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Crossing Over....

Child welfare bills advancing through the Legislature

While most folks may use the term “crossed over” as a euphemism for one’s having died, in the General Assembly it means the opposite: that your bill has successfully made it through one house on or before “crossover day” and can be considered for passage by the other legislative body (House or Senate) before the end of the 40-day session.

This year, a number of significant bills “survived” legislative day 28 and will be considered for full passage before the end of the session on March 29:

- [HB 927](#) – specifying information

DFCS must give to caregivers upon placement with relatives or foster parents. Passed House unanimously.

- [HB 972](#) – “Connected by 21,” extends foster care to 21. Passed House 162-3. (See Sidebar, page 5)
- [HB 920](#) – limited exception to confidentiality of/access to adoption records for DFCS and OCA. Passed House unanimously.
- [HB 982](#) – relative searches; TPR. Passed House unanimously.



Accurate representation of Crossover Day by Zane McKinney, 15.

- [HB 740](#) – limits expulsion or suspension of a child in preschool through third grade. Passed House 157-13.
- [HB 763](#) – creates protocol committee on school climate.

See [Crossover](#), page 5

Editorial: Information, Please!

[HB 927](#): To ensure the well-being of the children they care for, foster parents need prompt information from DFCS.



By Tom C. Rawlings
State Child Advocate

Imagine being a foster parent and inviting into your home a child about whom you know nothing. Is this an infant who was born premature and drug-exposed and who is at high risk of respiratory distress? Is this an eight year-old who has suffered physical or sexual abuse and is emotionally traumatized?

Has this child disrupted multiple placements and made allegations of abuse against prior foster parents? To ensure both the safety and well-being of a child in foster care as well as their own family’s safety, foster parents must have complete and accurate information about the medical, emotional, and psychological needs and history of the children DFCS places with them.

See [Editorial](#), page 4

Highlighting Our Partners: CJCC Criminal Justice Coordinating Council Supports Georgia CASA’s Programs

The Criminal Justice Coordinating Council’s (CJCC) vision of the future is a Georgia where criminal justice and victims’ service programs are just, accessible, and compassionate to all who encounter them. In 2017, with a focus on that vision, CJCC’s executive leadership was inspired to reinvent its organizational structure to more effectively, and efficiently, serve the citizens of the State of Georgia.

Through thoughtful consideration, the Grants and Policy Division was divided into the following six units:

- Child Abuse Unit;
- Community Programs Unit (Prosecution, Counseling, Underserved);

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Answering the Call. . . .

Stories from the field

Lloyd Varnado, Lead foster care SSCM at Pickens County DFCS, recently shared a situation he experienced.

A mother whose children were on Lloyd's caseload had been in a domestic violence situation. She ended up stranded on the side of I-10 in Louisiana after her husband kicked her out of the car following an altercation. She knew no one there and had no one to call, but she happened to have Lloyd's number. When she called late that afternoon, **Lloyd answered.**

“We never know what crisis a person may be in when they call you. Answering “the call” can speak volumes to how much you care about someone. It says, I hear you and you are important! It is so vital to us in building and maintaining relationships and possibly moving cases forward in a positive direction.

One of the things that I tell the parents and foster parents at the very beginning. We are busy people. We have tons of court, meetings, etc. If I don't answer your call, please text me. I can always answer a text with a simple “I'm in a meeting, I will call you as soon as I



am finished” or if it is something I can answer quickly then I will.

This allows the person to know that they did reach me and I am not avoiding them.

So, answer “the call.”

”

Youth Voice: *Hearing from*

Youth who have experienced our child welfare system....

By Ann Campbell

EmpowerMent Advocate/Fulton County Youth Tribe Coordinator

Ms. Campbell provided the following testimony to a Georgia House Committee in February supporting the passage of HB 972, which formally extends to age 21 services for foster youth. The bill since passed the House and is now assigned to the Senate Health and Human Services Committee.

Good Morning Representatives,

My name is Ann Campbell. I myself have aged out of care. I would like to talk about the positive side of having benefits beyond the age of 18, and how it is still helping me till this day.

While transitioning in care I fell homeless without my caseworker's knowledge. My placement at the time told me to remove all of my property from the home. During that time I recently turned 20 years of age. Out on the streets with nowhere to go and still struggling to be a college student. The benefits I received at 18 and beyond really helped me. I was experiencing a lot of health issues and I am very grateful to have my medical, mental health, and insurance.

