review Project has, therefore, focused on improving the court processes that create those outcomes.



Peer Review Counties 2017

OCA’s experts were especially interested in observing how different jurisdictions address the rights of children involved in dependency and termination of parental rights cases to have both a court-appointed attorney to represent their wishes<sup>11</sup> and a guardian ad litem and/or CASA to represent their best interests.<sup>12</sup> We also made efforts to note the different methods by which courts consider the participation rights of children; how different courts receive evidence; whether children and foster parents were notified of hearings;<sup>13</sup> and the extent to which parents, children, and DFCS were represented by legal counsel during these important proceedings.

<sup>10</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/gacoldcaseannualreport2016/>

<sup>11</sup> OCGA § 15-11-103.

<sup>12</sup> OCGA § 15-11-104.

<sup>13</sup> See OCGA § 15-11-109.



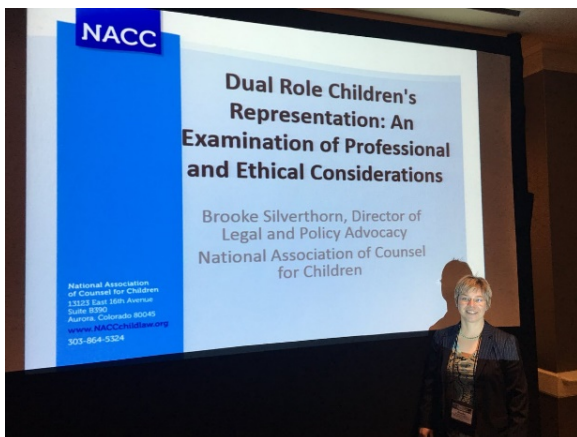
While full details of the 2017 findings are available in Appendix B, a few findings from our observations stand out. Some courts, we found, are not ensuring the child is present for hearings affecting him or her and has the ability to share his or her concerns.<sup>14</sup> Having the child present is especially important for youth and older children. At OCA, we often hear complaints from young adults who were in foster care that they never felt included in the court decisions affecting their lives. We also found that some courts are not holding the child protection agency's feet to the fire when it comes to the requirement that DFCS diligently and continually search for relatives who might be able to take custody of a child.<sup>15</sup> Our Peer Review observations have formed the basis for ongoing trainings that OCA and the Supreme Court's Committee on Justice for Children provide to child welfare attorneys and other court partners.

### **The Summit, Georgia's Child Protection Conference**



*Governor Deal addresses the Summit attendees*

In what we hope will be an annual event that will grow in both size and impact, OCA teamed up with DFCS, the Georgia Supreme Court, and a number of other partners to host a multidisciplinary child protection and child welfare conference November 27-29, 2017. Held at the Intercontinental Hotel in Atlanta, the conference was attended by almost 500 child welfare professionals including front-line case managers, juvenile court judges, attorneys, and medical personnel from all around Georgia. The training agenda for the conference focused on the intersection between law and child welfare practice and featured a number of



*Brooke Silverthorn of the National Association of Counsel for Children spoke on the ethics of child representation.*

inspiring national speakers including Judge Michael Nash from Los Angeles and Amelia Franck Meyer.

One of the highlights of the Summit was the presentation of videos featuring the

<sup>14</sup> OCGA § 15-11-19 (a).

<sup>15</sup> OCGA § 15-11-211.



work of case managers and judges around the State. In addition to providing training, the Summit provided motivation and reinforcement for those who are doing the difficult work of protecting children night and day. OCA believes this sort of multi-disciplinary training, in which front-line workers get to spend time networking and sharing with juvenile court judges and attorneys, is an excellent way to improve our state's system.

Presentations and videos from the Summit are available on OCA's website at <https://oca.georgia.gov/georgia-child-welfare-summit-2017>.

### ***Child Abuse Protocol Training and Development***

As it has done for many years now, OCA continued in 2017 to work with a number of partners including the state's prosecutors, Child Advocacy Centers, Prevent Child Abuse Georgia, DFCS, Law Enforcement, GBI, and medical professionals to improve our Statewide Child Abuse Protocol. Jodi Spiegel, former OCA Deputy Director, and former OCA Director Ashley Willcott continued to work with our agency by providing child abuse protocol trainings across the state and by convening a "mini-summit" of 58 child welfare professionals on September 22<sup>nd</sup> to revise and update the Statewide Protocol.

