

Cold Case Project
Annual Report for the Work of 2017
Georgia's Child Welfare System
March 2019



Prepared by the Judicial Council/Administrative Office of the Courts
Communications, Children, Families and the Courts Division

The tragedy of life is often not in our failure, but rather in our complacency; not in our doing too much, but rather in our doing too little; not in our living above our ability, but rather in our living below our capacities.

--Benjamin E. Mays

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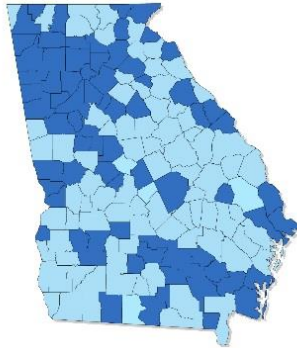
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Doesn't every child deserve a *forever home*?

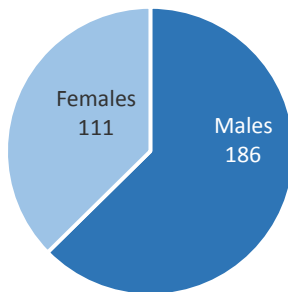
Of course they do.

The Cold Case Project team is working hard to ensure children stuck in long term foster care have an opportunity to find a *forever home*.

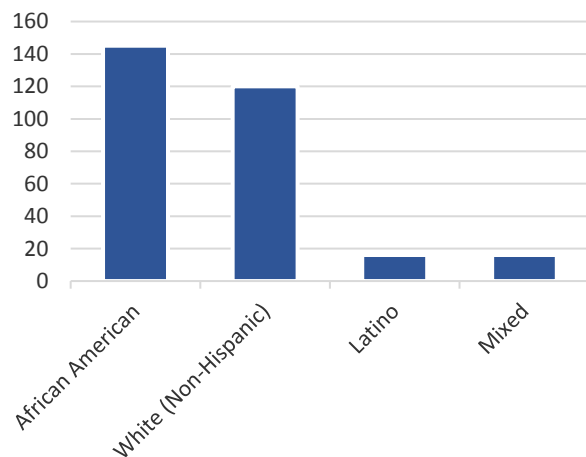
In 2017, the Cold Case Project (CCP) handled 321 cases statewide in 72 of Georgia's 159 counties.



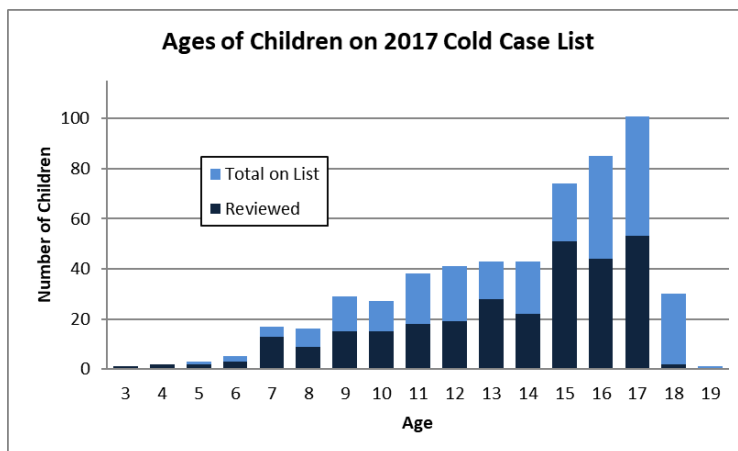
Gender of Cold Case Children



Race of Cold Case Children



Ages of Children on 2017 Cold Case List



WHY DOES PERMANENCY MATTER?

In Georgia, close to 14,000 children are in foster care. Children enter foster care when their family is in crisis and the children are not safe at home because of neglect or abuse. Most children do not stay in foster care long. But there are some children who stay in foster care for years, “aging out” of care before finding a permanent home.

EVERYONE DESERVES A HOME

Children in foster care deserve a safe and loving home. Often this means reunification with their now-stable biological parents, which is the best and preferred goal. However, sometimes reunification just isn't possible. In those cases, adoption, placement with extended family, or permanent guardianship should be the goal. Unfortunately, for some foster children, a permanent home remains elusive.

