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## Editorial: How to Fight Fake News in Child Welfare

By Tom C. Rawlings  
State Child Advocate

In Georgia, as elsewhere in the country, state agency records involving child abuse and neglect cases are generally confidential. When asked about a pending case, the agency usually responds that it can't even confirm such a case exists. This confidentiality is generally a positive thing, as it protects the privacy of young victims and protects families from scurrilous gossip, especially when someone has called in a child neglect complaint but the parents have done nothing wrong.

In recent weeks, I've been reminded that DFCS' inability to comment on a child welfare case opens a wide door for unscrupulous parents and caregivers to avoid and deflect responsibility for their own wrongdoing. Parents and families who have mistreated a child are free to call television and print reporters to complain about their "unjust" treatment at the hands of the "child-snatching" agency. They can create social media pages dedicated to seeking "justice" for the child. They can set up crowd-funding charity pages to raise money to "fight" the agency. They can make whatever claims they want in these efforts, be they

true or false. And the agency, barred by confidentiality rules from even publicly acknowledging the pendency of a child protection investigation, must sit silent even when the story being spread is fake news.

As the state's child welfare system ombudsman, I've certainly seen situations in which bureaucrats used the confidentiality of these records as a shield to avoid public scrutiny. But there are times when the confidentiality laws work against both the child's best interests and the principle that "sunshine is the best disinfectant." Sometimes, the problem is compounded when journalists accept an aggrieved family member's story on face value without making any effort to inde-

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## Promoting Reasonable Efforts

DFCS pilot project seeks safe alternatives to foster care.

With Georgia's foster care population exceeding 15,000 children, the State's child protection agency is making efforts to improve services and supports that can keep at-risk children safely in their own homes and communities. One significant new effort will bring in seasoned statewide experts to help counties determine if a child's situation requires removal from the home. A "PRE Team" short for "Promoting Reasonable Efforts," will assist counties in taking a broader and more intensive approach providing services designed to keep the child safe and avoid the trauma of removal when possible.

As part of this effort, a team consisting of DFCS county, regional, and state office staff, OCA, and the assigned SAAG will staff potential cases prior to seeking court intervention.

See [PRE](#), page 5

Support	Further support the intake decision process by promoting and ensuring reasonable efforts are made to prevent unnecessary removals
Strengthen	Strengthen the removal decision
Prevent	Prevent unnecessary foster care entries

Top goals for the PRE team process.

*OCA's monthly platform for the unedited voices of young people who have been in care....*

## Youth Voice

*Tiffanie Reyna offered the following reflection at the 2018 Celebration of Excellence, June 2, 2018, at the Westin Perimeter in Atlanta.....*

**Friday Jan 13th, 2012 is when my story begins in the system.** That morning was the last time I saw my room, my house, and my family dog. That's when I was taken off the school bus and never returned home. At the time I thought the whole world, especially my family, was against me, but what I didn't realize is that there was so many people in my corner rooting for me.

I was 16, a sophomore in high school. I was supposed to be that annoying teenage girl who was on her phone all the time, on the cheer squad, and having countless sleepovers.

The cottage is my group home where I stayed for a year and 9 months. They gave me so many sleepovers every single night, they supported me being on the cheer team, and when I proved to them that they could

See [VOICE](#), page 6

## ***Let's Celebrate!***

*26th annual event celebrates educational achievements of youth in care.*

*By Rachel Davidson,  
OCA Deputy Director*

**"As you let your light shine, you unconsciously give others permission to do the same."** This inspiration was shared during the 2018 Celebration of Excellence by Wendy Raquel Robinson, keynote speaker (and acclaimed actress) whose father spent part of his childhood in foster care.

What began 26 years ago with a small celebration of 20 high school and college graduates from DeKalb County has grown this year to a celebration honoring 250 graduates from across the state consisting of 200 high school graduates, 40 GED program graduates, and 10 post-secondary graduates!

The annual Celebration of Excellence (COE) event was born in 1993 after a child advocate investigator and a child advocate attorney had trouble making it to multiple graduation ceremonies for their clients in foster care. The event has grown and evolved over the years as so many have played a role in honoring the academic achievements and milestones of more than 5,000 youth in foster care.

The COE ceremony is now the culmination of a three day forum for youth in care which focuses on



providing resources to the youth that will assist them as they begin college, trade school, and/or enter the workforce. The teens participate in workshops focused on career soft skills, health and well-being, money management and other topics designed to educate them and enhance their ability to succeed.

