South Carolina Department of Children's Advocacy

Annual Report

2019-2020

South Carolina Department of
CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY
Advocacy. Accountability. Service.

SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY

Annual Report 2019-2020

To the Governor, President Pro Tempore of the Senate, Speaker of the House of Representatives and Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children:

Act No. 160 (S.805) was signed into law on May 3, 2019 which created the South Carolina Department of Children's Advocacy and became effective July 1, 2019. I was appointed by Governor Henry McMaster on June 3, 2019 to serve as State Child Advocate and Executive Director of the Department of Children's Advocacy.

During the first ninety days of the new agency, we deconstructed the agency's statutory obligations to create an organizational structure that fully supports the roles and duties of the agency's program operations as well as the investigatory and broad legislative duties. The resulting organizational structure also supports the practical and visionary roles of a State Director and a State Child Advocate, respectively. As a new agency, DCA has actively engaged in becoming integrated into the existing child-serving system and appreciates the welcoming nature of so many. DCA continues to work toward improving outcomes for children and families through a broad vision of reform which is outlined in this report.

I am honored and humbled to serve as South Carolina's first State Child Advocate and Director of the Department of Children's Advocacy and am pleased to provide this annual report outlining the Department of Children's Advocacy's work and the State Child Advocate's activities during the 2019-2020 fiscal year pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2270(7).

Respectfully submitted,

Amanda F. Whittle, J.D., CWLS
State Child Advocate and Director

South Carolina Department of
CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY
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MISSION STATEMENT:

Department of Children's Advocacy champions advocacy, accountability, and service to improve outcomes for children served by state agencies in South Carolina.

VISION STATEMENT:

Growing a community where children thrive.

South Carolina Department of
CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY
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DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY

Agency Structure

The statutory obligations for the Department of Children's Advocacy supported the creation of an organizational structure that separates the agency into two sections, with one primarily aligned with the role of a State Agency Director and with the other aligned with the duties of the State Child Advocate. The State Director role aligns with the broad program operation duties of S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Sections 63-11-500, 700, and 1310 including staff recruitment, hiring, onboarding and retention; equipment procurement and maintenance; car and building leases; budget preparation and submission; agency policy development and implementation; employee relations and human resources; technology and privacy; and quality assurance and process improvement. The State Child Advocate role aligns with the new agency's legislative duties outlined in S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Sections 63-11-1930, 2270 and 2280 including ensuring timely safe and effective services for children; examining system-wide services for children; receiving, referring, monitoring and/or investigating services provided to children by state agencies; referring issues to agencies regarding open matters; educating the public regarding the role of DCA and other agencies' services; receiving critical incident notifications; serving as a member of the Child Fatality Advisory Committee; developing and promoting a broad vision of reform; and making recommendations for quality improvements.

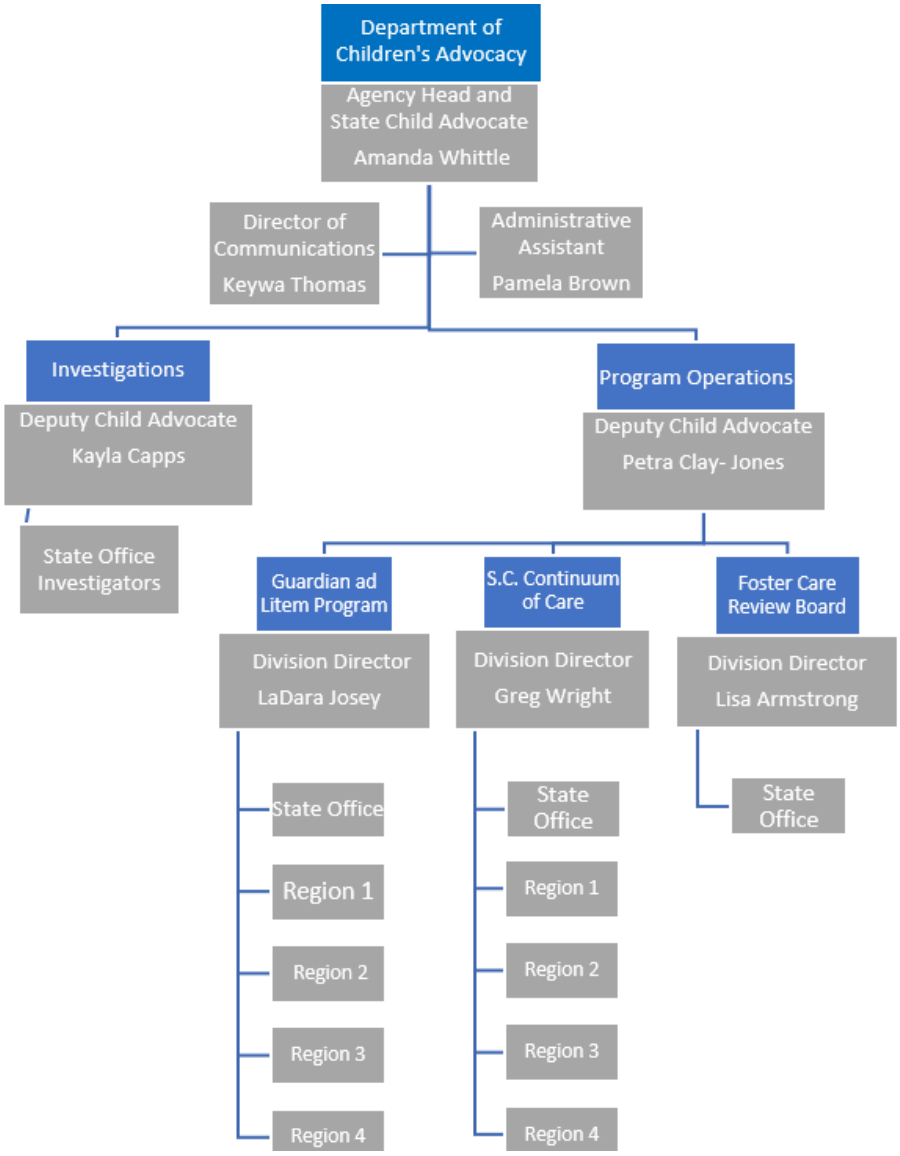
DCA's first budget submission for FY21 was submitted in September of 2019 and included a request for $2.6 million in recurring state dollars to support the ongoing work of Continuum of Care. Due to the COVID-19 emergency proclamation, state agencies operated pursuant to a Continuing Resolution into FY21. Although no additional budget request was submitted for FY22, it is anticipated that DCA will need additional state recurring funding for FY23 to support the agency's overarching legislative duties.