ESTABLISHING A CONNECTION TO AN CARING ADULT

Children need adult connections. These connections foster positive youth development, skill-building, and personal growth and give children more tools to succeed in life. Studies show positive connections with caring adults result in improved academic outcomes, increased relationship skills, enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence, improved behavior and interpersonal skills, and a reduction in risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use.

TRANSITION INTO ADULTHOOD

The transition into adulthood can be a challenge for all youth. This transition is almost impossible for children leaving foster care without a permanent home. Youth who age out of care are cast into the world without any stable adult connection. These youth often lack basic life skills and are more likely to end up homeless or in jail.

Imagine, you turn 18 and you are suddenly responsible for everything - your housing, health, education - EVERYTHING. And there is no one to turn to for help or support, no one invested in your future. Even the most mundane tasks, such as finding a doctor, enrolling in school, or opening a bank account, can be unfamiliar and overwhelming. Imagine how alone and scared you would feel.

Children who “age out” of foster care without finding a permanent placement are:

- Less likely:
 - 69% less likely to graduate from high school or get a GED
 - 50% less likely to go to college
 - 22% less likely to graduate from college
 - 10% less likely to have some form of gainful employment by age 24
- More likely:
 - 47% more likely to end up homeless, at least briefly
 - 23% more likely to be incarcerated
 - 19% more likely to live in poverty

Success comes from having a forever home.

WHAT IS THE COLD CASE PROJECT?

Cold Case Project (CCP) is a joint effort by Georgia’s Executive, Judicial and Legislative Branches to address the problem of finding permanent homes for children in foster care.

Executive Branch		Judicial Branch
Office of the Child Advocate (OCA)	Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS)	Supreme Court of Georgia’s Committee on Justice for Children (J4C)
Legislative Branch		
Appropriations		

The Cold Case Project is a quality assurance program designed to **help children who are most likely to age out of foster care without permanency**. Using a predictive statistical model to create a statewide list of “cold case” children, experts review the children’s case files with the ultimate goal of providing assistance and tools to identify barriers to permanency, break through those barriers, and provide resources to move cases forward.

Each child’s case from the Cold Case Project is intricate and unique, requiring a special eye towards the child’s needs, case history, and potential caretakers. Complex trauma is a big part of these children’s history and requires special consideration.

How does the Cold Case Project make breakthroughs on these difficult cases? Collaboration with the Children, the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) County Directors, DFCS Case Managers, DFCS Supervisors, State DFCS, DFCS Independent Living Program Coordinators, Child Attorneys, Guardians Ad Litem (GAL), Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Placement providers, Special Assistant Attorneys General (SAAG), DFCS Field Program Specialists (FPS), DFCS Regional Adoption Coordinators (RAC), DFCS Educational Programming, Assessment and Consultation Unit (EPAC), DFCS Wellness Programming, Assessment, and Consultation (WPAC) and Amerigroup Healthcare makes the project work.

WHY DOES GEORGIA NEED A COLD CASE PROJECT?

Children go into foster care when their family living situation is unsafe. Foster care should be a temporary situation. The goal is either to resolve the issues within the biological family or to find the child a safe and permanent placement, possibly through adoption. This placement needs to occur before the child reaches the age of

DID YOU KNOW?

Between **13,000** and **14,000** children are in foster care in Georgia.

599 foster children “aged out” of foster care in 2017. These young people never found a permanent home.

18 years or the child will “age out” of care and the juvenile court system will no longer be able to assist that child.

Some children are at a high risk of aging out of foster care never having found a stable, loving family. They may never have a place to truly call home.

This is where the Cold Case Project can make a difference.

THE COLD CASE TEAM

The Cold Case team provides an independent assessment for the most vulnerable children in foster care.

Ashley Willcott, Attorney at Law, heads the Cold Case Project. Ms. Willcott is a nationally-recognized Child Welfare Law Specialist and Juvenile Court Judge with over 20 years’ experience as a trial attorney and

legal analyst. Her life’s work revolves around passionately advocating for and striving to improve the lives of children at risk and youth in the foster care system.

DID YOU KNOW?

There are children in Georgia’s child welfare facilities who have no visitors during holidays or on their birthday?

WANT TO HELP?

To learn more about children in your community who need holiday or birthday visits, contact your local DFCS office.