A high school graduate and scholarship recipient, Alexis Bell offered this insight with her fellow graduates: "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." Youth in foster care encounter more challenges than most students to achieve academic success. However, as Alexis has experienced, your outlook can have a big impact on your outcome.

May we all continue to help others shine!





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## Editorial, continued...

pendently corroborate the facts.

Unfortunately, fourth-estate professionals sometimes seem to view DFCS' refusal to comment on a case as an admission of guilt. Journalists also often don't fully understand the child welfare process and stop asking questions when the agency press liaison says, "no comment."

Journalists should not accept a single-source account at face value. Parents willing to talk to the press about DFCS' involvement in their family should also be willing to provide the reporter with medical and child protection agency records backing up their claims. Reporters might also remember that when a child is removed from the home, the juvenile court will be involved and will have numerous hearings throughout the life of the case. Those dependency hearings in the juvenile court are *presumed* open to the public pursuant to OCGA § 15-

11-700 (b)(6). Even were a judge able to limit public dissemination of the proceedings' testimony, attending these hearings would allow reporters to get all sides of the story and hear the perspectives of attorneys for the State, the parents, and (especially) the child.

This next year, the Georgia General Assembly should consider taking the muzzle off DFCS' ability to fight fake news about its child protection and child welfare work. [According to the federal government](#), at least 10 states have laws that allow the child protection agency to speak out to correct erroneous publicity about a case. Our neighbor, [South Carolina](#), allows its child protection leadership to publicly address the actions of its staff regarding cases that are already the subject of public law enforcement, criminal justice, or legal proceedings and reports. [Louisiana](#) law permits the child

welfare agency "to confirm, clarify, or correct information concerning a case of child abuse or neglect . . . that has been made public by sources outside of the department."

Child welfare proceedings are often confusing and emotional processes, especially to the families involved and to the public. When you add the legal veil of confidentiality, you can create the opportunity for unscrupulous individuals to shift blame wrongly and manipulate the situation for their own gain. To ensure the truth will come out, we need to encourage as much agency transparency as possible, both to correct errors when the agency has made a mistake and to prevent misplaced public alarm and manipulation when the agency has, in fact, taken appropriate steps to protect a child from abuse or neglect.



Rebecca Brendle

## Focus on: Preventing Suicide

***Union County's Rebecca Brendle shares how she responded to the issue in her own small community . . .***

**Not knowing** where to start or what to do, a 22-year-old girl set out to find a way to help young people in her community. For the first full year there was not much more other than dreaming and prayer that was actually accomplished. The initial thought was to try and create some events for the young people to be safe and make some friends. This worked for a short time, however, she soon discovered that the issues facing young people needed more time than an hour or two once a month. So, she decided to openly invite any high schoolers to meet with her once a week where they would simply spend time talking about whatever was on their mind. This was extremely successful and continued to grow as they met in various restaurants in their small town—so well in fact, they soon needed their own space!

I was that girl. I never would have imagined I could make a difference on my own. At first, I sought part-

See [BRENDLE](#), p. 4



## Brendle, continued. ....

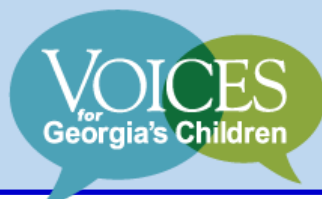
ners, but found none and was easily discouraged. However, with time and perseverance I made a space for my nonprofit named [Change in Our World, INC.](#) or more commonly known in our town as Change. Time spent with these young people, my own experience with my father's suicide, and the fact that our county was in the top 5 per capita concerning suicide in the state of Georgia, bound us together for a cause embodied in our motto: **You Matter. Your Life is Important. Someone Needs You. Be a World Changer.** Too many people are not finding value in life. It has been proven that with an increase in population there is a decrease in the value of human life. Thus, we aim to combat suicide by creating relationships, finding wholeness, and strengthening others mostly through events, social gatherings, and classroom time.

Three years since my start, I personally have begun to encourage people to use their voice. Not everyone has to go out and start a nonprofit, but everyone can turn to their neighbor and tell them that they are important. In fact, that is what we teach our young people. We teach them that they will see hundreds of people that we will never be

able to reach, and that means they have to speak up. Someone's life might depend on their voice!

In our county (Union County), this past school year, there were 3 suicides in our school systems, that I am aware of—at least two more in the community, one of which occurred recently... Believe it or not, we live in a very nice community. So, we ask ourselves why is this happening? And more importantly, what can we do to make a difference? It starts with one. One voice. One person taking a millisecond to smile at the passing stranger. One person opening the door for another. Consider how your actions make someone feel. Make them feel valuable. Together we can Change the world of those around us.

