



## Moving FFPSA Forward in Georgia:

### An Update on the State's Efforts to Implement the Family First Prevention Services Act



**By Melissa Carter**  
Director, Barton  
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Law School

**Georgia's embrace of the federal Family First Prevention Services Act ("FFPSA")** officially began with the September 13, 2018 announcement by Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) Director Tom Rawlings that September 29, 2020 had been selected as the state's target date for full implementation, a full year before states are required to be fully compliant with the new federal law. The most significant consequence of a failure to comply is the loss of federal funding available through

Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The higher stake, however, is the opportunity to transform Georgia's child welfare system into one that is fully committed – now with the support of federal funding -- to the prevention of unnecessary removal of children into foster care. Naturally, the announcement of an implementation date powered expectations for immediate and concrete next steps. Then, the wait settled in.

That kind of wait can feel unsatisfying and worse, anxiety-provoking. The perception might be that no progress is being made. The reality is that confident implementation of this kind of systemic undertaking requires careful planning. The months since November have been dedicated to the necessary building and spreading of awareness and knowledge about the requirements of FFPSA beyond DFCS to the full expanse of the child welfare system, from placement and service providers to judges, from elected officials to agency leadership. Community education and engagement has been and will continue to be ongoing. Internal agency governance structures have also been set up so that the work to be led by DFCS can be efficiently and intentionally aligned. The status quo of practice, policy, and law is being examined so that the steps toward change can be clearly understood and designed. **See [FFPSA](#), Page 4**

### House Bill 472: Opening the Doors to Extended Family Preservation



**By Tom Rawlings**  
Division Director,  
DFCS

**Georgia's Division of Family and Children Services** and its juvenile courts now have a new legislative tool that will help keep children

safe while providing court oversight and keeping them with parents or extended family. Governor Kemp recently signed into law HB 472, an administration bill carried through this year's General Assembly session by Rep. Bert Reeves and Sen. Blake Tillery.

Under HB 472, when DFCS or other authorities ask the juvenile court to authorize an emergency removal of an allegedly dependent child, the court must first determine whether "Temporary Alternatives to Foster Care" ("TAFC") could be implemented to keep the child safe pending a preliminary hearing on the case. Rather than removing the child to foster care, the court may, *ex parte*,

**See [HB472](#), Page 5**

*The unedited voices  
of young people who have been in care*

## Youth Voice

*Insights provided courtesy of Ashley Willcott*

**I have had the good fortune of meeting W.A.** through the Cold Case Project. At the time of his case review about five years ago, we learned that he did not have any visitors. He has been in and out of various PTRFs; has had multiple placements; has multiple diagnosis; a below average IQ; and various and multiple reported behavioral issues.

Of course at first I was cautious. I would visit him (just me) always within the rules of his placement. As I started to **See [Voice](#), Page 6**



## Baby Steps Recovery Program



By Judge Peggy Walker,  
Douglas County  
Juvenile Court Judge

The Juvenile Court of  
Douglas County serves as one

of fifteen national Quality Improvement Centers for Collaborative Community Court Teams (QIC-CCCT). The purpose of this national initiative is to address the needs of infants and families affected by substance use and prenatal substance exposure. The Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016 requires reporting of children born exposed and Plans of Safe Care for children born affected by substance use. The role of these sites is to implement federal law in a manner that utilizes best practices, policies and procedures for health and well-being of infants and their families affected by substance use. In Douglas County, the focus is to implement a community risk reduction model to connect women who are pregnant with medical insurance, medical care, substance use treatment and case management to co-ordinate and support the family during the pregnancy. With these supports in place, the hospital will have the information necessary for safe delivery and keep the mother and child together. The strongest evidence available demonstrates that keeping the mother and child together immediately after delivery is necessary for social, emotional, and physical health, and well-being is ensured through the Baby Steps Recovery Program.

Douglas County Juvenile Court is scheduling mini summits for August and October of 2019 to begin the process of dissemination of what has been learned, what is working and what needs to happen next to serve these families. Invitations will be extended in late May. If your jurisdiction has an interest in being included, please contact Gabe Howard by email at [goward@co.douglas.ga.us](mailto:goward@co.douglas.ga.us).