<https://dfcs.georgia.gov/location>

Mary Hermann, Diana Rugh Johnson, Rosalind Watkins, Kristi Lovelace, Leslie Stewart, Michelle Vereen, and Vicky Wallace are Cold Case Fellows. Fellows are attorneys who are Child Welfare Law Specialists. Each has over 20 years’ experience in Georgia’s juvenile courts and has broad, deep knowledge of the current Georgia child welfare system.

The Cold Case team includes retired DFCS case managers and private investigators who assist the Fellows in locating family members and developing creative solutions for permanency.

The team also includes Cold Case Coaches. The Coaches, renowned experts in specific areas of child welfare, assist as needed when cases involve mental health and special needs. Cold Case Coaches also work as a group to recommend enhanced services for these vulnerable children.

THE “COLD CASE” CHILDREN

Children identified on the Cold Case list are Georgia’s most vulnerable children. These children are in danger of reaching their 18th birthday having never found a permanent home.

Circumstances leading to children aging out of foster care are often complex and involve chains of traumatic events. Children are traumatized by abuse and neglect, then by the separations from friends, family, and familiarity necessitated by foster care. But foster care itself is often unstable, with children moving from one foster placement to another, often in different parts of the state, and each of these moves is a further traumatic event. Cumulative trauma may cause behavioral problems in children, which in turn may cause foster placements to request children be moved, and the cycle begins again. Additionally, the legal and financial complexity of adoption and legal custody are themselves often barriers to children finding permanent homes.

To identify at-risk children, the Cold Case Project uses a predictive statistical model to create a statewide list of children who are most likely to age out of foster care without permanency. The statistical model uses various predictors including:

- Long stay in foster care
- High per diem rate
- Housed within an institutional setting

Once identified, these cases receive a “temperature” ranking. Those cases involving children who are most in danger of not finding a permanent home are designated as “cold” cases.

CCP generates the Cold Case list twice a year and sends it, not only to the Cold Case team, but also to local DFCS staff. Sometimes, when DFCS staff see a child on the Cold Case list, they are able to move that child’s case quickly to a successful conclusion without the assistance of the Cold Case team. Perhaps this is due to the Hawthorne Effect, the fact that people will modify their behavior simply because they are being observed. If DFCS is not able to place the child, the Cold Case Team steps in to help.

THE COLD CASE PROCESS

Once the children are identified, the Cold Case team gets to work eliminating barriers to permanency.

The key to helping the children is often found at the Permanency Roundtable Plus (PRTPlus). This structured meeting brings together all the people who touch that child’s life. The child has the opportunity to be present and to be heard at the PRTPlus.



At the PRTPlus, Cold Case Fellows refocus attention on the child’s case which often leads to creative solutions to help move the child toward a safe and permanent home. The team discusses the child’s case, pinpoints the barriers to permanency, identifies needed services, and everyone leaves the meeting with

DID YOU KNOW?

Many children in foster care have relatives who would be willing to care for them. The problem is locating these folks.

The Cold Case team includes trained investigators who can track down family members on both sides of a child’s family. Often, these family members do not even know the child is in foster care.

These searches can lead to placement with a *forever family*.

an action plan. At PRTPlus, everyone is developing steps to directly address the child’s well-being, ensuring the child receives all possible services needed to meet his or her needs.

The action plan may include a plan for:

Education ♦ Visitation with Caring Adults ♦ Medical Care ♦ Mental Health Services

