

CHATHAM COUNTY
REPORT TO THE COURT IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE
MARCH 11-12, 2021

CII March 11-12, 2021, Team Members:

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Chatham County would like to highlight a number of initiatives. These include specialty courts, court programs, and partner programs.

Specialty Courts: Chatham County Juvenile Court has three specialty courts. Our newest court, HOPE Court focuses on the specific needs of court-involved youth who have been confirmed as or at high risk for human trafficking (Sex and Labor). Family Treatment Court serves families whose children are dependent due to substance abuse of the parent or custodian. Specialized Probation and Rehabilitation Court (S.P.A.R.C.) is for youth who are coming through the Juvenile Court with mental/behavioral health challenges.

Court Programs and Initiatives: The Chatham County Juvenile Court has a number of programs and initiatives to address the challenges faced by the children and families appearing before our court. Some of the programs focus on dependency and intersectional circumstances that include dependency issues or averting dependency. The Front Porch is a Juvenile Court led multi agency resource center that provides assessments and expedited connections to services for children and families. Community Conferencing is a restorative justice conflict resolution program. The Work Readiness Enrichment Program is an educational and life-skills program for high risk children. Juvenile Court/DFCS bi-weekly staffings have increased coordination and keeps dually involved children from falling between the cracks.

Partner Programs. CASA now has 89% representation of children in dependency cases. They are also spearheading several initiatives, including working with PACK Savannah, establishing a visitation center, and creating a Foster Futures program that focuses on children 14 and up.

I. Specialty Courts

A. Healing Opportunities through Positive Empowerment (H.O.P.E.) Court

“HOPE” Court is Chatham County Juvenile Court’s treatment court designed to address the specific needs of court-involved youth who have been confirmed as or at high risk for human trafficking (Sex and Labor). The HOPE Court multidiscipline team (MDT) consists of the Juvenile Court Judge, Assistant District Attorney, Assistant Public Defender, specially trained Probation Officers, Juvenile Court Behavioral Health Clinician, Educational Advocate, DFCS representative, a representative from the Court Appointed Child Advocate Office, Juvenile Law Enforcement Officer, Deputy Court Administrator, Juvenile Court CHINS Coordinator, representatives from the Coastal Child Advocacy Center, and a representative from Gateway Behavioral Health, Juvenile Court Staff Attorney. The Court also collaborates with the UGA Cease Law Clinic for child dependency representation.

The program has also put in place a Steering Committee. The committee is comprised of experts in their fields from a cross section of the community, who also have an interest in eradicating human trafficking. The Committee is tasked with providing general oversight of the program and helping to keep the team abreast of changes, innovations, and any developments essential to the success of the program. The Committee meets once a quarter.

HOPE Court officially launched in January 2020. The MDT meets weekly to staff each case and to address any development, concerns and successes relevant to each child. HOPE Court also holds weekly court review hearings. Whether or not a child will need to attend a HOPE Court review session depends on the child’s identified needs. Understanding the unique needs of these youth, the program takes an individualized, creative and supportive approach by adopting a reward and responsibility model as opposed to an accountability and sanction model. The Court continues to take a child-centered approach, while rewarding all success, both big and small. The Court also works to help youth identify short and long-term goals and linking them with mentors. Reward for positive actions is important while teaching personal responsibility.

HOPE Court works to reinforce and support positive outcomes for youth in the program. Candidates for HOPE Court are identified at the earliest possible time by court personnel through routine assessments. Youth that present with indicators are immediately referred to the Child Advocacy Center for initial assessment and connection with a therapeutic environment. Once a child is a part of HOPE Court, a CASA is assigned. The Court also works closely with the Department of Family and Children Services to ensure that our youth who are also in foster care, are placed in appropriate and therapeutic placements, and that the proper services are provided to their families. Although the only criteria at this time is confirmation or high risk for human

trafficking, each child is reviewed by the team to determine if they are appropriate for the Court. The youth are continuously assessed to ensure that the proper interventions, services and supervision are maintained.