**Click on the logo below to view Voices for Georgia's Children's wonderful new PSAs in which children who have experienced serious depression and anxiety give hope to their peers!**



## Investigator Insight!



**Our own Shantelle Whitehead** went out for a "ride-along" last month with **Belisa Perkins**, a Gwinnett County CPS investigator. At OCA, we encourage our employees to get out in the field so they'll remember just what DFCS frontline staff are up against when they must rapidly investigate child abuse reports under often difficult conditions.

Shantelle says:

*"As a former CPS Investigator I was extremely excited to participate in the Ride Along experience! I think the experience is mutually beneficial for OCA staff and DFCS case managers."*

*"This practice allows OCA staff the opportunity to provide guidance, support, and encouragement to case managers working in the field. It also helps case managers view their work from a different perspective. I think this experience is valuable and very important for new case managers that lack experience in the field. Through this collaboration they can benefit from insights that skilled and experienced child advocate staff have gained throughout the years of working in child welfare."*



## PRE, continued . . .

This staffing will focus on addressing three main questions:

1. Is the child in imminent or serious danger of harm?
2. What are the specific threats to the child and the specific issues that must be immediately addressed to keep the child safe?
3. Are there alternatives to safely reduce the harm other than asking the court to place the child in state custody? For example, could we place the child with neighbors or family for a day or two and ask the court for an expedited preliminary hearing to consider a protective order, a court-ordered case plan, or other alternatives to foster care?

Ensure that every child that should be in care is in care, but not a single child more.

Judge Michael Key  
Troup County Juvenile Court

The guiding mission of the PRE team project.

The agency hopes this project will help DFCS create a better continuum of options for keeping children safe and increase understanding among county staff that there are many safety options available to DFCS other than a stark choice between family preservation and foster care. These “interim” options will often require better coordination between the agency and the courts.

When addressing the options, the team will review a checklist focused on reasonable efforts. The information gathered during the more intensive staffing will help inform the court as to the agency’s concerns for the child; the specific safety threats to the child; the reasonable efforts that have been made to prevent removal; and the steps that can be implemented and enforced to protect the child and minimize child trauma, such as the use of an emergency protective order, expedited preliminary hearing, or non-emergency dependency petition.

This approach should help the courts and DFCS make better decisions regarding at-risk children and limit removal of children only when it is absolutely necessary to protect their safety.

The program will be launched as a pilot in DFCS Regions 13 (Clayton, Cobb and Gwinnett counties) and 12 (Bryan, Bulloch, Camden, Chatham, Effingham, Glynn, Liberty, Long, and McIntosh counties). With better decisions made on

the front end, DFCS can prevent the “snowball” effect that sometimes occurs when a child is placed in foster care and the parents must then accomplish a case plan to be reunited with their child. Increasing family preservation efforts will also help prevent the trauma of unnecessary removal and reduce the inherent adversarial nature of removal that makes working with parents difficult.

Ultimately, this pilot will help the agency better understand how removal decisions are being made and what our state’s child welfare leaders can do differently to provide better family preservation services. Implementing the project will also help the agency prepare for the implementation of the [Family First Act](#), which will authorize the agency to use federal IV-E funding on services designed to prevent removal for those children who have been identified as candidates for removal to care.