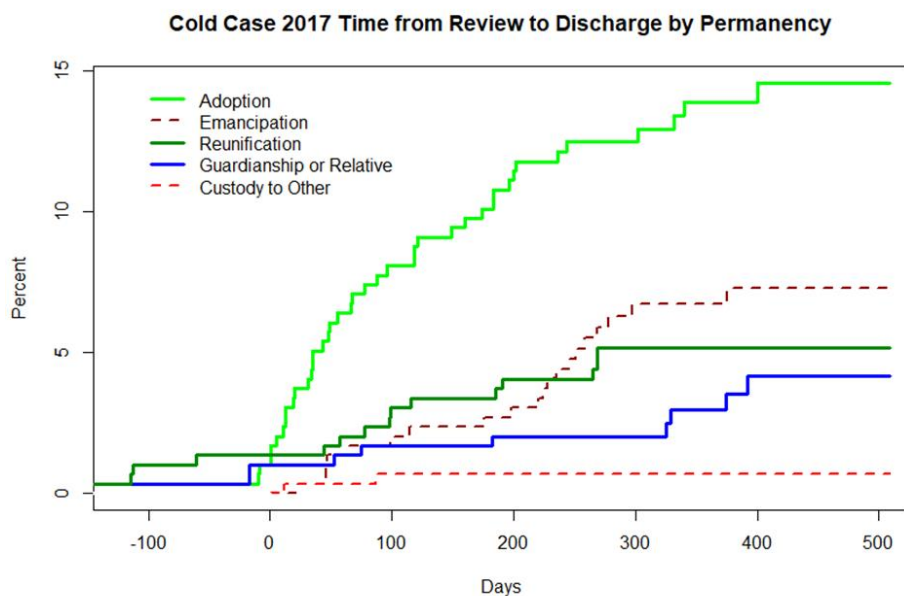
The Fellows manage each case for at least a year or until the team achieves substantial steps to permanency.

An essential element of the success for the PRTPlus is the child’s participation. Unless there is a compelling reason not to do so, the team invites the child to be an active participant in the process. First, the child must discuss his or her desired permanency outcome. Then, the child needs to understand and take part in the process which will reach his or her desired outcome. Even the best plan will fail without buy-in from the child.

All the participants in the PRTPlus meeting establish a positive relationship with the child. As a positive collateral consequence, the PRTPlus process also allows these concerned adults to guide the child into “successful adulthood.” Additional adults may include, not only potential parents, but other committed relatives and non-relatives.

The Cold Case Project Works

The Cold Case Project team reviewed 321 cases in 2017. Close to 20% of these children found a permanent home in 2017. For the others, there are on-going efforts to strengthen the child’s access to education, health services, and reconnection to relatives or the community.



HAPPY CHILDREN - HAPPY FAMILIES

FLOYD COUNTY. **P** was in care for 5 years but was resistant to adoption because she did not want to lose contact with her brother who is placed separately in a group home. The CCP Fellow used a Post Adoption Contact Agreement to allow continued sibling contact. Local DFCS was open to discussing the Agreement with **P** and her pre-adoptive parent. Reassured she could continue to see her brother, **P** decided on adoption. This case highlights the importance of counseling youth about new laws allowing them, if adopted, to maintain contact with extended family of origin.



BARTOW COUNTY. **D**'s adoption was finalized in 2018, after spending 3 ½ years in foster care. **D** experienced several failed relative placements, time in a Department of Juvenile Justice Youth Detention Center, and school expulsion. (CCP Educational Attorney Craig Goodmark successfully appealed the school expulsion.) His persistent foster / adoptive parents were zealous advocates for services for **D**. His Grandfather remains a supportive family connection for **D**. Wendy's Wonderful Kids (the signature program of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption) was also an important team member.





FLOYD COUNTY. After six years in foster care, three siblings found a permanent home with their adopted parents. The barrier to adoption identified by the CCP Fellow was the amount of funding available to meet the special needs of the youth if adopted. During the Permanency Roundtable Plus, the placement agency and local county DFCS collaborated to identify and secure funding for the evaluations necessary to support enhanced adoption

assistance rates for the youth's special needs. The county facilitated conversations with the family and the State DFCS office to work out appropriate adoption assistance rates given the needs of this particular youth. The prospective adoptive family also had the support of their faith community.

FLOYD COUNTY. Two siblings found an adopted home together, after 3 ½ years in foster care. The CCP Fellow identified as a barrier the appropriate adoption assistance rate given the articulated needs of one of the brothers. Local county DFCS obtained additional evaluations of the youth to identify the needs for any increased adoption assistance rate. The CCP also identified as a barrier the youth's problems in school. State DFCS EPAC (Educational Programming, Assessment and Consultation) assisted with obtaining the IEP & 504 plan for the youth by working closely with the adoptive parent and the school. The State DFCS Regional Adoptive Coordinator and Amerigroup assisted with additional evaluations to support an increased adoption assistance rate given the identified needs of the youth.