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY

Organizational Chart

The following organizational chart illustrates the Department of Children's Advocacy's agency structure.

This organizational chart does not show DCA's shared services through the Department of Administration. DCA receives administrative support through Admin for financial accounting, human resources, information technology, procurement and logistical support pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2215. The support from Admin's shared services has been significant to DCA.



DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY

Communications Plan

In June of 2019, the Department of Children's Advocacy Communications Director, newly-appointed Agency Director and State Child Advocate, and the Department of Administration prepared for the launch of the Department of Children's Advocacy pursuant to 63-11-2290.

As a result: (1) A toll-free public number became operational on the agency's first day of business; **(2)** The agency's logo design, mission-focused tagline and website were finalized and became active on July 1, 2019; **(3)** The newly-created website included an electronic complaint submission form and process to allow complaints to be submitted online and outside of normal business hours; **(4)** The Communications Director established contacts with each of the nine agencies to ensure that DCA's toll-free public telephone number and the web address for DCA's electronic complaint submission form were prominently posted in a conspicuous location on the websites of the nine agencies. In October of 2019, the Department of Children's Advocacy joined Lieutenant Governor Pamela Evette and other state agencies and community organizations to serve on the Governor's Complete Count Committee. The Department of Children's Advocacy promoted participation among staff, volunteers and public regarding completion of the 2020 Census. The agency's website, social media posts, newsletter and agency emails have included data regarding the importance of the Census data and South Carolina's response rate.

In March of 2020, DCA began sharing notifications and updates regarding the novel Coronavirus. During the week following Governor McMaster's declaration of a state of emergency, DCA launched FaceBook and Twitter accounts. Within seven months, DCA had a total of 688 followers on its two social media accounts with posts reaching up to 17,113 people. DCA also began publishing a weekly newsletter on March 25, 2020. Each week since then, a newsletter has been created for distribution to DCA's approximately 180 staff members and 2000 volunteers. DCA's social media and newsletters have increased DCA's ability to share information about safe sleep, suicide prevention, resource access, child abuse prevention and reporting, and public health matters with a larger audience and to connect with other people and agencies even amidst an unprecedented health pandemic. DCA will continue to build and implement its Communications Plan.

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY'S DIVISIONS

Program Operations and Highlights

Effective July 1, 2019, the Department of Children's Advocacy (DCA) became the agency responsible for administering three divisions (Continuum of Care, Foster Care Review Board, and Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem Program) which were previously part of the Office of Executive Policies and Programs administered by the Department of Administration from 2015-2019 and through the Governor's Office prior to 2015.

The DCA consists of approximately 180 full-time employees, 200 legislatively-appointed Foster Care Review Board local board members, five Gubernatorial-appointed Foster Care Review Board state board members; and 1780 volunteer Guardians ad litem. DCA staff are physically located in fifty different offices throughout the state with a centralized office in Columbia; four regional and 28 county Guardian ad Litem Offices; and four regional and 14 county Continuum of Care offices. Along with the Deputy Child Advocate of Program Operations Petra Clay-Jones LISW-CPS, Alicia Blackmon and Marilyn Thomas, who are both Continuum of Care employees, have supported all three programs with hiring and onboarding as well as with COVID-19-related technological and Human Resources (HR) needs.

CASS ELIAS McCARTER
GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM
SOUTH CAROLINA

SOUTH CAROLINA
continuum of care

FOSTER CARE REVIEW BOARD

Advocating Permanent Families for Children

SOUTH CAROLINA CONTINUUM OF CARE

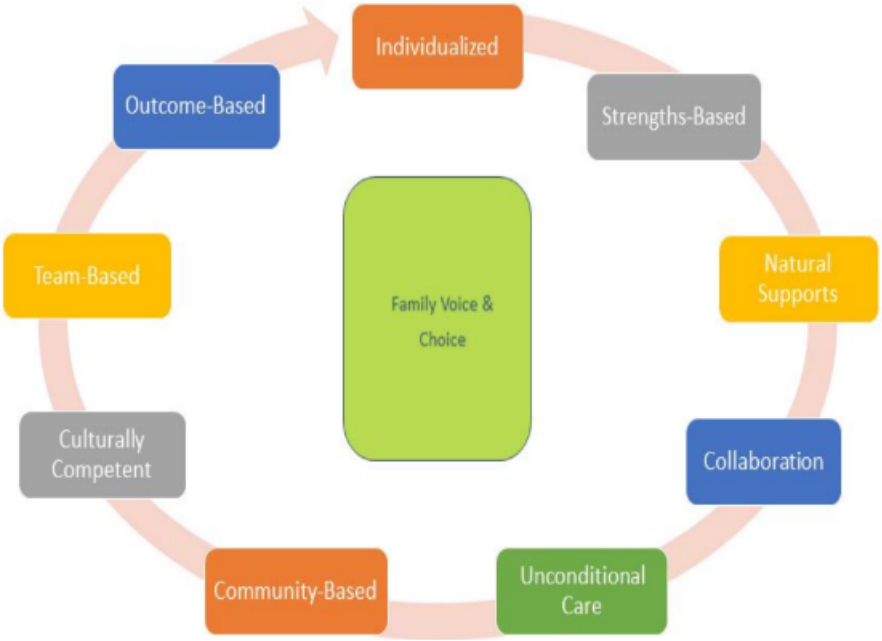
S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-1310, et.seq.