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CJCC, continued.....

- Criminal Justice Unit;
- Domestic Violence Unit (Family Violence, Shelter Programs);
- Juvenile Justice Unit; and
- Sexual Assault & Human Trafficking Unit.

This change in structure empowered CJCC to expand its capacity to build relationships with new and existing partners, make more insightful advisory and funding decisions, and facilitate closer collaboration and coordination within the criminal justice system.

A great example of this increased collaboration is with one of CJCC's key existing partners, the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Georgia. Georgia's CASA programs are supported by CJCC through the Child Abuse Unit which is led by Program Director, Shontel Wright, and Supervisor, Jonathan Peart. Georgia currently has 46 affiliate CASA programs located throughout the state whose sole mission is to recruit, screen, train and supervise CASA volunteers. There are approximately 2,400 adult volunteers who are appointed by the court to advocate for a child's best interests in juvenile court dependency proceedings. CASA volunteers serve Georgia by utilizing their time, energy, and resources to help ensure that each child finds a safe and permanent home in which they can thrive and grow into productive citizens. Of the 46 affiliate CASA programs, CJCC currently awards funding to 39 in the

amount of \$5,387,471.

CJCC's Child Abuse Unit continuously seeks to secure additional funding to support Georgia CASA's vision to advocate for every child's right to a safe and stable environment. This includes keeping well-informed of the various challenges child-serving organizations face in an effort to identify the comprehensive resources needed to protect, serve, and heal Georgia's youth. One of the Child Abuse Unit's perpetual missions will be to support and promote all child victim service organizations who assist

those who cannot advocate for themselves. CJCC is grateful for its partnership with Georgia CASA, as we all stand "for the child."



CJCC and CASA staff at the 2018 CASA Day at the Capitol

About the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC)

Created by the Georgia General Assembly in 1981 as an Executive Branch agency, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) represents the culmination of many efforts to establish a statewide body that would build consensus and unity among the State's diverse and interdependent, criminal justice system components. In addition to serving as a coordinating body, CJCC also:

- Serves as an advisor to the Governor on issues impacting the criminal justice system in Georgia;
- Functions as the statewide clearinghouse for criminal justice information and research;
- Receives, manages, and allocates grants to criminal justice and victim assistance programs; and
- Administers the Georgia Crime Victims Compensation Program.

For more information, visit the CJCC website: <https://cjcc.georgia.gov>.



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Editorial, continued...

The Foster Parent Bill of Rights (OCGA § 49-5-281), first enacted into Georgia law in 2004, was designed to require our child welfare agency to provide that information. The law establishes foster parents as “member[s] of the professional team caring for foster children” and gives them the right to be notified, prior to placement, of issues that “may jeopardize the health and safety of the foster family or the child or alter the manner in which foster care should be administered.” Foster parents are entitled to receive a copy of the child’s treatment plan and information about the child’s placement history, and they are entitled to communicate with the child’s doctors, therapists, and other treatment professionals.

Too often, unfortunately, foster par-

ents do not know they have these rights and do not receive the necessary information in a timely manner. While DFCS itself might not have this information when a child first comes into care, it is critical that the child’s history and health records be obtained promptly and shared with the foster parents who are providing day-to-day care for the child.

House Bill 927, authored by Representative Chad Nimmer, would complement and expand the Foster Parent Bill of Rights by emphasizing not only the right of all caregivers to receive this information but also the obligation of DFCS to provide it. The bill requires DFCS to provide to the relative, foster parent or other caregiver, at the time of placement or within 15 days, information including:

- Information from the child’s most

recent medical, dental, developmental, psychological, and trauma assessments;

- Dates and times for all hearings on the child;
- The child’s health insurance information;
- Information on enrolling the child in school; and
- A description of financial assistance for which the caregiver may be entitled.

HB 927 is legislation that will strengthen our foster care system and serve the best interests of those who must be its focus: abused and neglected children. The more our system recognizes these caregivers as integral to our efforts to promote safety, well-being, and permanency, the better the outcomes it will achieve for children.

Voice, continued....

