

Cold Case Project
Annual Report for the Work of 2019
Georgia's Child Welfare System
April 2021



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

**“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”
- Helen Keller**

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Adoptive and Foster Families

Placement and Service Providers

Introduction

Georgia's Office of the Child Advocate ("OCA") and the Supreme Court of Georgia's Committee on Justice for Children, in collaboration with Georgia's Division of Family and Children Services ("DFCS"), is pleased to report on the joint Executive and Judicial continuation of the CCP ("Cold Case Project").

The CCP began its work in March, 2009. As of March, 2019, it has completed ten years of work, positively impacting the lives of abused and neglected children in state custody. The CCP can be viewed as a quality assurance program that uses a predictive statistical model to create a statewide list of children who are most likely to age out of foster care without achieving permanency. Through its unique, collaborative use of attorneys who identify barriers to permanency and well-being needs, CCP literally changes outcomes for these children and youth.

What is permanency and why is it important?

Permanency, for children who are 'stuck' in what is known as 'foster care drift,' may mean being reunited with their family of origin, joining a new family through adoption or guardianship, or forming meaningful and stable connections with caring adults which continue throughout a lifetime. Experts agree that children who lack permanency tend to experience bad outcomes. A former foster youth poignantly illustrates how precarious life can be for this population:

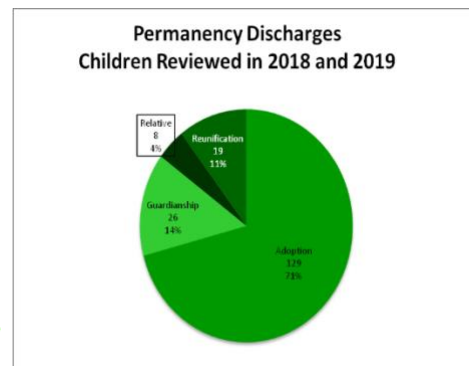
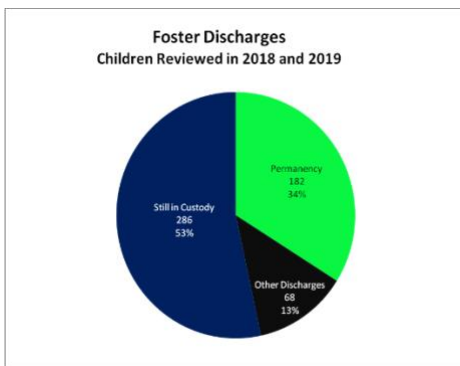
"I was in foster care twice in my life and experienced a lot of trauma and abuse. In my last four years of foster care before I turned 18, I had approximately 54 placements. I have seen how my foster care peers who did not have family support have struggled. Many have been homeless. One is in prison for armed robbery, and another became a prostitute who was murdered. When I became a legal adult, I had not completed high school, had no job skills, and was generally hostile. Violence was my preferred way of solving problems. I was very angry at the world and made many poor decisions. Ten years later, I have my GED and am making progress toward making a good life for myself, though it remains a challenge. Even middle-class kids with family support can find it hard to live independently these days. If not for the commitment of a family who I met through the Cold Case Project, I would likely be homeless today." Zeke, aged 27

Children who age out of foster care without permanency often become adults who struggle to join the ranks of productive citizens as indicated by the national statistics.ⁱ As of 2018, 51% of the children leaving Georgia's foster care system "emancipate," i.e., leave the protection and structure of the ongoing 'foster care for legal adults' program.ⁱⁱ These aging-out former foster youth often require government resources.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, a focus on the economic benefit of doing more to help young people who age out of foster care is merited and beneficial.

The Cold Case Project seeks to avoid these negative outcomes, both for these individual children and the community at large. Focusing attention on these children ultimately conserves state and local resources. By ensuring that Cold Case children have the emotional “permanent” support necessary to succeed in life, everyone benefits.

This year the statistics again speak for themselves showing the success of the Cold Case Project in establishing permanency; **permanency outcomes were achieved for 33.96 percent of the cold case children reviewed.**

Adoption	129 (24.07%)
Guardianship	26 (4.85%)
Relative	8 (1.49%)
Reunification	19 (3.54%)
Custody to Other	9 (1.68%)
Death	1 (0.19%)
Emancipation	54 (10.07%)
ILP	3 (0.56%)
Runaway	1 (0.19%)
Still in Custody	286 (53.36%)



What does the Cold Case Project do?