The Continuum of Care division was established by the Legislature in 1983 to develop and enhance the delivery of services to children and youth with severe emotional and behavioral needs and to ensure that the special needs of this population are met appropriately to the extent possible within South Carolina. Continuum of Care serves children with serious emotional and behavioral issues whose families need help keeping them in their home, school or community.

During FY20, the State Child Advocate and Deputy Child Advocate of Program Operations visited all of Continuum of Care's regional offices in the state to meet the Continuum of Care team and observe how they incorporate the family-driven and child-focused principles of the Wraparound model into their internal team meetings.

Continuum of Care is led by Gregory Wright, LPSC. Continuum of Care uses High Fidelity Wraparound to provide evidence-based intensive care coordination for children and families. Continuum of Care is the only state program that provides High Fidelity Wraparound as part of the system of care. High Fidelity Wraparound (HFW) incorporates an assessment to measure outcomes.

Ten Principles of High Fidelity Wraparound



Continuum of Care has used a Child and Family Adolescent Functional Assessment Score, which is referred to as the acronym CAFAS, to measure how children function in daily life activities and to assess impairment of children and adolescents who have been or who are at risk for emotional, behavioral, substance abuse, psychiatric or psychological problems.

Youth are assessed at the beginning of the program and then reassessed every 90 days while enrolled in the program to monitor progress. The key elements of Continuum's HFW model is grounded in a strengths perspective, driven by underlying needs, determined by family and supported by an effective team process. Youth who complete Continuum of Care's program experience successful outcomes as evidenced by significantly improved Child Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS) scores. The following chart shows the reduction in CAFAS scores among children being served in the state's four regions during 2019.

Served Youth Medians			
Region	Baseline Scores	Most Recent CAFAS	Difference
A	140	80	60
B	140	90	50
C	140	70	70
D	160	110	50

Data from Fidelity EHR 1/14/2020

A 30 point improvement in a CAFAS score is a significant improvement, and CAFAS scores of 100 or less, in addition to a team decision, indicate that continued care coordination is no longer needed.

Research has shown that effective home and community based services can be less costly and provide better outcomes for children, youth and their families. Beginning immediately upon launching as a new agency, Director Whittle and Deputy Petra Clay-Jones advocated and negotiated with the Department of Health and Human Services for the submission of the Palmetto Coordinated System of Care §1915(C) Medicaid waiver. The proposed waiver was initially discussed in 2016 and was officially submitted to Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) in November of 2019. It was then resubmitted in the Spring of 2020. 1915(c) and 1915(b)(4) waivers were approved by CMS on July 29, 2020 and identifies Continuum of Care as the sole provider of high fidelity, intensive care coordination for eligible children through a sustainable reimbursement rate.

Continuum of Care will be able to increase its capacity to serve children to approximately 250 youth during the first year and gradually up to 400 youth over a 5-year period. Continuum of Care, DHHS, and DSS have discussed additional capacity for COC to serve eligible youth who enter DSS's custody (foster care).

Pursuant to the approval of the waiver, COC began using the Child and Adolescent Service Intensity Instrument (CASII) in August 2020 as a screening tool to assess waiver eligibility. The CASII is a comprehensive tool for evaluating the service intensity needed for youth with complex mental health challenges.

Approval of the waiver is a significant accomplishment which creates financial sustainability for Continuum's intensive care coordination through high fidelity Wraparound services for South Carolina children and youth with the most severe and complex emotional and behavioral health challenges in South Carolina.

The Waivers that were approved by CMS do not include Rehabilitative Behavioral Health Services (RBHS). DCA recognizes the need to increase the availability of outcome-based, quality community treatment services for children/youth with complex behavioral and mental health needs, thus providing community service options for families who seek to maintain their child at home in the least restrictive environment, and decreasing the frequency of out-of-home placements for children in our state.

In addition to negotiation and approval of the Medicaid Waiver, Continuum of Care has partnered with the Department of Mental Health to promote and support a coordinated system of care.

Two Continuum of Care intensive care coordinators are employed through a SAMHSA grant with Department of Mental Health's Roads of Independence (ROI) program. ROI launched in November of 2019 to serve young adults ages 16-25 in Sumter, Lee and Kershaw Counties who have a history or are at-risk of mental illness, struggling with substance abuse, entering or leaving foster care or juvenile justice and/or who are at risk of homelessness. https://adultingishard.wixsite.com

In January of 2020, Director Whittle and Deputy Petra Clay-Jones teamed with the Department of Mental Health to submit a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grant application for the Expansion and Sustainability of the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children with Serious Emotional Disturbances. This grant was designed to build upon progress made in developing a comprehensive system of care by focusing on sustainable financing, cross-agency collaboration, the creation of policy and infrastructure, and the development of evidence-based and evidence-informed services and supports. Unfortunately, this grant was not awarded to South Carolina in 2020.

As part of establishing DCA's organizational infrastructure, DCA leadership has reviewed the legislative requirements of the divisions, and there are two statutes concerning Continuum of Care for which DCA may seek amendment. The first is S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-1360 which requires Continuum of Care to submit an annual report to the Governor and General Assembly on its activities and recommendations for changes and improvements in the delivery of services by public agencies serving children. It appears that nine annual reports were filed between 1985 and 1994, and no reports have been filed since 1994. https://dc.statelibrary.sc.gov/handle/10827/31171 DCA requests that this report satisfy the statutory requirement for Continuum of Care's annual report.