## Child Welfare Training Collaborative



By Amy Mobley, Program Manager,  
Child Welfare Training Collaborative

Beginning in 2016, the Child Welfare Training Collaborative (CWTC) created a partnership between the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services and Georgia State University School of Social Work Professional Excellence Program to enable stronger relationships between agencies to promote better outcomes for children. These partners include child-and-family-serving agencies and community organizations across multiple sectors including: child placement providers, juvenile justice, law enforcement, early care and education, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), and behavioral and physical health providers.

Bringing diverse child and family serving populations to the same table through training and action planning meetings creates an opportunity for community partners to have a shared understanding of issues facing children and families involved in the child welfare system and also strengthens collaborations to promote better outcomes for Georgia's children. Since its inception, CWTC has focused on increasing understanding about complex trauma and the impact of complex trauma on children and families, promoting the application of learning from training, and fostering collaboration among community partners and with the Division of Family **See [CWTC](#), Page 6**

### Upcoming Events:

- ✓ Children's Mental Health Awareness Day at the Capitol, May 9, 2019, Atlanta, GA. More info [here](#).
- ✓ Foster Walk 2019, May 18, 2019, Lithonia, GA. More info [here](#).
- ✓ (Free!) Human Trafficking Community Training, May 23, 2019, Atlanta, GA. More info [here](#).
- ✓ Free courses on child trauma and brain development through the Child Welfare Training Collaborative, multiple and ongoing opportunities statewide. More info [here](#).
- ✓ Save the Date! The Summit: Georgia's Child Welfare Conference, November 13-15, 2019, Alpharetta, GA. Stay tuned for more details.



*Mark your  
calendar!*



## Pinwheels for Prevention

**Pinwheels are the national symbol for child abuse prevention** and are planted throughout the state every April during National Child Abuse Prevention Month. Blue pinwheels are planted in many communities across the state; below is a small sampling as seen on social media. These pinwheels represent the happy and healthy childhoods that all children deserve. As we continue to see these beautiful pinwheels sprout and play in the wind, let us remember that we all have a role to play in keeping children safe and making every effort to protect children from abuse and neglect throughout the year.



*Cherokee Co. DFCS planted 150 pinwheels in Downtown Canton.*



*Bulloch Co. DFCS wearing blue with their pinwheels.*



*Butts Co. DFCS planted pinwheels in their courthouse square.*



*Polk Co. DFCS wearing blue with their pinwheels.*

## WHAT IS STATE OF HOPE ALL ABOUT?

|  |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|
| <p>Offer models for youth and families to shape the work that is meant to serve them</p>              | <p>Create convening opportunities where stakeholders can learn from each other and build relationships</p>                       | <p>Lift up and scale promising practices</p>              | <p>Inspire collective impact and innovation</p>    |
| <p>Partner with communities and support efforts that ensure that individuals and families thrive</p>  | <p>Connect and support local leaders in prioritizing the needs of families and developing strategies to address these needs</p>  | <p>Encourage communities to leverage their strengths</p>  | <p>Celebrate community successes and shine a light on HOPE in action across the state</p>  |

## State of Hope Applications Under Review

DFCS is proud to announce the second round of applications for potential State of Hope sites closed out at the end of March with more than **120 applicants!** Applications were received from every region in the state and will be evaluated in the coming weeks to determine their level of support: emerging, designated, or funded.

Additionally, current designated sites in the 23-county metro area were invited to a unique opportunity on April 11<sup>th</sup> to learn about accessing additional funding and meet with Dan Williams of the Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta. The foundation serves as one of our partners with State of Hope. Additional opportunities are being pursued to connect sites with Community Foundations in other areas of the state.



## FFPSA, cont'd...

And, while this level of assessment and organization is going on in Georgia, similar efforts are underway in all states. An ecology of sorts is developing, with learning happening within and between states, the federal government and national resource and technical assistance organizations supporting key stakeholder groups. The result is a centripetal force that propels seemingly disparate, and sometimes competing, efforts toward a common center.