B. Family Treatment Court (FTC)

Family Treatment Court's primary mission is to achieve safe and permanent families for children by addressing the dependency resulting from substance abuse of a parent or caregiver. This mission is carried out by addressing the comprehensive needs of parents and children through an integrated, court-based, and multi-disciplinary team approach which strives to achieve timely decisions, coordinated treatment, ancillary services, judicial oversight, and safe and permanent placements.

Since its inception in 2008, the FTC has served 90 parents who suffer from long-term chronic and severe drug use. 234 children and grandchildren have benefited from the program. Program goals to improve the lives of dependent children include: facilitating quick entry into treatment for targeted families, retaining targeted families in treatment for a significant time, helping program participants live a lifestyle that is free of drugs and alcohol, promoting community stakeholders to conscientiously work together, and complying with elements of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA).

The FTC parents are required to complete intensive drug/alcohol treatment, follow all treatment recommendations including attending individual, group, family, marriage and/or residential treatment as recommended, attend 1-3 community support sessions weekly, provide 2-5 random observed drug/alcohol screens three times a week, attend weekly court sessions and complete weekly goals, receive unannounced visits from a specially trained Community Policing Team, complete parenting classes and two family education programs, provide appropriate and stable housing, request and review personal credit report, develop a sustainable budget, document an emergency fund, complete a resume with a cover letter, and referral document while seeking employment and documenting efforts until 35-40 hours of employment have been obtained, attend all scheduled visitation and demonstrate healthy parenting skills.

As a highlight, this week, a partner has provided two years of funding for a wellness program. Participants in treatment at Recovery Place will have on-site yoga and exercise classes five days per week, a personal trainer, ongoing healthy shopping and cooking education, and will be given appropriate exercise clothing and equipment (ie. running shoes and yoga mats) for these activities. The program will be tracking data to measure any changes in outcomes for participants.

C. Specialized Probation and Rehabilitation Court (S.P.A.R.C.)

”SPARC” is Chatham County Juvenile Court’s mental health court. The SPARC team consists of the Juvenile Court Judge, Assistant District Attorney, Assistant Public Defender, Specialized Probation Officer, Juvenile Court Behavioral Health Clinician/Coordinator, Juvenile Court DFCS Liaison, Deputy Court Administrator, Probation Supervisor, SPARC Case Manager, Educational Advocate, DFCS Case managers assigned to a child in SPARC, Juvenile Court Staff Attorney, and a representative from Gateway Behavioral Health.

The program continues to problem-solve every day on how to best meet the needs of youth who are coming through the Juvenile Court with mental/behavioral health challenges. This includes screening, assessing, and providing supervision, which is both intensive and therapeutically informed.

Candidates for SPARC are identified by various individuals involved in the court process, including probation officers, attorneys, judges, and DFCS case managers. Once a referral is received, an assessment is completed by the Behavioral Health Clinician to determine eligibility. Each assessment reviews the child’s areas of functioning, history of services, and family background. The behavioral health clinician prepares a written report for submission to the Court at either disposition or a review hearing which includes recommendations for interventions, services and supervision.

While many court-involved children have mental health issues, there is a subset of this population whose mental health threatens to interfere with the child’s successful completion of probation. To facilitate the development of a plan for these children’s success, SPARC convenes a multi-agency team, including representatives from outside agencies, to conduct a pre-dispositional screening. In addition to developing individual recommendations for probation, this committee determines whether the child is an appropriate candidate for specialized probation through SPARC.

To qualify for SPARC, a child must have a documented diagnosis that includes a mood disorder, and the child must be a medium to high risk offender. Participants and their families work intensively with the court team, including having the Specialized Probation Officer provide supervision for the children on an almost daily basis. Their service plans are managed by the Behavioral Health Clinician and they are frequently reviewed in front of the judge. The SPARC team meets 3 to 4 times per month to discuss barriers and/or successes to moving forward in the program and attempts to ensure that the child as well as family receives the utmost support and services.