The second statutory concern is S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-1510 which establishes the Interagency System of Caring for Emotionally Disturbed Children (ISCEDC). This statute was enacted to establish ISCEDC as "an integrated system of care to be developed by the Continuum of Care for Emotionally Disturbed Children within the Department of Children's Advocacy, the Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Mental Health, and the Department of Social Services, to be implemented by November 1, 1994.

The goal of the system is to implement South Carolina's Families First Policy and to support children in a manner that enables them to function in a community setting. The system shall provide assessment and evaluation procedures to insure a proper service plan and placement for each child. This system must have as a key component the clear identification of the agency accountable for monitoring on a regular basis each child's care plan and procedures to evaluate and certify the programs offered by providers." ISCEDC has operated as an interagency staffing process to establish level of care to make placement decisions and assign lead agency responsibilities.

When the statute was originally enacted, Continuum of Care was involved with all children who were diagnosed with behavioral and emotional issues, but, in approximately 2000, Continuum of Care's staff and resources were divided into two cohorts of children and youth. At the time of the division, Continuum of Care continued to offer intensive care coordination to children and youth who remained in the custody of their parents. Department of Social Services' Managed Treatment Services (MTS) division, subsequently known as Intensive Foster Care and Clinical Services (IFCCS), managed the children in foster care because these children were in the custody of DSS. Continuum of Care has not been involved in making placement decisions for foster care youth since that time. Based upon the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), the recently-approved 1915(C) waiver, the fact that there is no longer an IFCCS designation for DSS case managers, and the renewed momentum for agency coordination and collaboration particularly concerning youth with higher intensity of need, DCA is continuing to review the ISCEDC statute and whether it should be modified based on changes that have occurred within the child-serving agencies since ISCEDC was initially established in 1994.

FOSTER CARE REVIEW BOARD

FOSTER CARE REVIEW BOARD

S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-700, et.seq.

The Foster Care Review Board was created in 1974 and is a division for the review of children who are in foster care. South Carolina was the first state to enact a Foster Care Review Board to review the permanency of children in foster care. The FCRB begins reviewing the cases of children when they have been in foster care for six months and then reviews the child's case every six months thereafter while the child is in the custody of the Department of Social Services. The mission of the South Carolina Foster Care Review Board is to provide external accountability for the foster care system and to advocate on behalf of children in foster care.

The Foster Care Review Board (FCRB) "may participate, through counsel, in child abuse and neglect proceedings pursuant to Sections 63-7-1660, 63-7-1700, 63-7-2520 and in any hearing held pursuant to a motion filed by a named party or party in interest. Participation includes the opportunity to cross-examine witnesses and to present its recommendation to the court" pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-750. When DCA became operational on July 1, 2019, the FCRB staff attorney position had been vacant since July of 2018, and hiring an attorney for this statewide position was identified as a FCRB priority. The position description was drafted in July of 2019, and recruitment began in August of 2019. While the interview and hiring processes were underway during Fall of 2019, FCRB Director Lisa Armstrong contracted with attorney(s) on an interim basis to intervene in court cases to advocate for permanency for children. FCRB's full-time attorney was hired and onboarded in December of 2019, and, during FY20, a process was developed and implemented to ensure that cases are staffed with the FCRB Attorney for advocacy.

FCRB hosts four regional trainings per year and one annual training to provide an opportunity for relevant legislative and caselaw updates in addition to strengthening ongoing mission objectives and focus. The scheduled date for the statewide Annual Professional Day was moved to allow sufficient time to plan a virtual schedule and platform. The statewide training occurred on August 7, 2020 with more than 100 participants.

As a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, Foster Care Review Board's in-person case reviews were halted. FCRB's case reviews include approximately twelve people per case including, depending on the case, members of the local legislatively-appointed Foster Care Review Board, FCRB staff, biological parents and their attorneys, DSS case manager and supervisor, the child's Guardian ad Litem, foster parents and the child. These meetings have traditionally been held at local DSS offices. When the state of emergency was declared, FCRB was no longer able to safely convene these meetings, and an alternative method was developed and tested in June of 2020. Thereafter, the FCRB made additional revisions in coordination with the Department of Social Services and Guardian ad Litem Program. Agency-issued laptops and cell phones were purchased for FCRB staff, and a WebEx subscription was purchased to create a platform for full participation by interested parties. A remote live process began in late September, 2020. This process mirrors the FCRB's in-person process and required additional technology for FCRB and training for staff and volunteers. FCRB will continue to work on process improvements as issues arise, but DCA believes that the remote process provides greater access to families who would ordinarily need to make work and travel arrangements for in-person meetings. The in-person reviews also created security concerns as noted in FCRB's 2018-2019 Annual Report, and these concerns are assuaged by the live, remote process.

The South Carolina Heart Gallery is part of Foster Care Review Board. Heart Gallery arranges photo sessions for children who are legally free for adoption. Heart Gallery staff recruits and schedules professional photographs to be taken of legally free children at scenic locations throughout the state.

The photographs are displayed on Heart Gallery's website and shared with other organizations. Heart Gallery also enlarges photos and has them framed by the Department of Corrections. Heart Gallery then contacts public spaces throughout the state to host an exhibit of the framed portraits in an effort to share information for the recruitment of adoptive families. More children were adopted in calendar year 2019 than in any preceding year. Foster Care Review Board publishes an annual report each year with its findings and recommendations. (fcrb.sc.gov)

Heart Gallery South Carolina

CASS ELIAS MCCARTER GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM

S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-500, et.seq.

The Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem Program became a statewide system in 45 counties in 1984 to provide training and supervision to volunteers who serve as court-appointed special advocates for children in abuse and neglect proceedings within the family court, pursuant to Section 63-7-1620. The Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem Program was named after Cass Elias McCarter, a volunteer who started one of the first Guardian ad Litem programs in South Carolina. Richland County has a separate county-supported program known as Richland County Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program and is not part of the state Guardian ad Litem Program. The Guardian ad Litem Program is responsible for assigning a Guardian ad Litem to each child who is involved in a Department of Social Services abuse and neglect case in family court. As a result, Guardians ad Litem are assigned to children who are in foster care as well as children who are placed with their family or other adults if there is a DSS legal proceeding in family court.

The operational model anticipates that all court-appointed Guardians ad Litem will be volunteer Guardians ad Litem who would be recruited, trained, supervised, coached and supported by Guardian ad Litem staff. DCA has committed to have enough volunteers to serve as Guardians ad Litem for all children by 2024. DCA's goal for its first year of operations was to increase coverage from 54% to 60%, and DCA increased coverage to 59%. Guardian ad Litem Program Director LaDara Josey was hired in March of 2020 and is prioritizing recruitment and retention.

The Guardian ad Litem Program is a volunteer business model, so it is important to recognize the need to know whether volunteers are satisfied with their work through the Guardian ad Litem Program. To that end, DCA developed a survey that was completed by volunteers in February of 2020. The target was for 80% of volunteers to be satisfied with their work through DCA's program. 578 volunteers participated in the survey and answered 14 questions pertaining to their experiences and recommendations regarding the Guardian ad Litem program. 70% expressed overall satisfaction with the Guardian ad Litem Program, and 81.4% of volunteers expressed satisfaction regarding their communication with county Guardian ad Litem offices. DCA received excellent feedback regarding recommended improvements, not only from this survey but also from county visits and other communication with volunteers and staff.

Due to an insufficient number of volunteers to serve as Guardians ad Litem for all of the abused and neglected children who are involved in DSS family court legal actions, Guardian ad Litem Program staff also serve as Guardians ad Litem for children. Due to their work as court-appointed Guardians ad Litem, staff has been unable to recruit volunteers to the extent necessary.

As a result of the staff shortage, the Department of Children's Advocacy's first goal for the Guardian ad Litem Program was to reduce the existing vacancies within the program. On July 1, 2019, 37% of the available Guardian ad Litem Program positions were vacant. In addition to the volunteer survey, Department of Children's Advocacy leadership sought to hear from the staff and volunteers about ways to improve recruitment, retention, and support for staff and volunteers. DCA leadership met with staff and volunteers who work in 28 of the 45 counties served by the Guardian ad Litem Program to better understand Guardian ad Litem staff and volunteers who work in 28 of the 37 counties to better understand ways to recruit and retain high quality staff, volunteers and attorneys. Suggestions were put into action including a peer-coaching pilot project in Greenville County and a $72,000 media grant award to provide additional staff support and to strengthen recruitment and retention of volunteer Guardians ad Litem. Talented staff within the Department of Children's Advocacy were identified to assist the Guardian ad Litem Program with streamlining the hiring and onboarding process for Guardian ad Litem staff. On July 1, 2019, there were 42 FTE vacancies in the Guardian ad Litem Program, and 18 of those vacancies were filled as of June 30, 2020. As hiring efforts have been underway, DCA concurrently added capacity, through hiring temporary hourly employees, to support offices that were critically understaffed. VOCA grant positions continued to be allocated based upon program needs, and, as anticipated, the VOCA grant awards were reduced in 2020 thus reducing position availability beginning in October of 2020.

By June 30, 2020, staff vacancies were reduced by 17%.

Guardian ad Litem Program Staff Capacity

Current Positions	Current Total	Filled July 1, 2019	Filled January 2, 2020	Filled June 30, 2020
Total FTE	120	78	91	96
Total Temporary Grant	10	6	7	8
Total Time Limited	2	1	1	1
Total Temporary Hourly	9	0	9	6
Total	141	85	108	111

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY INVESTIGATIONS UNIT

INVESTIGATIONS UNIT

S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2270 through 63-11-2290, et.seq.

The Department of Children's Advocacy (DCA)'s Investigations Unit was created pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Sections 63-11-2270 through 63-11-2290. Pursuant to the authority and responsibility granted to the DCA, the Investigations Unit is authorized to receive, refer, monitor and/or investigate complaints regarding services provided to children by nine specific state agencies. The Investigations Unit is required to transfer a complainant to the appropriate agency if the complainant's submission is related to abuse, neglect, or an open matter within another agency.

Some of the foundational work to implement the Investigations Unit is outlined in the Communications section of this report. In addition, positions were created, and position descriptions were developed for a Deputy Child Advocate of Investigations and two Investigators. Those three individuals were hired in November and December of 2019.

During the first week of operations, the State Child Advocate requested full access to Department of Social Service (DSS)'s electronic child abuse and neglect records and began meeting with DSS leadership about an access protocol and process. Initially, the State Child Advocate was provided with access at DSS's state office and then was provided with security credentials to access DSS records remotely. Four laptops were purchased for this purpose to ensure confidentiality and to accommodate increased capacity when additional staff were hired. In September of 2020, DSS provided DCA's Investigations Unit and State Child Advocate with security credentials and access to the DSS virtual desktop. This required additional logins and accounts to be created to access DSS records through their online database. Through collaboration with DSS, there has been no net cost incurred by DCA for access to these records.

In July, 2019, the State Child Advocate met with the South Carolina Inspector General to discuss cases that were appropriate for the Office of Inspector General (OIG) to refer to DCA and cases which may be referred to OIG pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2295. DCA and OIG shared contact information and developed a referral and response process. Deputy Child Advocate of Investigations Kayla Capps, JD, was hired in December, 2019 following the hiring and onboarding of two full-time investigators.