FLOYD COUNTY. Three siblings, ages 7, 8, and 9 years old, were in foster care for 63 months, but all living in separate placements. CCP facilitated overnight visits between the boys which led to placement together in their adoptive home. The creative plan of sleeping bags overcame the barrier of each needing a separate bed to begin overnight visits while the adoptive home completed home renovations needed to be approve as an adoptive home. The CCP Fellow found someone to contribute the 3 sleeping bags so the visits could begin. The adoption of all three boys together was finalized 8/21/2018. Their dedicated DFCS case manager stayed committed to these boys and found the right family so these boys could remain together and be adopted together.



LAMAR COUNTY. Five siblings are now part of an adopted family after 3 years in foster care. The adoption signing actually took place during a CCP in-person follow-up combined with a Family Team meeting with the adoptive resource, Regional Adoption Coordinator, placement agency and service providers to work out plan for continued services to sibling group.



DeKalb County. Graduation Day for a youth! This graduate spent seven years in foster care with 3 other siblings, 2 of whom were adopted by maternal grandfather in Kentucky. **A** did not want



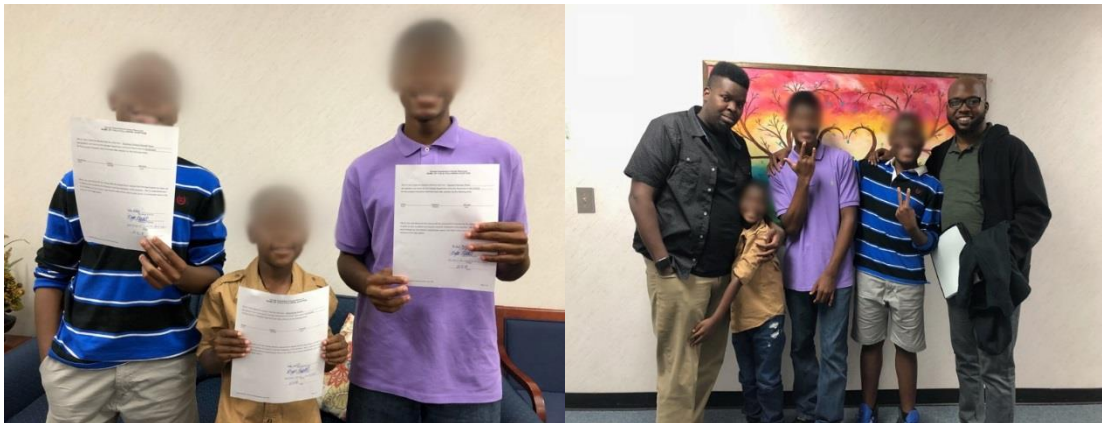
to be adopted. The initial removal of the children from the mother was due to drug use, educational and medical neglect. **A** had 14 placements including a psychiatric hospital until she stabilized in a small DeKalb County group home. There she caught up educationally, graduating with A's & B's, and weaned off psychotropic medication. Now **A** is at basic training for the Navy. She received a laptop for graduation, participated in the Orange Duffle Bag & Celebration of Excellence programs. CCP provided financial

assistance for grandfather and siblings from Kentucky to travel to Georgia for the graduation.

BROOKS COUNTY. Four siblings, ranging in age from 3 to 17 years old, entered foster care in 2015. Three years later, one family adopted all four of them! Foster care originally placed the siblings separately, but the local DFCS office ensured a waiver was obtained to allow the number of children in the adoptive home.



FLOYD COUNTY. Three brothers have been in foster care for 7 ½ YEARS. They had been in the same foster home for 6 ½ years, but although the foster parent said she would adopt, she never signed the documents necessary for moving the brothers to adoptive status. The foster parent even said, during the permanency roundtable and the many follow up calls, DFCS would not be able to find an adoptive home for all three brothers due to their special needs. The Regional Adoption Coordinator and local DFCS Supervisor were DETERMINED and never gave up on finding the right family for the brothers - and they did! The brothers moved to the pre-adoptive home on 6-1-2018 and the adoption signing was on 10-09-2018.