That alignment in Georgia is being facilitated, in part, by a clear vision developing from DFCS. DFCS Director Tom Rawlings has stated that DFCS's goals with respect to FFPSA include:

- Safely preventing removals to foster care through targeted, effective, community-based prevention services;
- Supporting a model of extended family preservation that allows children to remain in their communities;
- Ensuring children are appropriately placed in settings that meet individualized needs and preserve family and community connections; and
- Leveraging and investing in communities to provide adequate and effective service capacity statewide.

Consistent with that vision, DFCS pursued substantive legislation and appropriations requests during the 2019 legislative session to help create readiness within the state for full FFPSA implementation. With the support of Governor Kemp and the members of the Georgia General Assembly, Georgia now has implementation assets in the form of a statutory framework for expanded court oversight and budgetary support to build necessary service capacity and technology infrastructure. The Amended 2019 Fiscal Year budget for the Department of Human Services includes an authorization for DFCS to use existing surplus funds to assess the readiness of congregate care providers to become Qualified Residential Treatment Programs pursuant to FFPSA and to support retention initiatives for foster parents and relative caregivers, consistent with FFPSA's emphasis on family-based care. The Fiscal Year 2020 budget included significant injections of state funding to support enhancements to SHINES, the statewide child welfare information system, in addition to funding to support a FFPSA project management team. The legislature also acted affirmatively in support of relative caregivers by increasing relative per diem rates by \$1.00.

Changes to the Juvenile Code adopted during the recent session also reinforce the aims of FFPSA. House Bill 472 authorizes the juvenile court to order "temporary alternatives to foster care" in lieu of removal or placement of the child in foster care. Temporary alternatives to foster care are already deemed to be an appropriate practice in order to prevent or reduce trauma, allow the child to be cared for by people with whom the child has an existing bond, or ensure the child's safety pending further court action. The new law aims to strengthen that front-end practice by permitting the court to enter an order authorizing the care of a child by a relative or fictive kin or requiring a pre-removal investigation and report by DFCS, in addition to other forms of protective orders already provided for by law. This oversight, coupled with funding that will become available through FFPSA for prevention services, will support a more robust system of prevention and family preservation when safe and appropriate for the child. Additionally, the legislature passed Senate Bill 225, which includes many of the core technical compliance aspects of FFPSA. The bill adds a definition of "Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP)" to the Juvenile Code; it sets forth documentation requirements for DFCS regarding children placed in QRTP settings and requirements for evidence to be presented by DFCS at each periodic review hearing and permanency hearing concerning any child placed in QRTP settings. It also codifies the federal law's specifications for an assessment of the appropriateness of a placement by a qualified individual, within required timeframes, and subject to court oversight. Finally, the bill adopts the requirement that youth aging out of foster care receive official proof of having been in foster care.

The steady march forward of initial and preliminary planning and system design, coupled with [See FFPSA, Page 7](#)



## National Happenings



OCA attended two different national convenings in Washington, D.C. this month.

The first was the ABA Center on Children and the Law's conferences where Jerry Milner, the Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau and the Acting Director of the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families welcomed everyone.

As part of the Children's Bureau federal Court Improvement Program (CIP), representatives from Georgia—Jerry Bruce (AOC), Melissa Carter (Barton Center), and Chris Hempfling (DFCS) - spoke about Georgia's efforts on MDCANI. Two main areas highlighted during the CIP meeting include the CFSP and the Title IV-E attorney representation waiver.



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### HB 472 cont'd...

authorize a child to stay with a relative or neighbor; order an individual out of the family home; or enter a temporary protective order.

The new law serves two important purposes. First, it will cut down on the unnecessary removal of children when lesser alternatives would keep the child safe and secure while DFCS works to address the issues that presented a threat to the child. In many instances, we have found that children are removed to foster care on an emergency basis only to be returned to the family under a protective order or court-ordered case plan following the preliminary protective hearing. Second, this law will help us start the process of implementing our options under the federal Family First Prevention Services Act to provide IV-E eligible services to families of children who are not in state custody. By identifying family members and services that can keep the child safe while avoiding removal, we maintain the child's and family's eligibility for these federally-funded community-based services.