Section 63-11-2290

(A) The Department of Children's Advocacy shall establish a toll-free public telephone number and an electronic complaint submission form on the department's website for the purpose of receiving complaints relative to the provision of services to children by a state agency. The department shall transfer a complainant to the appropriate agency if the complainant's submission is related to abuse, neglect, or an open matter within another agency.

(B) The following agencies must post the toll-free public telephone number and the web address of the department's electronic complaint submission form prominently in clear view of all employees and the public and in a conspicuous location on the agency's website:
(1) Department of Social Services;
(2) Department of Mental Health;
(3) Department of Juvenile Justice;
(4) Department of Health and Environmental Control;
(5) Department of Health and Human Services;
(6) Department of Disabilities and Special Needs;
(7) John de la Howe School (now known as the S.C. Governor's School for Agriculture at John de la Howe);
(8) School for the Deaf and the Blind; and
(9) Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School.

Pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2280, a state agency is required to inform the Department of Children's Advocacy within twenty-four hours of a critical incident. Thereafter, the State Child Advocate may perform an independent investigation or review the completed critical incident investigation which has been performed. In addition to the critical incident reporting requirements, the State Child Advocate is required to immediately report a matter to the appropriate state or federal law enforcement agencies and prosecuting authorities with jurisdiction over the matter if the State Child Advocate has reasonable cause to believe that a crime has occurred or is occurring.

DCA worked with DSS and DJJ to develop critical incident reporting protocols for DCA to be notified of critical incidents pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2280. Reporting agencies must send their critical incident notifications within 24 hours of receipt. DSS, DJJ and DCA have agreed that written communication and notification is provided via email to both the State Child Advocate and Deputy Child Advocate of Investigations.

DCA has had regularly scheduled meetings with DSS leadership to discuss specific cases and to share concerns. DCA has met with the DJJ Systems Improvement Committee regarding systemic improvement identification and solution strategies

DCA used an existing Department of Administration contract for Intranet Quorum (IQ) to enter complaint information that was accessible by Investigations Unit staff. There was no cost for this program during DCA's first year of operations. Although the system that existed on July 1, 2019 provided an efficient and confidential way for the Investigations Unit to store and share information, there was concern that the system did not have the ability to create reports with information that would be helpful to systemic improvement or issue tracking.

A total of 4,707 calls were made to the Investigations Unit between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020.

A total of 4,707 calls were made to the Investigations Unit between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020.The Investigations Unit logged approximately 1559 messages or referrals and 1086 services or review/investigative cases during FY20. With the initial system framework, the Investigations Unit was not able to build a report that provides issue-specific information regarding calls which were referred, reviewed, monitored and/or investigated.

The initial electronic operating system had two categories for data entry of calls, messages and services. The DCA Investigations Unit categorized referrals to other agencies as "messages" and denoted complaints which were reviewed, monitored and/or investigated as "services." In an effort to identify areas where communication or improvement was needed, the Investigations Unit began analyzing data regarding complaints and concerns received through the toll-free number and electronic submission.

Although the Investigations Unit has engaged in case-specific communication with other agencies, DCA sought the ability to electronically categorize and report service issues for this report and to identify problems and provide real-time feedback to child-serving agencies. In February, 2020, DCA explored software and system alternatives to process, track, and report information received by the Investigations Unit. Costs for a new system were projected between $35,000 and $43,500. DCA was ultimately able to work with IQ's software team to modify the existing program at an annual cost of $7218.52. In late June, 2020, new fields were added that are specific to DCA's tracking needs. This will allow the Investigations Unit to identify the recurrence of "services" issues as well as the outcomes of the reviews or investigations, and the fields are extractable to allow mission-specific report building. Intentional and focused data and analysis will improve identification of areas that need improvement and will result in better outcomes for children and families.

Based upon the number of referrals, DCA recognizes that a significant amount of complaints DCA receives are based on a need for resource information. The Investigations Unit is building a network of relationships and contacts with other agencies and organizations to strengthen awareness of and access to services. As part of DCA's role to "undertake activities designed to educate the public regarding the services and the independent role of the department and the mission of state agencies in providing services to children and families," DCA began working toward creating an online resource directory. The goal of the online resource is to provide information about the availability of services to children and families to reduce incidences of abuse, neglect and institutionalization of children by apprising families of services available to them in their homes and communities. The resource information shared by DCA should be relevant to communities' needs, maintained with current provider information, and readily accessible to the public and referring agencies.

DCA determined that completion of this objective was not a realistic one-year goal for a new agency and that the resource publication should be a living library of resources rather than a list. DCA has communicated with many resource and service providers throughout the state who compile and share resource information including Children's Trust, Family Connection of SC, SC Thrive, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), and First Steps. Testing is underway for production of a resource library on DCA's website that links the public to reliable resource information.

DCA has had two externs through the University of South Carolina School of Law and these externs have provided helpful research and support to DCA. The Deputy Child Advocate of Investigations has worked with the law school to develop a program within the Investigations Unit that is approved by the law school, and DCA is grateful for the partnership with the University of South Carolina School of Law in this endeavor.

The Investigations Unit has remained fully operational during the COVID-19 pandemic. With laptops, cell phones, secure access, and ongoing toll-free and electronic complaint submissions, the Investigations Unit has been able to continue its work without interruption.

The Investigations Unit is an integral part of establishing an objective system for reviewing and evaluating services for children. Collecting, reviewing, and considering this type of information will help DCA and other agencies provide better services for children and families and will assist the State Child Advocate in promoting and adjusting, if necessary, a broad vision for reform that includes recommendations for improvement.