The updated draft has been submitted to OCA and is in the proofing stage at the time of this report. The draft will be reissued to contributors for final edits in January 2018. When the document is finalized, the 2017 Statewide Model Child Abuse Protocol will be distributed across the state as a tool to assist each jurisdiction update their own protocols. The model protocol will also be posted on the OCA website as a reference resource.

A full evaluation of the Protocol Project is available in Appendix C.



*Jodi Spiegel leads the Child Abuse Protocol Mini-Summit*

## **Other Projects and Initiatives**

In addition to these major projects, OCA staff worked diligently across agencies and professions in 2017 to improve child welfare law, policy, and practice. Here are just a few of the efforts we made to improve Georgia's system of protecting its most vulnerable children:



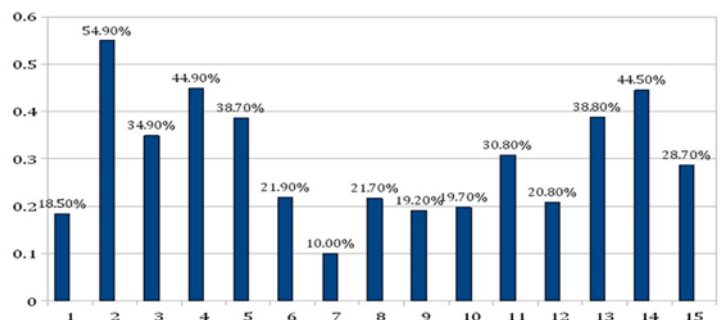
1. *Training nurses, medical providers, DFCS personnel, and other professionals on how to better collaborate to keep children safe.*

This work continues. OCA has developed a number of protocols for these professionals to follow to ensure the appropriate investigation of serious physical injury cases and has convened a working group to address care for newborns who are medically fragile or who are affected by substance abuse. To date, we have conducted trainings in Augusta, Atlanta, and Columbus as well as site visits in Savannah.

2. *Working to Keep Children in Foster Care Close to Home*

OCA Deputy Director Rachel Davidson served in an integral role as part of an ongoing project to keep children in foster care close to the homes from which they were removed. As the chart nearby shows, children in DFCS custody are too often placed in foster homes far from their families, making it more difficult for them to maintain stability and attachments to school, friends, activities, their faith community, and extended family support. As part of an effort to achieve permanency for youth in foster care and reduce the trauma of removal and placement changes, DFCS has made keeping children in local homes a priority, and OCA continues to work with DFCS and court leaders to implement this vision.

PERCENT OF CHILDREN PLACED OUTSIDE OF THEIR REGIONS (APRIL 2014)



DFCS makes every attempt to place children as close to their home community and school as possible. Region 3 is the 6<sup>th</sup> highest in the state with 35% of children placed outside of the region, and Region 5 is the 4<sup>th</sup> highest with 39%. This suggests that both regions are challenged in developing placement resources within their own region.

3. *Developing Guidelines for Working with Disabled Parents*

Throughout 2017, OCA staff has helped lead a working group of academics from Emory Law, judges, attorneys, DFCS leadership, and other professionals to address a growing concern: the proper handling of dependency cases involving parents who have severe developmental and cognitive disabilities and mental illness. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), states must make additional efforts to help these parents raise their own children. To that end, OCA has worked with the Barton Child Law and Policy Center at Emory



University to create a handbook that will help judges, attorneys, and case managers better address the needs of these parents while keeping their children safe and connected with family. That guidebook will be published in early 2018.

#### 4. *Working with Youth in Foster Care*

At OCA, we strongly believe that youth in foster care should be listened to and treated with respect. In 2017, OCA staff have regularly worked with DFCS and its providers as well as directly with these youth to ensure teens in foster care, as well as older youth who have remained in care past age 18, are able to fully participate in the decisions that will affect their futures. It is a legal and moral imperative that we prepare these youth to become responsible adults by providing them with proper educational opportunities, life skills, drivers' lessons, financial education, and the support they need as they heal from trauma and when they make the mistakes that we have all experienced and from which we learn to be healthy and productive adults.