Led by the Hon. Ashley Willcott, J.D., CWLS, the Cold Case Project identifies, examines, and analyzes the most difficult cases of children who remain in foster care long-term. The Cold Case Project seeks to identify any barriers to permanency and then to brainstorm potential solutions. In this way, the Cold Case Project, in collaboration with its partners, identifies previously-overlooked permanency outcomes for our most vulnerable children. For these children, who are predicted to be most likely to age out of care with no home and often no adult connections, a safe, permanent, and loving home is vital if they are to become productive citizens. The CCP has observed that a child’s ‘adoptability’ can be enhanced if the child’s well-being is specifically addressed.

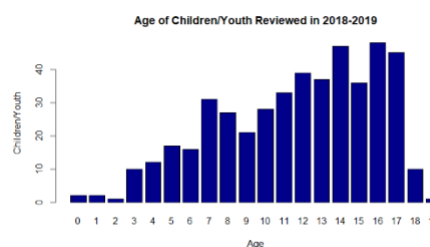
CCP began as a project through the generous funding of Casey Family Programs. It is now supported through state and federal funding through DFCS and OCA. Funding is used to pay Child Welfare Law Specialist (CWLS) attorneys as well as attorneys in specialized fields including immigration and education, experienced/seasoned retired DFCS case managers and managers, and private investigators.

These team members review cases, conduct Permanency Round Table Pluses (“PRT+s”), and monitor and encourage the next steps to work towards permanency for CCP children.

Description of the CCP

The Cold Case list of children (run twice in 2019) is produced using a computer-based predictive model. The more information the computer accumulates over the years, the more predictive the model becomes. In 2019, the model once again provided a comprehensive list of children likely to age out of foster care without achieving permanency.

The cold case list is distributed twice annually to DFCS staff – this enables DFCS to identify any changes in the local cases. As in past years, perhaps due to the [Hawthorne effect](#), some cases quickly start to reach success prior to intervention from the CCP team. The partnership with Georgia DFCS is so intrinsic at this point that there are numerous immediate and on-going responses to the distribution of the cold case list including the sharing of success stories and updates like “his/her adoption has been finalized!”



What are the characteristics of the Cold Case children?

Of the 536 Cold Case children in 2018/2019 (plus their siblings, if any):

- More than 50% of children were between the ages of 8 and 16 at the time of first contact with the Cold Case Project. 25% were over 15.64 years old.
- 283 African-American children/youth (52.8%)
- 202 White children/youth (37.7%)
- Average length of time spent in foster care is over 4 years
- Almost 10% were taken into custody due to abandonment or relinquishment
- More than one in four removals were associated with abandonment, relinquishment, the child's behavioral problems, the caretaker's inability to cope due to illness or other reason, or/and refusal to assume parental responsibility. These cases tend to be unusually complex and frequently require expertise on the topics of mental health (especially trauma), developmental disabilities, funding streams, and the interactions of numerous governmental agencies.

Details of the CCP Process

The CCP team consists of specially-trained Child Welfare Law Specialist (CWLS) attorneys called Fellows, as well as attorneys in specialized fields and experience. These Fellows are attorneys who have passed a national child welfare exam and are certified by the National Association of Counsel for Children. In addition, social workers and private investigators round out the team. The broad and deep expertise of each Fellow, contract attorney, and social worker ensures that we can address with specificity issues such as immigration, social security, education, adoption, and DFCS policy. The Fellows each have a broad working knowledge of the current child welfare system in Georgia, both in and out of the courtroom.

Guided by the list of “Cold Case” children, expert reviewers read the children’s case files, and draft concise but thorough summaries with questions and recommendations for further action. A Permanency Roundtable Plus (PRT+) is then scheduled by the CCP. The PRT+ meetings bring all of those who touch the child’s life, including DFCS personnel (including but not limited to: case managers, independent Living Coordinators, Regional Adoption Coordinators, Field Program Specialists), attorneys, service providers, therapists, school personnel, CASAs, and foster parents to the table to find creative solutions to help move the child towards a safe, permanent home. The most important person attending the PRT+ is the child, who is empowered to raise his or her concerns and communicate preferences to the CCP team. The ultimate goal of these meetings is to provide assistance, tools, resources, and creative thinking and dialogue to break through any barriers and to move cases forward toward permanency.

After brainstorming permanency strategies that have not yet been tried or identifying any strategies that should be tried again, the CCP drafts suggested Permanency Action Steps to guide the discussion at the PRT+ meetings.

During 2019, the state-wide Cold Case Project (CCP) reviewed 262 cases, held 184 PRT+s, and 552 follow-up calls statewide.