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY'S

Overarching Legislative Duties

In addition to the duties regarding administering the Department of Children's Advocacy's programs and creating and implementing an Investigations Unit to meet the requirements regarding the receipt and disposition of complaints, the State Child Advocate and Department of Children's Advocacy are also charged with overarching legislative duties pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Section 63-11-2240(A) and 63-11-2270(1-3) and (6-7), in pertinent part:

SECTION 63-11-2240. (A) The State Child Advocate is responsible for ensuring that children receive adequate protection and care from services or programs offered by the Department of Social Services, the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Department of Health and Environmental Control, the Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, the John de la Howe School, the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School, and the School for the Deaf and the Blind.

SECTION 63-11-2270. The Department of Children's Advocacy shall:
(1) ensure that children under the care of a state agency, particularly children served by the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, receive timely, safe, and effective services and shall safeguard the health, safety, and well-being of all children receiving services;
(2) examine, on a system-wide basis, the care and services that state agencies provide children and shall provide recommendations to improve the quality of those services in order to give each child the opportunity to live a full and productive life;
(3) develop and promote a broad vision for reform, driven by the values and goals of child-serving agencies, to make the services and programs provided by state agencies more effective for children, youth, families, and communities;
*
(6) undertake activities designed to educate the public regarding the services and the independent role of the department and the mission of state agencies in providing services to children and families;
(7) annually submit a report to the Governor, President of the Senate, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children detailing the State Child Advocate's activities

Interagency Engagement

In addition to receiving and responding to complaints about the nine legislatively-identified agencies, the State Child Advocate and Department of Children's Advocacy must also be a partner within the child and family wellbeing system:

(1) DCA is part of the system of care that includes three child-serving divisions (Guardian ad Litem, Continuum of Care and Guardian ad Litem Program) that work closely with most of the nine agencies;

(2) DCA's Investigations Unit, along with the State Child Advocate, should not only identify areas which need improvement but also effectively advocate toward action steps and outcomes. DCA should be part of the collaboration, coordination and communication toward sustainable transformation of the child and family wellbeing system.

Governor McMaster's Cabinet Meeting at the Edgar Brown Building (January, 2020)

Governor McMaster's office facilitated a series of initial meetings among several agencies in June of 2019 for introductions and for sharing initial observations about how the agencies could improve their coordination with each other.

Thereafter, during the first year of appointment, the State Child Advocate and Director of the Department of Children's Advocacy created and strengthened relationships, and a summary of interaction with the nine child-serving agencies listed in the statute is provided here.

Department of Disabilities and Special Needs

Director Whittle met individually with DDSN Director Mary Poole who provided information about DDSN's children's services, waivers, and procedures. The Investigations Unit has reached out to Director Poole and her staff to discuss case-specific matters, and Director Poole offered to provide presentations to Department of Children's Advocacy staff, particularly the Investigations Unit, regarding DDSN eligibility and services. Director Whittle attended a presentation by a DDSN representative at a Continuum of Care regional meeting in August of 2019 regarding DDSN's eligibility criteria and service array. DDSN is a member of the Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on children, and Director Whittle attended the public hearings in the Fall of 2019 and Fall of 2020. At these hearings, individuals provide public testimony about matters regarding children. DDSN is also a member of the Joint Council of Children and Adolescents for which Director Whittle served as the Chairperson during 2020. In November of 2020, Director Poole was elected as the 2021 Vice-Chair of that committee.

- Individual meetings and conversations with DDSN Director Poole and DDSN leadership regarding services offered by DDSN and specific children's services
- Presentation by DDSN representative (August 2019)
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children public hearings
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents (Chair, 2020) quarterly meetings

Department of Health and Environmental Control

As with all nine agencies, Director Whittle and DCA Communications Keywa Thomas reached out to DHEC in July of 2019 to introduce the new agency and to establish contacts. DHEC provided contact information for constituent concerns which allows the Investigations Unit to provide warm transfers to callers when referring them. DHEC is one of nine agencies that is a member of the Joint Council on Children and Adolescents. DCA is looking forward to working more closely with DHEC and South Carolina National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)'s Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (CoIIN) which promotes availability and access to Adolescent and Youth Adult Health (AYAH) resources. These resources are fundamental to maintaining children in their homes, communities or least restrictive environment and in preventing suicide.

- Individual correspondence and information-sharing regarding DHEC's services
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents (Chair, 2020) quarterly meetings
- Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (CoIIN)

Department of Health and Human Services

Director Whittle began working with Director Baker and HHS not only to establish contacts and resolve issues that arose through the Investigations Unit but also to negotiate a 1915(c) Medicaid waiver regarding Continuum of Care's intensive care coordination services for youth with severe emotional and behavioral needs. Discussions had occurred for approximately five years prior to the launch of the Department of Children's Advocacy. The waiver was submitted in November of 2019 and then resubmitted in February of 2020. It was approved by Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS) in July of 2020 and provides capacity for Continuum of Care to serve approximately 250 youth with increases over a five-year period to serve 400 youth. In addition to individual meetings, HHS, DSS, DJJ, DMH and DCA leadership have discussed issues that involve multi-agency cooperation and coordination including the availability of Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTFs) and Rehabilitative Behavioral Health Services (RBHS). Director Whittle was appointed by Director Baker to serve on the Medical Care Advisory Committee and has participated in quarterly meetings related to that committee. Director Baker was the immediate past-Chair and preceded Director Whittle as Chair of the Joint Council on Children and Adolescents. HHS is a member of the Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children. Director Whittle attended the public hearings in 2019 and 2020 during which testimony was provided regarding services for children.