#### 5. *Fighting Sex Trafficking*

OCA's staff regularly participate in a number of efforts to combat sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of children and serve on committees that are engaged in fighting this scourge. In September, OCA investigator Renee Moore had the opportunity to intervene herself to rescue a teenaged girl from sex trafficking. She writes:

*"I reviewed a case involving a seventeen-year-old runaway. During the course of the investigation, OCA discovered this child was being sex trafficked. OCA reached out to collaborative partners to begin what became an exhaustive search to find this child. Due to the efforts of many, this child was found and resources obtained to try and begin the healing process for this child. While attempting to change the course this child was on it was discovered this child had suffered a long history of abuse.*

*I spent many hours wondering what could have been done differently .... the conclusion I came to is sometimes we give up because we think there is nothing else that can be done. What I discovered is that no matter what age the child, they need to know we are not giving up on them. I also learned that whether you are law enforcement, OCA, DFCS, a private provider or a community resource, we are all focused on ensuring each child is safe and*



*protected and will take whatever course of action necessary to ensure we have done everything we could.*

*We do not see success every day but we move forward every day in this work to try and make that difference in a child's life. While everyone has heard the adages of how hard the work is and sometimes wonder if it is all worth it.....I can tell you it is worth every moment!!!!!!”*

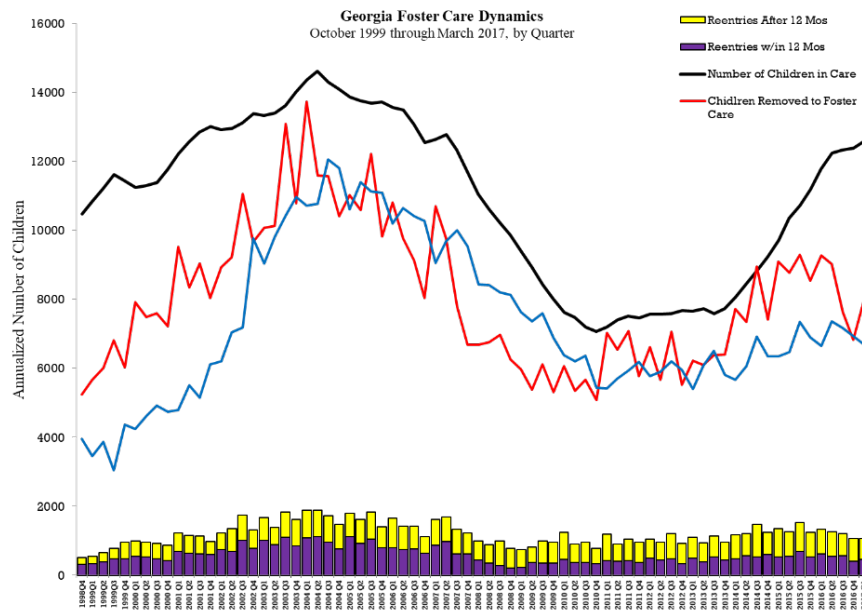
#### 6. Addressing the Needs of Runaway Children

Georgia has responsibilities to protect victims of child abuse and neglect, even if those children and youth we are serving claim not to want our help. Often, we find that victims of child abuse often have emotional or behavioral issues that drive them to run away from foster care. At the same time, these children who do run away are often at high risk for exploitation and sex trafficking. At OCA, we developed during 2017 additional guidelines and protocols for juvenile courts and DFCS to use to improve all of our efforts to locate, assist, and protect children who have run away from care.

## **The State of Child Welfare: Recommendations for 2018**

All public child protection and child welfare systems worldwide are under stress. Workers who go into this field with the best of intentions often burn out from dealing with the trauma they see. As a result, public child protection systems often have high worker turnover. Too often, when a child who should be under the system's protection dies, the public has a tendency to blame the system itself, and this public pressure often results in changes to agency leadership and sudden shifts in policy, law, and practice.

Georgia has itself experienced these types of issues since OCA's creation, which itself was spurred in part by the tragic death of a child who had passed through our child protection system.