In addition to helping us find alternatives to foster care, this new law also promotes good outcomes for children by ensuring court oversight of these cases and of our agency's work. Whenever the court issues a TAFC, it will convene within five days a preliminary hearing to determine how to proceed on the case. At that hearing, parents will be afforded counsel and children will be appointed attorneys and guardians ad litem. We anticipate that most of these cases will continue under the court's jurisdiction as non-removal dependency cases, and the involvement of

See [HB472](#), Page 6



**HB 472 cont'd...** of judges and attorneys will spur all those involved to ensure the well-being and success of the child and family.

The requirements of HB 472 are also a natural extension of a legal requirement we have had in place for many years: that before removing a child, the court must determine whether DFCS used “reasonable efforts” to avoid removal and must find that remaining in the home is contrary to the child’s welfare. Intake officers must be trained annually on the law and on best practices for making these alternative findings. By requiring judges and intake officers to actively explore these alternatives, the law encourages us all to ensure we follow the spirit as well as the letter of the reasonable efforts law.

Governor Kemp and the General Assembly are to be commended for this innovative legal change that will promote our State’s efforts to protect children while respecting to the greatest extent possible the right of children to remain with their parents and family.

**CWTC cont'd...** and Children Services. The ability to recognize and respond to the impact of traumatic stress; the infusion of trauma awareness, knowledge, and skills into organizational practices and policies; and the ability to act in collaboration with others who are involved with the child and family are key characteristics of a trauma-informed child and family service system.

To date, the CWTC program has provided training opportunities around 5 courses to over 14,835 participants. Training is provided across the state at a variety of scheduled locations.

If you are interested in attending or scheduling a training in your community or school, you can access the community provider and school course descriptions here <http://bit.ly/cwtccourses>.

For those who may not be able to attend a live class, there is an online Trauma/Brain 101 course that can be accessed by clicking on the instructions <http://bit.ly/traumabrainonline>.

**Voice cont'd...**

get to know him I felt very comfortable introducing my family to him. We visit him when we can and take him out for the day. His favorite restaurant is Waffle House and it does not matter what we offer that is always his first choice! He has been nothing but respectful, kind to and embracing of my children who are now 11, 14 and 15 years old. They know where he likes to eat and what he likes to do. They know that he is not a big toucher so they don't expect nor they give hugs. They know that he expresses himself differently and they understand what he means. When asked to write about their experiences with W.A., they shared the below. We are better for him and our lives.

“I felt as if it opened up the world and showed you how not everyone is created equal despite what they say. Some people just don't have good opportunities so we must do our best to allow them to have those opportunities. He loves to run outside and race us.” **Age 14**

“I think that W.A. doesn't get the education that he needs I also think he needs to see the world more. He is very funny and makes us laugh. And alot of little things make him laugh.” **Age 11**

“I feel like through the years, W.A. has learned a lot and as an effect of that matured as well. The foster homes he goes to don't give him the kind of care he needs. With a different structure, he can grow more into a mature person and become who he really is. I can't believe how tall he has gotten.” **Age 15**



## Welcome to the Team!

We are excited to introduce you to our two newest team members who came on board with us this month!

Megan Dishman is serving as our Office Administrator. She comes to us from the Multi-Agency Alliance for Children (MAAC) and has a background in psychology, social science research, and data.



Megan Dishman, OCA Office Administrator



Jansen Head, OCA Deputy Director

Jansen Head has joined us as the Deputy Director. Jansen has years of experience as a lawyer with state and local government and has worked on immigration and trafficking issues. She is looking forward to contributing to the child welfare field and meeting many of you!

We are pleased to welcome these new members to our team and know they will contribute greatly to our collective work!

**FFPSA, cont'd...** the legislative and budgetary benchmarks of the past session will add to the momentum building behind FFPSA implementation in Georgia. In addition to the administration of FFPSA budget items and education concerning changes in the law, stakeholders with an interest in FFPSA can expect to see frequent and on-going public education and professional training events, local engagement opportunities including through upcoming DFCS roadshows and specially-set meetings, and enhanced professional communication efforts, including the launch of a public website.

This early stage of planning for implementation can be an experience of one step forward, two steps back as progress is made and then events are experienced that cause the work to be further behind. The child welfare system is a complex system and meaningful and lasting change does not come quickly or simply. Sometimes small steps must be taken before the bold leaps that satisfy the wait. But, progress is progress nonetheless.

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