Throughout the year, the CCP continues to work very closely with local DFCS, regional leadership, and the state DFCS office. This multi-disciplinary approach by the CCP, OCA, and DFCS to drill down on cases and seek positive solutions has been demonstrated to be highly effective over the last decade. Additionally, CASAs have become more involved in the CCP as are crucial partners. In almost all cases in which CASAs have been assigned state-wide, CASAs have been present at and participated in PRT+ meetings. Further, coaching team members continue to provide critical technical guidance, for instance: education legal expert, Craig Goodmark, disability legal expert, Joe Sarra, and MAAC funding expert, Sandy Corbin, all ably assist the Cold Case team.

In 2019, the CCP continued to focus on follow-up conference calls to ensure that the agreed-upon Permanency Action Steps remain on the forefront and that moving these cases continues successfully. One of the most significant developments is that DFCS staff welcome and request CCP involvement and technical assistance. Since it is the 10-year anniversary of this project, we have ample data to identify what, if any, lessons can be learned. For example, in 2014, the first full year of the Cold Case Court in Fulton County, there were 65 children on the Cold Case list. Five years later, in 2019, there were only 24 children on the Cold Case list in Fulton County, a dramatic reduction.

Over the past decade, Cold Case Project Fellows have identified the following issues which impact the state's financial bottom line:

1. Missed federal funding for foster care

The work of the Cold Case Project has highlighted a striking and avoidable budgetary impact. As a state, Georgia fails to receive reimbursement from the federal government (through IV-E funding) for numerous children. The federal government reimburses Georgia 68.5% of the costs of foster care maintenance if certain criteria are met. When a child in foster care is not eligible for IV-E funding, the state must fund the entire cost of foster care using IV-B funds.

IV-B funding can occur for a number of reasons, but often, the cause is as simple as the absence of specific language in a court order which is mandated by the federal government. The Cold Case project has identified many cases in which VI-E funding was inapplicable. These amounts are not inconsequential. Georgia's loss of federal reimbursement for one particular sibling group of three children amounted to \$44,831.88 per year for 4 years, totaling \$179,327.52. Losing this revenue stream unduly burdens the state budget and results in less funding being available for Georgia's children in foster care, so the CCP focuses on correcting the errors leading to IV-E ineligibility. Over the past decade, there have been dramatic improvements noted state-wide regarding court orders which include the federally-required judicial findings. This means that increased federal IV-E funding can be drawn down to partially offset foster care maintenance payments. If the state-wide penetration rate is improved by just 1%, this would result in at least one million additional federal funding.

Recommendation: Continued training of the attorneys representing DFCS (the Special Assistant Attorney Generals – SAAGS) and juvenile court judges statewide to ensure that the precise language which triggers federal funding is included in court orders; involvement with dependency stakeholder meetings to educate and train around required language and timely orders.

2. Extended stays in PRTFs and lack of PRTF discharge plans

Currently in Georgia, there are 567 children in foster care placed in PRTFs and crisis stabilization units (CSUs) around the state. The cost of inpatient psychiatric hospitalization to the state is staggering. Georgia spends a shocking \$29 million per year on its foster children in PRTFs. Annual costs of individual PRTF stays can exceed \$350,000. Under federal law, the various agencies of our state collectively hold the responsibility to ensure that federal dollars are correctly spent, so a careful review of these stays is warranted. In a number of cases, these hospitalization costs are borne solely by DFCS when Amerigroup, the Medicaid managed-care organization, denies coverage on medical necessity grounds^{iv}. DFCS is often put in the position of funding these extended stays in order to safeguard the life and safety of certain children.^v

Recommendation: Implementing a complex care management system, in which all parties (DFCS, DCH, Amerigroup, treatment providers, CASAs, etc.) engage, would reduce this expenditure. Having this issue considered by Georgia's newly-appointed Mental Health Commission may be helpful.



Success!

- 78 months in foster care.
- Because of the needs of all of the kids, they had a few placements and had to be separated.
- In January 2014, the kids were placed together in the home of paternal aunt and uncle of the youngest child.
- Agency and relatives worked together to stabilize treatment providers for the kids.
- Adoption of the kids together by the relative!

3. *The high cost of children with high psychiatric needs being sent to out-of-state psychiatric residential facilities (PRTFs)*

One additional, related problem with hospitalization directly impacts our state DFCS budgets. As of the end of 2019, 117 Georgia children in foster care had been sent to out-of-state PRTFs. This represents a dramatic increase from the eight children who were sent out of state during the 2012 to 2014 period. The reasons for these out-of-state placements vary – sometimes it may be that a specific treatment is unavailable in Georgia. Other times, the child may have been rejected for admission by every single psychiatric hospital in Georgia. As seen in #2 above, the annual financial impact on the DFCS budget is immense.