These services made a difference for me in my years and I know it will continue to make a difference if it stays. We were all 18 and up before. Our brains are not fully developed until our mid 20’s, but the system is wanting us to grow up faster than our brains. With this bill we can keep kids off the streets, more educated and hardworking youth. I hope you will support this bill because it will truly make a difference .

March is Social Work Month!



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**We appreciate the valuable
contributions of the social
work profession to child protection
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Crossover, continued....



Governor Deal signs HB 159, reforming adoption law

- **SB 335** – Labor and sexual servitude trafficking. Passed Senate unanimously.
- **SB 407** - implements recommendations of the Criminal Justice Reform Council and includes requirements related to collection and sharing of juvenile delinquency court records. Passed Senate unanimously.
- **SB 236** - allows the prosecuting attorney to provide a copy of the traffic citation and all pertinent documents to DFCS when certain offenders are convicted for endangering a child by driving under the influence to aid in an investigation of possible child abuse. Passed Senate unanimously.

A few interesting bills have already made it through the process. These include:

- **SB 131** - postpones adoptions pending a final judgment in a related juvenile court termination of parental rights proceeding and changes the definition of the “harm” element in such cases. The bill awaits action by Governor Deal.
- **HB 159** - reforms Georgia’s adoption laws and creates a “parental power of attorney” process. Governor Deal signed it into law on March 5, 2018.

Sidebar: Connected by 21 (HB 972)

HB 972 would authorize DFCS to implement a program for extended care youth services for youth until the age of 21. While DFCS currently has a program to serve youth up to age 21, this bill is a formal, legislative adoption of the provisions for extending foster care under the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. If passed, it will allow the state to obtain federal funding for implementing this federal law. This bill will also authorize the court to review the cases of 18-21 year olds to determine that extended care youth services are in the child’s best interest, oversee a transition plan, and make necessary reasonable efforts findings regarding transitioning the youth to independence. Finally, it sets forth criteria for participation, requirements for development and contents of a transition plan, and ongoing court oversight. At the time of this writing, HB 972 passed the House and is assigned to the Senate Health and Human Services Committee.

To keep up with the General Assembly’s work:

- Learn more about the Georgia General Assembly and monitor legislation of interest at <http://www.legis.ga.gov/>
- Learn updates on bills of interest to child advocates at <http://bartoncenter.net/about/maillinglist.html> and <http://georgiavoices.us6.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=c03d7039c9f51b08a13301ce5&id=da24a184d9>

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OCA Data Points: The Foster Parent Bill of Rights

“What’s OCA? What do you do?” Although the Office of the Child Advocate has been working with our state’s child protection and child welfare fields for over 17 years, many Georgians don’t know that they can turn to our office for assistance in working with our state child welfare agencies. Our office serves as the “official” independent “ombudsman” to whom the public and professionals can turn for assistance and advice regarding a child whose situation requires state intervention and who is (or should be) under the watchful eye of one of our state’s child welfare agencies or providers.

In addition, OCA works to help foster parents — both those engaged by DFCS as well as those working with private agencies — to resolve complaints and concerns. Whenever a foster parent believes he or she is not being treated as a partner in the child welfare process or believes the agency is not providing appropriate services to the child or the foster family, [the Foster Parent Bill of Rights — OCGA § 49-5-281](#) — creates a path to resolve those issues.

For over 15 years, OCA has played an integral part in mediating disputes between foster par-

ents and child welfare agencies, and we work to ensure that foster parents understand their rights. Engaged, informed foster parents are critical to our goal of ensuring that children in care are safe, cared for, and able to achieve permanency quickly. If you have any questions about the rights of Georgia foster parents, please contact OCA or our friends at [AFPAG, the Adoptive and Foster Parent Association of Georgia](#).

OCA Director Tom Rawlings training foster parents on healthcare issues at the annual AFPAG conference.



Crowing about Our Folks!

We at OCA are very proud of all our hard-working staff, but this month we’re especially proud of Renee Moore, who was recently awarded the “Servant’s Heart Award” by First Lady Sandra Deal. Renee goes out of her way to respond to concerns about children and to ensure they are safe. Congratulations, Renee!





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

AdvOCacy
Your child welfare update

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Georgia Office of the Child Advocate for the Protection of Children

Tom C. Rawlings, Director

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- Phone: (404) 656-4200
- Internet: <https://oca.georgia.gov/webform/request-oca-assistance-or-investigation>

To submit an article for the newsletter:

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