As the chart above shows, since 2000 we have had spikes and troughs in the number of children in care. Right now, we are experiencing another spike. It is likely that this increase in the number of children placed in foster care has resulted from a combination of the following factors:

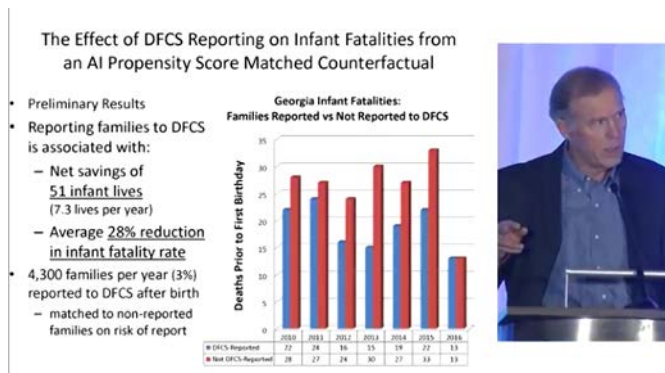
1. The implementation of a statewide centralized intake system for child abuse reporting (1-855-GACHILD), which has resulted in a significant increase in the number of reports of child maltreatment the State receives each month;
2. The debilitating effects of the opioid crisis, which has produced a significant number of addicted parents who are not able to care for their children and whose addictions cannot be quickly treated and resolved; and
3. To some extent, a natural leveling of the system, as our State's leadership has focused more on keeping children safe. It is likely that prior to 2010, the number of children in foster care was lower than might have been expected.

Governor Deal, working with former DFCS Director Bobby Cagle, has responded to these increases by making significant investments in our child protection workforce, including providing significant pay increases for new front-line workers. OCA is pleased not only with those reforms but also with improvements DFCS is implementing in the way the agency recruits, trains, mentors, and retains its workforce. In our opinion,



front-line CPS workers who work night and day in dangerous situations deserve the same respect and honor that we accord firefighters, policemen, and other emergency responders.

One of the key indicators of the success of our system is the number of children who are identified as having suffered abuse or neglect who remain free from additional abuse or neglect. Between October 2016 and September 2017, 96.3% of children who were found to have suffered maltreatment did not suffer additional maltreatment during the following six months. This result compares very favorably to national standards. Another key indicator of the system’s health is how quickly we are moving our children in foster care to safe, stable, permanent homes through reunification, placement with relatives, or adoption. In Georgia, for the 12 months ending in September 2017, DFCS reunited 57% of children in foster care with family or relatives within 12 months, with those children remaining in care for a median length of time of 10 months. We do have some work to do in assuring that children who must have a new adoptive family are moved along that path quickly; those children remained in foster care for a median length of time of almost 31 months.



Andy Barclay’s “Lives Saved” Presentation at The Summit

Although the public often hears of children who may have not been protected by state child protection systems, in 2017 OCA and its partners at DFCS, Public Health, and the Georgia Supreme Court Committee on Justice for Children were able to support a project that has demonstrated for the first time that DFCS involvement does, in fact, save children’s lives. Andy Barclay, a child welfare statistician, was able to compare two demographically nearly-identical

groups of families: one that had experienced DFCS involvement, and another that had not. His conclusion, supported by the data, is that DFCS involvement reduced child deaths by almost 40%.<sup>16</sup> In 2018, we hope to expand on these kinds of studies.

Two other bright spots on which we expect to see improvement by the state’s child welfare system in 2018 are in the areas of behavioral health care for children and educational achievement for children in foster care. The first improvement we expect will come from Governor Deal’s efforts to implement the recommendations of his

<sup>16</sup> Andy Barclay’s “Lives Saved” presentation is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD7-BB7uOls&feature=youtu.be>



Commission on Children’s Mental Health.<sup>17</sup> Among its recommendations, which we hope the General Assembly will follow, are to increase funding for school-based mental health services for children and to create and fund additional specialized therapeutic foster care services for children with significant mental health needs. The unfortunate fact is that our behavioral health system and our child protection system often serve the same children: those who have been yelled at continually, physically abused, who have witnessed domestic violence, or who have lived not knowing whether they are loved or cared for. By improving mental health services for all children, we can improve the chances they will not enter foster care and will grow into healthy adults.