Recommendation: Implementing a complex care management system, in which all parties (DFCS, DCH, Amerigroup, treatment providers, CASAs, etc.) would reduce this expenditure. Georgia’s five highest level PRTFs may need to expand their therapeutic options. It may be helpful to notify Georgia’s newly-appointed Mental Health Commission about this issue.

4. *Adoption disruption continues to present a common reason for children who come back into foster care and become Cold Cases.*

Unfortunately, many children come into care because their parents or guardians cannot (or do not know how to) access mental health resources. Many of these parents are adoptive parents, guardians of special needs children, or grandparents raising grandchildren. These frustrated parents, guardians, and grandparents often seek to place these children in foster care in the hope that that DFCS will ensure that the child obtains necessary treatment. In 2019, a total of 687 children were relinquished to DFCS in either an effort to obtain disability services for them or when parents have given up on a child. DFCS often becomes involved in these cases when a child is scheduled for discharge from a psychiatric placement but the parent does not feel capable of meeting the child’s high needs and refuses to bring the child home. Sometimes the child’s issues cannot be readily addressed in the adoptive home, such as when one child is sexually predatory toward vulnerable siblings or when a teenager acts out violently toward the parents. However, most of these children should not need to enter foster care in order to receive timely and adequate mental health services.

Under the Family First Prevention Act, federal funding can be used to help families *before* the children enter foster care. To address this ongoing problem, changes in policy are already being made by DFCS.

Recommendation: In an era of budget cuts, requesting increased state support for adoptive parents of special needs children may not be feasible. However, adoptive parents of high-needs children report problems in obtaining resources such as respite care or in-home therapy on their own. If some of these families were given access to DFCS representatives and could receive preventive services designed to prevent disruption, perhaps the number of disrupted adoptions could be reduced.



Success!

- Youth in care since 2015 following a disrupted adoption.
- Adopted when she was very young and did not know anything about her birth family or that she had siblings.
- During the CCP PRT+ in Jan 2019, youth attended and expressed she wanted to know her birth name.
- County DFCS not only located her birth name, but located her sister who was also in care.
- Sisters introduced, have weekend overnight visits and will be living together in the same foster home.

As a result of the detailed CCP work over the past decade, the following barriers to Cold Case children achieving permanency have been identified (presented in descending order of occurrence):

1. ***Georgia’s Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) waivers are not being sought, obtained, and appealed.***

DBHDD waivers allow children with mental health and developmental disabilities to receive sheltered housing with caretakers as adults. These young adults are not capable of caring for themselves and do not have supportive family members. If not for “waiver homes,” these former foster youth would be homeless or institutionalized. As developmental disabilities are generally life-long conditions, they must be specifically identified early on and then addressed through waiver applications.^{vi} The current waiver application process warrants improvement. Psychological evaluations conducted by school systems, which do not include IQs, are currently not accepted by DBHDD, thus delaying funding. Further, many children have dual diagnoses, i.e., developmental disabilities co-existing with psychiatric conditions, and are currently rejected for DBHDD waivers on the grounds that their developmental disabilities are not primary. This DBHDD policy warrants review. Georgia’s newly-appointed Mental Health Commission is a great example of a way to address this issue. Additionally, all mental health professionals who conduct evaluations of children should be advised of the necessity of making intellectual disability diagnoses when applicable. Lastly, a new, dedicated unit at state DFCS is planned to alleviate some of the backlog in applications and to provide much-needed expertise.

Continued training for judges, attorneys, CASAs, and DFCS personnel would help keep this issue on the radar, as well as community stakeholder meetings. ***The child's mental and/or behavioral needs are not being either addressed or adequately addressed.***

Virtually all of the Cold Case children have experienced complex trauma and have multiple psychiatric diagnoses. Every child now receives a trauma assessment when they enter foster care, and all are supposed to be receiving trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT). The efficacy of the therapeutic counseling and psychotropic medications these children receive appears to vary widely. For children with autism diagnoses, processing disorders, or intellectual disabilities, alternative therapies should be considered.^{vii} Unfortunately, treating trauma in the absence of nurturing parents is often unsuccessful.

When the "Child In Need of Services" (CHINS) statute came into effect in 2014, it was thought that these issues would be ameliorated. The CHINS statute applies to a child adjudicated to be in need of care.^{viii} However, CHINS is being effectively circumvented as children continue to come into DFCS custody due to a lack of services being available (as discussed more fully below), or the services are perceived as being unavailable. This issue should be studied, and if these resources are available, improved education and messaging with the public needs to occur.