BARTOW COUNTY. After 1 disrupted adoption, 5 plus years in foster care, 2 years at a group home, 6 months at a residential in-patient facility, **B** was adopted when he was 17 ½ years old. **B** met his adoptive family through a church youth group. **B** had been adopted when he was 5 and the adoption disrupted when he was 12 years old due to his mental health issues. He received mental health care while he was in foster care. The CCP Fellow assisted in contacting the previous adoptive parents and obtaining surrenders of parental rights from them so the youth could be adopted. After 12 months in the pre-adoptive home, the adoption was finalized 9-5-2018.



LESSON LEARNED

Collaboration is the key.

Without the help and cooperation of all the stakeholders, Georgia's most vulnerable children would have no chance. The Cold Case Project is a model for collaboration between agencies and individuals.



“A clear purpose will unite you
as you move forward, values
will guide your behavior, and
goals will focus your energy.”

— Kenneth H. Blanchard,

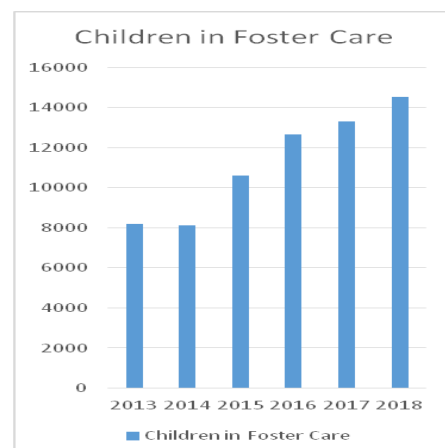
Collaboration Begins with You: Be a Silo Buster

ISSUES WE FACED IN 2017

More children in the foster care system

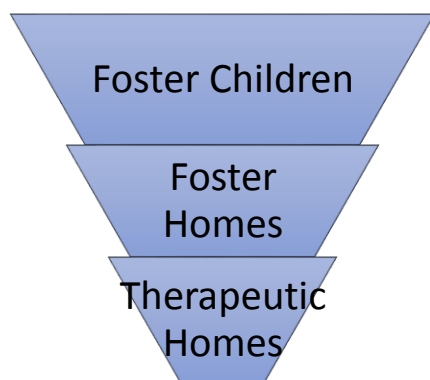
The “cold cases” can often overwhelm the resources available to the foster care system. These cases have a disproportional impact on the system because they are costly in terms of time and money.

The system is burdened with complex cases. At the time of this report, the number of children in foster care hovers at 14,000. The complexity of “cold cases” often require more intensive support but busy caseworkers often have to turn their attention to cases which can be solved quickly.



Shortage of foster homes

There is a shortage of foster homes, particularly therapeutic homes and placements for children with severe trauma or mental illness. This shortage can result in inappropriate placements and inappropriate placements can result in children failing to succeed.



More placements need to be trauma informed, prepared and equipped to provide appropriately for cold case children. By recognizing trauma and the early treatment of trauma in children in foster care, the needs of these children as they age may not necessitate special placement.

Multiple Placements

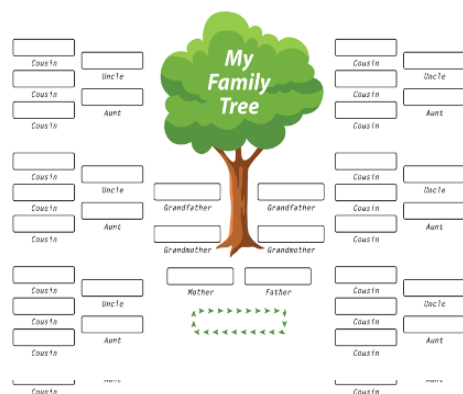
Too many children in foster care experience numerous placements. Placements disrupt a child’s progress for a host of reasons including behaviors, cost, geography, policies, and lack of education/knowledge by the placement. Every time a placement changes for a child, it traumatizes that child again.

High Caseworker Turnover

Foster care caseworkers have a hard job which is why DFCS has a hard time keeping caseworkers. High turnover can lead to caseworkers with limited experience, knowledge of system, and knowledge of individual cases. Every time a new caseworker is assigned to a foster child, the case slows because the caseworker needs time to come up to speed. This “lag-time” can be a significant barriers to permanency.

Relative Searches

The goal of foster care is to reunify the child with his or her biological parents if circumstances change and the parents become able to resume care for their child. Unfortunately, this is not always possible. The next best outcome is placement with a biological relative.