The second area to highlight is DFCS’ recent efforts to boost graduation rates among children in foster care. Nationally, children in foster care have low graduation rates in part because of the trauma they have experienced that has hampered their ability to get a stable education. We have an obligation to ensure that once those children are in a stable foster home, they are empowered and supported to graduate from high school and take advantage of opportunities to pursue further technical or college degrees. The Multi-Agency Alliance for Children, DFCS, OCA and others have recently begun a collaborative project that will focus on improving these educational outcomes.

OCA has, in its partnership for child protection, offered throughout the year policy and practice recommendations to DFCS when we believed the agency’s work was not carried out to its potential. In addition, we recommend for 2018 that the State – not limited to DFCS but including courts and other child-serving agencies -- focus on the following issues:

1. Increase data for better decision-making

- DFCS should work with the Department of Public Health, the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Department of Community Health, and other state agencies to automate the provision of data that can help DFCS “flag” dangerous situations. For example, when DFCS is determining the risk of danger to a child about whom a child abuse complaint has been made, it should have the ability automatically to pull that child’s medical records as well as his or her parents’ records related to substance abuse and mental health. Many of these records are already kept in electronic form.

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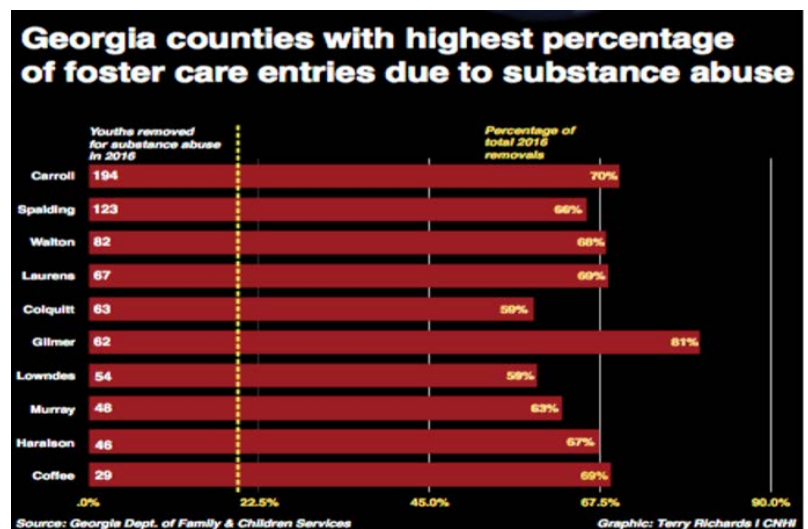
<sup>17</sup> The full Commission report, released on December 11, 2017, can be found on OCA’s website at <https://oca.georgia.gov>.



Likewise, if DFCS has a report on a child but cannot find the family despite a diligent search, emergency rooms and law enforcement personnel should have a way to alert DFCS if they encounter the family.

## 2. Improve handling of situations involving newborns affected by substance use

- Pursuant to the federal Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016, states are required to identify and assess children who are born “affected” by drugs, whether those drugs are properly prescribed or are illegal street drugs. DFCS has taken the lead on receiving reports of drug-exposed children, requesting the parental substance abuse



assessment, and working with providers such as Babies Can’t Wait to implement the “plan of safe care” required by this federal law. In OCA’s experience, however, there remain a number of obstacles to successful implementation, including:

- Some hospitals and healthcare providers are not notifying the agency of children born drug-exposed, thwarting the agency’s ability to help these families.
- There is a lack of coordination among the various agencies and providers who are charged with assessing the mother’s substance abuse issues, designing a plan to help her while keeping the child safe, and implementing services.

OCA has formed a working group to address these issues and recommends that all state health care agencies and providers make the identification, assessment, and treatment of drug-exposed newborns a priority.

## Conclusion

All of us at OCA continue to look for ways that we can positively impact our state’s



system for protecting children. We understand that this responsibility is not that of one agency or even of government alone; rather, it requires us to work humbly in partnership with all of those who have made child protection the focus of their work.