Further, a 'system of care,' which essentially "rates" the level of resources needed by each child, was created by statute in 2010. Unfortunately, this has not been fully realized. Implementing the already-approved system of care scheme would help ensure that children receive the appropriate resources. Institutional settings such as psychiatric hospitals, which are not designed to be long-term, is often protracted simply because community-based treatment is lacking. The current contractual arrangement between DFCS and Amerigroup (the managed care provider) does not provide the appropriate range of services for children in foster care. Lastly, administrative appeals regarding Amerigroup denial of coverage are not being sufficiently utilized. This might be ameliorated if court-appointed guardian *ad litem*s were funded to pursue these appeals.

2. Failure to implement CCP Permanency Action Steps & related case manager turnover.

DFCS case managers have an undeniably challenging job. They are often forced to engage in a constant cycle of crisis management, leaving little time to execute the CCP Action Steps agreed upon during PRT+s. While turnover at DFCS is declining and new DFCS hires are now booming, this remains a concern. Case manager turnover can mean that a new hire is unaware of the detailed history of the case and the existence of Cold Case Action Steps, while a delay in assigning a new case manager to a case can also lead to communication gaps. As DFCS is *in loco parentis*, in the position as the legal parent, it is essential for case managers to be fully informed about the needs of each child. Clearly, children benefit when their case manager has long-term involvement with their case; case manager turnover has been repeatedly correlated with foster care drift. Case managers may need additional support from their supervisors, Field Program Specialists, and Regional Adoption Coordinators to implement the CCP Permanency Action Steps in a timely manner, particularly since children's needs change constantly.

3. *A lack of meaningful child-specific recruitment.*

There are a number of ways DFCS “markets” children for adoption: Wednesday’s Child^{ix}, adoption parties, ‘paper match’ events, and publishing the child’s availability for adoption with several national adoption organizations. Given Georgia’s dramatic increase in achieving permanency through adoption, these avenues are obviously effective. For some children, particularly Cold Case teens, additional creative strategies may be needed. For instance, some of the Cold Case children have “marketed” themselves by approaching teachers or athletic coaches to discuss adoption or guardianship. For some children, outreach to faith-based communities or to mentoring programs may be worth pursuing. For others, the department’s assistance in getting the child involved in a sport or extracurricular activity may lead to a “forever family.” Thoughtfully encouraged settings and situations where children’s relationships can be formed with members of the community (as opposed to professionals who are paid to deal with them), can promote permanency.

4. *In cases where APPLA may be an appropriate case plan, independence skills are not being fostered to enable a child to succeed as adult.*

Permanency through reunification with family, adoption, or guardianship are considered optimal permanency case plans. APPLA (Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) plans are not permanency plans and are viewed as the least desirable plan for children in foster care. However, there are situations where APPLA plans are appropriate. APPLA permanent foster care may be considered only when a youth 16 years or older resides in a foster home or with a relative who is committed to the long-term care, support and well-being of the youth and this placement is not likely to disrupt unless or until a more permanent plan can be accomplished.^x Approximately 1,300 children in Georgia’s foster system are currently placed in institutional settings (psychiatric hospitals and congregate group homes) and are thus segregated from society, impeding the opportunity to learn appropriate social skills. Independent Living Skills are imperative for these youth.

5. *Social Security Insurance (SSI) disability applications are not being made.*

As measured by DFCS, of the approximately 13,000 children in Georgia’s foster care system, approximately 4,000 have disabilities. Of those, 58% have psychiatric diagnoses, and 42% have medical diagnoses (which include developmental disabilities). SSI monthly benefits and continued Medicaid eligibility can make the difference for aged-out foster children between a safe shelter, sufficient food, and medical care on one side and destitution and homelessness on the other. Many states employ a different approach than Georgia, which delegates the completion of SSI applications to individual case managers, who may have minimal training concerning this important task. A dedicated unit at state DFCS is now planned to focus on the intricacies of filing these applications and conducting appeals might improve the odds of success as well as reduce the number of appeals.

6. *Large sibling groups*

Understandably, only special pre-adoptive parents are enthusiastic about adopting very large sibling groups. There have been CCP sibling groups as large as 13 children – an overwhelming number for the majority of prospective adoptive parents. Additionally, some foster parents who are interested in adopting younger children may not be willing to adopt a 17-year-old. Another related issue arises when the CCP discovers the existence of siblings in the custody of different counties.

This can occur where there are different fathers in different counties who are unaware of other related half-siblings and when a mother's children enter care with different last names. In both cases, the children may not even know each other, but the sibling waiver process must be implemented nonetheless. Entering into Post-Adoption Contact Agreements may resolve some of these situations, and front-line staff are becoming increasingly aware of this option. These cases continue to present a real challenge and may be addressed through the sibling waivers discussed below.