## Voice, continued. . . .

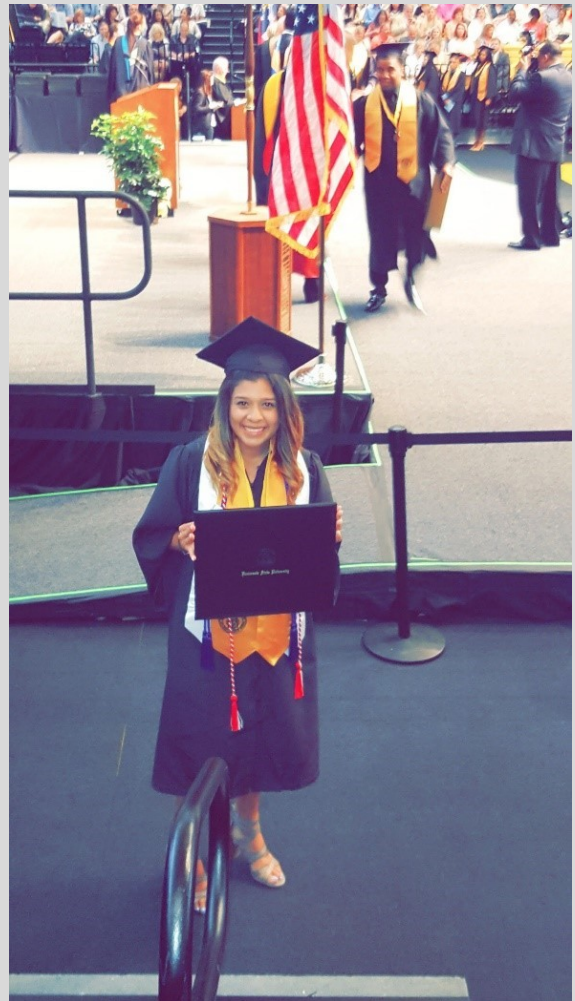
trust me I had a cellphone and had friends pick me up from my group home. So not only did going into the system give me so many brothers & sisters but it really changed me as a person and my outlook on things.

During my time at the cottage I was able to attend so many workshops that taught me how to properly do my laundry, change a tire, explore 3 different college campuses where I was able to stay for a week, and gave me two summer jobs.

I turned 18 in October 2013 and that's when I moved home with my mother and sister. My brother moved out that same day and my dad was not allowed to see us. We struggled. With my mom working 3 jobs there was no one to drive us to and from school or work yet all 3 of our paychecks went to help paying bills and groceries. December is when I finally saved up enough money for ILP to match it to help me buy my car. It's a little Nissan Maxima and I still drive it. Her name is Daisy. She has two bungee cords on the front holding her bumper up but you know she got me through college.

My initial plan was to stay home and go to Dalton State so I could help out my family. The cottage staff and my guidance counselor had a different plan for me. I then applied to KSU. These two support systems ensured that I took the ACT once, then provided me with a study session with a private tutor, then take the ACT again the morning of my junior prom just to ensure I received the highest score I could. I remember leaving math class early one day because I received an email saying my ACT score was in and I knew what I needed to get to get into KSU so I went down to the guidance counselors office where I opened the score up with my principal, vice principal, and my guidance counselor. When we saw that number we cheered with excitement.

So my next stop was senior awards and walking across that stage. Every day I checked my status of my application. Then I finally received the welcoming packet in the mail. I was accepted to college!



Come August I left for college. I had it set up. A nice dorm on campus, roommate who's my best friend now, full schedule, and a bright future ahead of me.

Once I was settled in I knew I wanted to be involved on campus as much as I could. I didn't think sorority or fraternity life was for me but I gave it a shot. I was a founding sister of Zeta Tau Alpha so this means I helped start this chapter at KSU. I joined a Hispanic group that brought me closer to my culture, my heritage, and new friends.

I studied abroad in Peru where I backpacked across the country for a month, made lifelong friends, and





## Office of the Child Advocate *For Georgia's Children*

## AdvOCacy

*Your child welfare update*

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### Reyna, continued. . .

memories that will last a lifetime.

I knew I would attend college one day but I never thought I would be walking out debt free. College was a great 4 years but before going into care I didn't think I would be where I am today if it was not for the help of my group home staff and Georgia RYSE ILP.

I loved calling Lisa, Ms. Coggins, Ms. Grice, and now Ms. Roberts (sometimes every day and more than once a day.. sorry) to tell them about my grades, accomplishments, and anything that I am doing in life to hear them end the conversation with "I am so proud of you".

This past May I graduated from Kennesaw State University with a Bachelor's Degree in Marketing. I beat the statistics of being in care, statistics of being a Latina, and first in my family to walk that stage and as I stated earlier with

owing no money.

I never would have thought that under the not so good circumstances that day Friday the 13th January 2012 when I was 16 years old would give me such a good life that lead me here to celebrating with all of you graduates to share that success knowing that if I can do it, trust me guys—all of you can do it. You have no idea the amount of support and love you have. And I better see all of you here in four years from now telling your story of how you are a college graduate.



## Welcome to Our Newest Staff Members!

We're excited to welcome our two newest investigators, Beth Smith and Eboni Woodbury, MSW, as well as our summer intern, Cassie Scoggins!



Beth Smith



Eboni Woodbury, MSW



Cassie Scoggins

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- Phone: (404) 656-4200
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*To submit an article for the newsletter: [rdavidson@oca.ga.gov](mailto:rdavidson@oca.ga.gov)*

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