In order to place a child with a relative, it is necessary to find a willing relative. Sometimes, successive communication and relative searches during the life of the case result in renewed commitment from family members which could lead to a permanent placement for the child.

A thorough file review often provides leads to the discovery of family members, as do the children themselves. Older children frequently are in contact with relatives through social media. Sometimes, however, it is very difficult to locate relatives who might be interested in providing a *forever home*.

This is why the Cold Case Project employs experienced investigators. These investigators make it a priority to track down dozens of family members on both sides of the family. The Fellows follow-up with interested parties, hoping a familial link between the relative and the child could lead to possible avenues of placement and permanency.

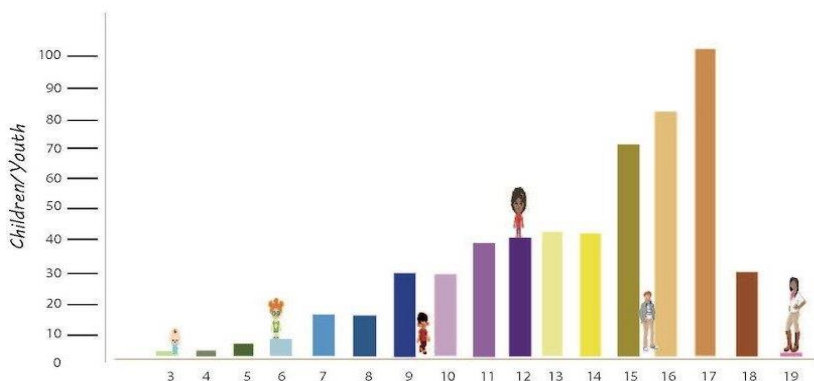
Visitation

Prior to finding a permanent placement, many children need to visit with family members or possible foster parents. Coordinating these visits is time consuming. In addition, these visits can be costly, with expenses for travel, food, etc. Regardless of the effort and expense, these visits are an essential step to finding a permanent placement for the child.

Age

Many children on the Cold Case list are older, often teenagers. Sometimes people who could provide a permanent home are reluctant because they believe that all teenagers in foster care are troubled. But there is no age limit on love. These older children need loving homes and can fully benefit from the emotional and financial stability a family offers.

Age of Children/Youth on Cold Case List, 2017



Resistance to Adoption

Some foster children resist adoption. These children have been let down in the past or they do not want to let down their biological parents by “giving up” on them. Specialized adoption counselors and trained staff are needed to reduce the resistance to adoption. Helping children overcome their fears helps them open themselves up to the possibility of finding a *forever home*.

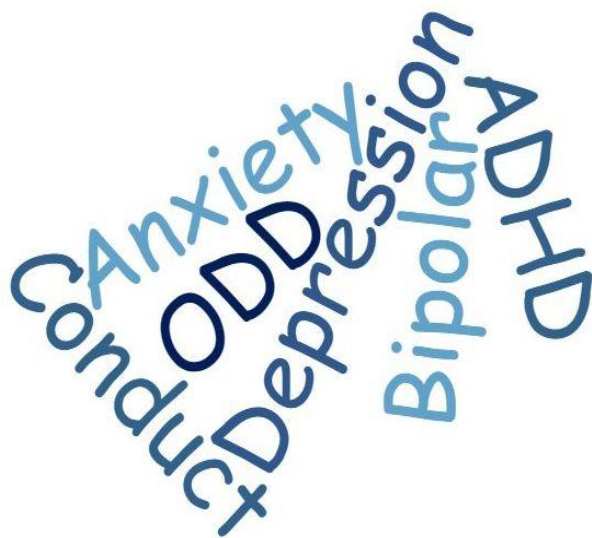
Barriers to Adoption

Limited resources provided to adoptive families is a difficult issue to resolve. The funding and services available while a child is in foster care do not follow that child through adoption. This creates a situation where it is more financially advantageous to be a foster parent rather than an adoptive parent. In addition, relatives do not always receive the financial assistance offered to a foster parent. These are real issues that cause great potential caretakers NOT to adopt a child.

Medication and Mental Health Diagnosis

Medical reviews of children on psychotropic medications are still imperative to identify the best treatment plan for the child.