7. *Sibling waivers not being sought when the ongoing needs of one sibling is greater than the other siblings.*

When one sibling has very high behavioral or mental health needs, the traditional focus has been to provide resources to that high-need sibling in the hope that the entire sibling group can reach permanency as a unit. Unfortunately, this can lead to an extended delay in making a decision to request a sibling waiver from the state DFCS office.

A sibling waiver allows the department to split the sibling group and allow one or more of the children to seek permanency separately. This is a very serious undertaking with long-term consequences, but it is often necessary to give siblings with fewer mental health needs a chance for permanency. The potential loss of sibling contact can be ameliorated by implementing Post-Adoption Contact Agreements with adoptive parents or guardians.

Success!



- 2 brothers and sister placed in one home foster initially.
- All 3 experienced multiple placement changes as the result of the foster parents not being able to manage the sister's behavior.
- Sibling waiver obtained that allowed the brothers to be adopted together by foster parents who were not able to parent their sister.
- Sister is now stable with a therapeutic foster home, and receives frequent in-person sibling visits. WWK is assisting in child specific recruitment for her.

8. Caregivers are unwilling to do more than foster a child.

When a child is bonded with a foster parent who refuses to adopt, this can be particularly hurtful. Cold Case children have typically experienced multiple rejections. The Cold Case project focuses on unpacking the basis for the foster parent's resistance towards adoption. Some foster parents report that they want and need DFCS' support and problem-solving and are unenthusiastic about being solely responsible for the child. Others state that they do not want to burden their adult children with the care of these children should they pass away. The Cold Case Project team engages in Permanency Counseling whenever possible and notes that some of these parents are more open about their true motivations with non-DFCS personnel.

9. Foster parents are unwilling to adopt due to financial considerations.

For a number of Cold Case children, high foster care *per diem*s greatly exceed the adoption assistance rates. Specialized foster care is known as "Room, Board, and Watchful Oversight" (RBWO). RBWO waivers pay the foster caretakers and their Child Placement Agencies (CPAs) a much higher fee than regular foster care. Daily RBWO per diem rates exceeding \$325.00 (\$9,650 per month) are not uncommon. In contrast, enhanced adoption assistance stipends paid to adoptive parents for the highest-need children rarely exceed \$1,000 per month. For many RBWO foster parents, even when they love the child and want to adopt him or her, the financial disincentive to adopt is determinative. Additionally, the Cold Case Project has encountered numerous CPAs who are not supportive of their foster parents adopting. This has led to a concern about the CPA's potential conflict of interest – on one hand, the welfare of the child and his or her need for permanency vs. the continued finance stream on the other. The Cold Case team has repeatedly noted that once a child receives the RBWO funding, this is rarely reduced even when the children's behavior improves out of a concern that the children will lose a stable placement.

Child Welfare Outcomes for 2019

[This year, the CCP reviewed 262 cases, held 184 PRT+s and held 552 follow-up conference calls.](#) This number is in line with the work than we have accomplished in each of our previous 9 years.

2019 and the CCP

The CCP remains a collaborative effort of Georgia's Office of the Child Advocate (the executive branch of Government), the Justice for Children Committee (the judicial branch of government), and Georgia DFCS. This partnership has served these children well. While the number of children in foster care has decreased slightly this year (there are approximately 12,837 children in care in Georgia as of February 2020^{xi}), turnover of DFCS case managers continues, and resources remain limited (such as therapeutic foster homes). However, the leadership and resources from all three agencies stand ready to assist in these most difficult cases.

CCP has also continued to engage and rely on its Cold Case "coaches." The collaboration with coaches, a select group of treatment providers and advocates, was first implemented in 2015. These stakeholders assist, support, and educate the Cold Case team. For sample, CASA has continued to ensure that local CASA programs are notified of Cold Cases and as a result, CASA representatives are consistently present at Permanency Round Table Pluses (PRT+s) to advocate on behalf of the child.

Additional Measurable Outcomes of CCP

In 2019, the CCP focused on gathering and analyzing additional data regarding measurable benefits to Cold Case Children. Children have continued to be engaged and present at the PRT+s in 2019. Additional efforts were made to invite and secure the presence (via telephone or in person) at the PRT+ of the Special Assistant Attorney Generals (SAAGS), who represent local DFCS and who can advise DFCS of the legal options and possibilities while taking into account the local legal culture. The inclusion of local CASAs in the PRT+ allows their participation in the PRT+s to advocate for the best interest of the children. Additional efforts were made in 2019 to ensure that child attorneys and Guardian *ad Litem* attorneys were likewise identified and included in the PRT+ process, thus increasing the number of those who participated in the PRT+s. GA DFCS' [E.P.A.C.](#) (Educational Programming, Assessment and Support) unit partnered closely with CCP in 2019 and helped connect Cold Case children to better educational services. Amerigroup continued its engagement to assist in identifying and providing services to meet the CCP children's medical and mental health needs. The CCP conducted regular relative searches in 2019. In order to make the identification of such services stronger and better, PRT+ meetings were attended in person by the CCP Fellows all around the state.