II. Court Programs and Initiatives

A. The Front Porch is a Juvenile Court led collaborative that has been designed to reduce both recidivism and court involvement among youth who pose little to no risk to community safety. Each individual is assessed by a Front Porch staff and referred to a multi-agency panel. The panel will develop an intervention plan for each child that is designed to address their underlying issues. The Front Porch staff will work with all partner agencies involved and provide assistance to facilitate and implement the intervention plan. Anyone can refer a child or their family to the Front Porch. Local law enforcement can refer to the Front Porch through pre-arrest diversion.

The staff at the front porch include a county and school board funded director, administrative support, juvenile court probation officers, school social workers, a DFCS case manager, CSB counselors and support staff, parent university staff, etc.

Partner agencies include the Chatham County Board of Commissioners, City of Savannah, Savannah Chatham County Public School System, Chatham County Juvenile Court, District Attorney's Office, Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council, Gateway Community Service Board, Coastal Georgia Indicators Coalition, St. Joseph's/Candler, Mediation Center of the Coastal Empire, DFCS, Public Defenders Office, Parent University, DEEP, and Community Representatives.

B. Community Conferencing is a restorative justice conflict resolution program offered through the Mediation Center that collectively provides ways for people to resolve conflict and crime. The conference provides an opportunity for parties to take accountability for their actions. Parties sit in a circle and discuss what occurred, how each party was affected and work together to resolve the issue. Parties include those involved and supporters and/or representatives from other organizations. A third party facilitates the conference at a convenient location.

C. Work Readiness Enrichment Program (WREP) is an 18 week juvenile court referred program that serves 15 disconnected, system involved youth ages 14-16 who without significant intervention are at a high risk to re-offend. The goal of WREP is to provide educational programming to bring participants back to their grade level, provide work readiness training, so they are qualified to enter the workforce, and provide support services to help address the root cause of their chronic delinquent behavior and activity. WREP targets students enrolled in Savannah Chatham County Public School System's Intensive Behavior Unit program (less than full day program), given this is the population with the highest delinquency and recidivism rates in Chatham County Juvenile Court.

D. Interagency Staffing for Dually Involved Children. Bi-Weekly Juvenile Court administrative and probation staff meet with DFCS supervisors to review the cases of children involved in both dependency and delinquency cases to ensure optimum coordination.

E. Chatham County Office of Child Advocate. In collaboration with the Georgia Office of Child Advocate, Chatham is a pilot site for creating an office of counsel for children in dependency cases. Attorneys will be salaried, county employees with benefits. Each courtroom will have a dedicated child attorney. There will be administrative staff and likely a social worker assigned to the office. The attorney's fees for these attorneys and the other dependency panel attorneys will be submitted for title IV-E reimbursement. The Georgia Office of Child Advocate will provide training and technical assistance for this pilot program.

III. Partner Program Highlight: CASA

The CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) program recruits, screens, trains and supervises volunteers who serve as advocates for abused or neglected children that are under the jurisdiction of the Chatham County Juvenile Court. CASA is now serving 89% of children in foster care. These volunteers conduct investigations, participate in court hearings, and provide a recommendation to the judge regarding what they believe is in the best interest of the child. Chatham County CASA goes above and beyond the role of courtroom advocate. They have partnered with a number of entities and offer several additional support programs for the children and families before our court.

PACK Savannah – In partnership with this non-profit, a clothing and toy boutique has been built. It provides an opportunity for dependent children to choose new items in their size during periodic shopping trips. This non-profit also provides food and other items for the children and families in our court. A recent FTC parent obtained housing and had no furniture. Within days, a house full of furniture was provided without cost to the family.

Visitation Center – STATUS ONGOING – Chatham County does not have a supervised visitation center, outside of the DFCS office. CASA continues to work to establish a visitation center that can provide family time in a home-like setting. A capital campaign will be launched in April, 2021, with proposed launch in January 2022.

Fostering Futures is a new initiative focusing on children 14 and up, helping prepare them for adulthood. This is one of eight sites serving as a pilot for this program.