Many Cold Case children are receiving psychotropic drugs, and this is often a concern for prospective parents. Psychotropic drugs include antipsychotics, anti-depressants, anti-obsessive agents, antianxiety agents, mood stabilizers, stimulants, and anti-panic agents. Thousands of foster children in Georgia are prescribed these drugs and all too often, over-prescribed. In fact, children in foster care are prescribed get three times more psychotropic drugs than other children.



These drugs should only be prescribed to treat specific mental health issues, but fragmented medical care can result in foster children being prescribed multiple psychotropic drugs. Many children are given the maximum recommended dosage for adults because there is no research on the appropriate dosage for children. Sometimes, because these drugs are mood altering, the drugs are prescribed for the caregiver’s convenience. And sometimes, obtaining the correct psychotropic medications for children in care is held up by internal approval processes. This over-medication of foster children is costing Medicaid millions of dollars.

Also noted is the need for updated and current mental health evaluations. Frequently, psychological evaluations are 3 to 5 years old and do not accurately reflect the child’s current level of functioning or needs. Unfortunately, insurance sometimes refuse to approve psychological evaluations for these children.

To combat these barriers to permanency, the Cold Case team works with medical professionals and mental health service providers to ensure proper diagnosis, review medication and ensure proper care.

Aging Out/Emancipation

Each year, more than 500 teenagers in foster care in Georgia age out before finding a forever home. The good news is most teenagers in Georgia now choose to stay in care beyond age 18. DFCS achieved this result by changing its emancipation policy. Today, an 18-year-old in foster care must affirmatively choose to leave foster care. Otherwise, DFCS continues to provide services to that child.

Even when teenagers choose to stay in care, they need adequate step-down resources to prepare for adulthood. They still need to connect to caring and concerned adults who can guide, mentor and support them in a positive, loving way.

Severe Trauma

Because complex trauma is still a big part of these children's history, more education of the stakeholders is needed.

Many of the children in foster care have experienced severe trauma. Simply being taken from their home is trauma. Being placed in foster care with strangers is trauma. The initial abuse or neglect is trauma. Moving schools is trauma. Having to make all new friends is trauma. Not having any of their belongings is trauma. Not being with a sibling is trauma. You get the picture. This cycle of trauma causes severe trauma which affects brain development, which affects behaviors, which ultimately affects outcomes for these children.



Criminal Justice System

Children continue to be arrested for incidents occurring in their placements. Ideally these placements are paid to be equipped to handle children's behaviors in an appropriate way and without arrest. Punishing a child criminally for behavior the placement should expect creates a barrier to permanency as any Department of Juvenile Justice history can make a child very difficult to place, and therefore more difficult to find a permanent home.

This issue is further complicated if the foster child is 17 years old. Frequently the 17-year-old in DFCS custody is processed in the adult criminal justice system or released from the adult system without any participation by DFCS. While in jail, the 17-year-old does not participate in ILP, mental health services or education. Being cut off from services may have a negative impact on any improvement the child was making.

THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO HELPS MAKE THE COLD CASE PROJECT POSSIBLE

The Cold Case Project began as a one-year study in 2009 and has grown into an effective and efficient approach to solving the toughest cases in Georgia's foster care system.

Past funders include: the Casey Family Programs, Department of Family and Children Services, Georgia's Office of the Child Advocate, Title IV-E Federal funding, Court Improvement Program, Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta, and the Waterfall Foundation.

In 2016, the Georgia General Assembly appropriated state funds to ensure Georgia's most vulnerable children have every opportunity to find a *forever home*.

We look forward to continuing this work in 2019 to produce next year's annual report. It is a privilege for all involved to work on this project and to serve this population.

SPECIAL THANKS

The Georgia General Assembly

Office of the Child Advocate

Department of Family and Children Services

- County Directors
- Case Managers
- Supervisors
- Independent Living Program Coordinators
- Field Program Specialists
- Regional Adoption Coordinators
- Educational Programming, Assessment and Consultation Unit
- Wellness Programming, Assessment, and Consultation

The Cold Case Team

- Fellows
- Coaches

Amerigroup Healthcare

Child Attorneys

Guardians Ad Litem

Court Appointed Special Advocates

Special Assistant Attorneys General

Adoptive and Foster Families

All the Placement Providers



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