Lessons learned in 2019

1. The CCP team notes that Georgia's child welfare system continues to improve overall. DFCS continues to collaborate in a meaningful way with the CCP. DFCS's positive approach and warm reception for the expertise of the CCP works to the benefit of Georgia's most vulnerable children. In turn, the CCP commends the hard work of DFCS front line staff and management.
2. The CCP has learned to look beyond statistics and instead focuses on the "whole child." Sometimes relatively small changes in a child's life can make the difference between them aging out or being adopted. For instance, a child may not be receiving the optimal type of therapy. He/She might need a psychotropic medication review which leads to either a reduction in medication or a change to a new, more effective medication. A child may need professional help in reaching out to the trusted adults in their life to explore the possibility of forming a lasting connection. A child who grieves her lost relationship with siblings can be helped to reestablish this connection, and thus, be able to function better in a foster home. A child with academic difficulties and reactive violence may benefit from tutoring which helps him feel successful, reducing problematic behaviors. Locating a relative who was previously thought to be deceased can make a huge difference to a child who feels abandoned. Each case is complex and different and requires a special eye towards the uniqueness of each child, his or her needs, history, and possible caretakers.
3. Despite the CCP team's best efforts, some Cold Case children do not achieve permanency. As a result, the CCP has increasingly focused on ensuring that needed resources for the Cold Case children will be available if they are in danger of aging out without permanency. As discussed above, obtaining DBHDD waivers and SSI benefits is of paramount importance for some of these children and could mean the difference between safe, sheltered housing and homelessness.

4. Reviews continue to reveal systemic defects including a lack of resources which are sometimes geographic in nature. For example, there tends to be more and varied service providers in urban areas and few service providers in South Georgia. There is a general paucity of regular foster homes in Georgia and only a handful of therapeutic foster homes^{xii}. Placements which are specifically designed to address trauma and mental health needs are needed as complex trauma affects the vast majority of the children on the Cold Case list.
5. DFCS personnel continue to express their appreciation of the detailed narratives produced after the CCP online review of DFCS records. Not only do the narratives serve as the best starting point for these cases, they often unearth long-buried details of which front-line staff may be unaware. For many of the Cold Case children, the narratives may constitute the first time such a comprehensive life history has been completed.
6. The collaborative relationship between the judicial and executive branches continues to be very strong and has had a major impact on the effectiveness of this work. This has a cascading effect which benefits other parts of the child welfare system. Persistence and collaboration resulted in the CCP being fully funded in 2019.

Next Steps for 2020



1. The CCP plans to initiate Cold Case reviews in 2020 according to psychiatric hospitals (PRTFs) where multiple children are admitted. PRT+s will actually take place at the PRTFs, providing the facility is amenable. This will allow the children to be present (since they are frequently too unstable to be transported to a DFCS office), allow the therapists to be present, and will allow the CCP to focus on these high-need children in a more efficient manner.
2. The CCP continually reviews its own work to tweak any deficiencies and ensure that best practices are implemented. While abbreviated narratives were experimented with in 2019, the consensus of the CCP team is that the more in-depth narratives provide more useful information.
3. The CCP will continue to run the Cold Case list at least two times per year at a statewide level. In a significant improvement, this printout will be readily available at the county level for all personnel with access to the Court Process Report System (CRPS2). This will allow CASAs, GALs, child attorneys, and court personnel to easily see which children are identified as Cold Cases, and hopefully, this will motivate greater focus on the steps leading to permanency.
4. The CCP will continue to monitor Cold Cases after initial PRT meetings. When needed, follow-up conference calls and meetings will be scheduled. There will a continued effort to focus on well-being issues such as health, education, visitation, and family connections. When appropriate, the CCP will ensure that excellent social work and positive case outcomes will be shared with DFCS leadership.
5. An annual report written jointly by CCP Team Members, J4C staff, DFCS staff, and with continued data analysis by DFCS, will be published for the work of 2020.

Conclusion

While the challenges can feel daunting, the CCP continues to benefit Georgia’s most vulnerable children. These are the children who lack a family through no fault of their own and are most likely to end up homeless or in jail as adults. For many, the CCP project may represent one of their last chances to fix a life path before it is derailed.

This project is unique in that it utilizes both legal and social work expertise to focus on these cases, and our successes spur us towards achieving even better outcomes for these children. The CCP team wholeheartedly believes that these children deserve the opportunity to be loved and be part of a family, to succeed, and to become productive citizens. We are grateful for the opportunity to institutionalize this quality-assurance project with state funds and look forward to sharing our results again next year.

2019 CCP FELLOWS

Hon. Ashley Willcott, CWLS

Leslie E. Stewart, CWLS

Mary Hermann, CWLS

Vicky Wallace, CWLS

Kristi Lovelace, CWLS

Vicki Townsend, DFCS (retired)

Lynn Barmore, DFCS (retired)

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- ⁱ More than 23,000 children will age out of the US foster care system every year.
 - After reaching the age of 18, 20% of the children who were in foster care will become instantly homeless.
 - Only 1 out of every 2 foster kids who age out of the system will have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24.
 - There is less than a 3% chance for children who have aged out of foster care to earn a college degree at any point in their life.
 - 7 out of 10 girls who age out of the foster care system will become pregnant before the age of 21.

<https://www.nfyi.org/51-useful-aging-out-of-foster-care-statistics-social-race-media/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/georgia-fosteringyouthtransitions-2018.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ A 2013 [study](#) by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative showed that, “on average, for every young person who ages out of foster care, taxpayers and communities pay \$300,000 in social costs like public assistance, incarceration, and lost wages to a community over that person’s lifetime. Do the math and you can conservatively estimate that this problem incurs almost \$8 billion in social costs to the United States every year.”

In Georgia, the annual cost of housing state prisoners in correctional institutions in 2017 (the most recent data available) was almost \$24,000.ⁱⁱⁱ This does not take into account the loss of tax revenue and lack of productivity associated with each imprisoned Georgian.

^{iv} It may be relevant that Amerigroup contends that it prefers to make medical necessity determinations without reviewing psychological evaluations or documentation.

^v For instance, one troubled Cold Case child attempts suicide multiple times every single day, and outside a locked ward with constant supervision, this child would be at risk of death. On the other hand, less severely ill children sometimes remain hospitalized as a result of a lack of planning. The CCP reiterates that discharge planning should begin the moment a child is hospitalized.

^{vi} These children in foster care need to obtain these waivers prior to age 18. Typically, DFCS is the agency filing these applications, but Amerigroup, the managed-care insurance company for Medicaid-eligible foster youth, is also designated through its state contract to file these applications. In certain counties child attorneys are prohibited from conducting Medicaid waiver appeals, leaving children with no one to pursue these housing benefits. The capacity of non-profits such as the Georgia Advocacy Office and Atlanta Legal Aid is insufficient to address this issue.

^{vii} Unfortunately, access to autism-specific Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapy is limited. Not only is ABA therapy expensive, but there are a limited number of certified ABA therapists in Georgia. Trauma and PTSD are increasingly recognized by mental health professionals as manifesting as or being diagnosed as a number of psychiatric conditions such as ADHD and bipolar disorder. These psychiatric conditions are primarily treated with medication. Additionally, children with limited cognitive function may not be able to benefit from TF-CBT, which requires the ability to think abstractly and communicate verbally. Teasing out which diagnoses are accurate is a challenging task for mental health professionals. Unfortunately, the Cold Case Project team sees many children who are in diagnostic limbo and not making adequate progress towards improved mental health.

^{viii} As well as needing guidance, counseling, structure, supervision, treatment or rehabilitation who also is adjudicated to be truant, habitually disobedient of his or her parent or custodian and is ungovernable, a runaway, a status offender (an offense applicable only to a child), a child who wanders or loiters between the hours of midnight and 5 a.m., a child who violates court-ordered supervision or a child who patronizes any bar where alcoholic beverages are being sold, unaccompanied by his or her parent or possesses alcoholic beverages, etc.

^{ix} <https://wednesdayschild.dhs.ga.gov/>

^x Significantly, APPLA plans must include a comprehensive transition plan. The appropriate services necessary to succeed in all aspects of the child's life must be identified and the child must be actually be receiving the health, mental health, dental and educational services that meet his or her needs. In these cases, the burden is on DFCS to teach the living skills necessary for the youth to transition to successful adulthood.

In some cases, the youth's participation in Independent Living programs is insufficient to accomplish this goal. In other cases, no adult who is willing to commit to a long-term supportive relationship with the child is identified.

^{xi} <http://fostergeorgia.com/demographics-of-children-in-foster-care/>

^{xii} Tom Rawlings, Director of Georgia's state DFCS, is committed to reviving therapeutic foster homes in Georgia.



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