- Individual meetings and conversations with Director Baker and DHHS leadership
- Multi-agency meetings regarding collaboration and coordination
- DHHS Medical Care Advisory Committee member quarterly meetings
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents (Chair, 2020) quarterly meetings
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children public hearings

Department of Juvenile Justice

Director Whittle met with and communicated with DJJ Director Freddie Pough regularly during FY20. Along with Senator Katrina Shealy, Director Whittle met with young men and with young women at the Broad River Road facility in December of 2019, and, in addition to Senator Brad Hutto, visited the Youth Development Center (private) community residence program. Director Whittle attended Raise the Age legislative hearings regarding juvenile justice reform and reviewed proposed legislation that would result in juvenile justice reform. DJJ is a member of the Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children. Director Whittle attended public hearings that were held throughout the state, and, through speaking with individuals who called the Investigations Unit, invited individuals to participate in those hearings to share their concerns and observations with the members of the Children's Committee.

In December, 2019, the Legislative Audit Council (LAC) asked Director Whittle for input regarding the LAC's study concerning DJJ. Director Whittle shared concerns regarding justice-involved, seriously mentally ill youth who cannot lawfully be detained at DJJ but for whom there is no available mental health placement, the lack of placements with appropriate services that will accept children with serious mental health issues, and a need for a sufficient array of services to support community evaluations as opposed to secure evaluations. In early January of 2020, DCA and DJJ leadership met, developed and agreed upon a critical incident notification process.

In February, 2020, Chairman Jay Elliott appointed Director Whittle as an ex officio member of the Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (GJJAC), and thereafter Director Whittle and Deputy Child Advocate Kayla Capps became members of the DJJ Systems Improvement Committee. Deputy Capps has communicated with Short Term Placement Providers (STAPs) across the state regarding placement diversion, and DJJ Director Pough shared STAP and other resource information with Solicitors, Public Defenders and Family Court Judges. Director Whittle has also engaged with DJJ through participation with the Joint Council on Children and Adolescents and the Child Fatality Advisory Committee. Director Whittle and Deputy Capps participated in the Coalition for Juvenile Justice national conference at the invitation of the State Advisory Group.

- Individual meetings and conversations with Director Pough and DJJ leadership
- Visits with young men and women at the Department of Juvenile Justice with Senator Katrina Shealy
- Raise the Age legislative hearings
- Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee ex officio member quarterly meetings
- Visit to and tour of the Youth Development Center, a private community residence program which offers services for justice-involved youth
- DJJ System Improvement Committee monthly meetings
- Development of Critical Incident Notification protocol in January, 2020
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents (Chair, 2020) quarterly meetings

Department of Mental Health

Director Whittle met with and communicated with DMH Director Ken Rogers, Interim DMH Director Mark Binkley, and other members of the DMH team regularly during FY20. DMH collaborated with other agencies and divisions including Continuum of Care to implement the Roads of Independence grant. Director Whittle attended the opening of that site in Sumter, South Carolina and toured the facility. In December, 2019, Director Whittle and Deputy Child Advocate Petra Clay-Jones worked closely with DMH for DMH's submission of another SAMHSA grant for the sustainability of system of care services in three identified counties within the state. Although South Carolina was not awarded the grant, the application process afforded a rich opportunity to identify needs and to discover the ways communities will be creative and generous when confronted with opportunities for tangible and meaningful improvements. This collaboration strengthened relationships among DCA, DMH and the other agencies that supported the grant application. DMH then reached out to the Department of Children's Advocacy to partner with the S.C. Infant Mental Health Association, DSS, DAODAS, and S.C. Network of Child Advocacy Centers to submit a grant application to Zero to Three to bring Safe Baby Courts to South Carolina. Director Whittle is a member of the Suicide Prevention Coalition which provided another agency to agency connection through DMH's Office of Suicide Prevention (OSP). DMH's OSP delivered online suicide prevention training for all of the Department of Children's Advocacy's staff at no cost to DCA. The training was provided through partnership with the S.C. Dept. of Mental Health Office of Suicide Prevention (OSP) and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) South Carolina Chapter with funding for the training provided through OSP's Garrett Lee Smith SAMHSA grant

(Grant Number SM062901). OSP is currently working with the Department of Children's Advocacy to deliver this online training to DCA's approximate 2000 volunteers.

- Individual meetings and conversations with Director Rogers and DMH leadership
- Visited DMH/SAMHSA grant site – Roads of Independence
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents (Chair, 2020) quarterly meetings
- Suicide Prevention Coalition member quarterly meetings
- Partnered to draft and submit SAMHSA grant (December, 2019-January, 2020)
- Online suicide prevention training delivered to all staff through DMH's Office of Suicide Prevention

Department of Social Services

Director Whittle met with and communicated with DSS Director Mike Leach and other members of the DSS team regularly during FY20. Initially, these meetings were to discuss Director Whittle's access to DSS's electronic case records, and thereafter, these meetings have been to discuss child-specific matters and system improvements. For example, during FY20, DSS moved from a county intake system to a centralized phone number and then to a 24/7 intake with telephone and electronic online (non-emergency only) submission. DCA has communicated with DSS regularly to be apprised of updates in an effort to share this information with the public both through DCA's communication planning and also with callers through the Investigations Unit. It has become clear that information cannot be overcommunicated, and it is essential to share and repeat information to replace old information and to ensure that people have the most current, accurate resources. DCA and DSS have participated in joint trainings, collaborations and planning including Foster Care Review Board's Annual Professional Development Day, Pre-Merits Hearing Conferences, Bench Bar, Safe Baby Court implementation planning, the National Judicial Leadership Summit and Thriving Families. Director Whittle has attended hearings regarding DSS's child welfare reform, budget, and legislative oversight in addition to attending the Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children public hearings. Director Leach personally attended all of those hearings and provided feedback to individuals who provided public testimony on child-related issues.

- Individual meetings and conversations with Director Leach and DSS leadership
- Development of Critical Incident Notification protocol in January, 2020
- Legislative Oversight Hearings
- Meeting with HHS Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Acting Commissioner Jerry Milner at DSS State Office
- Michelle H. v. SCDSS, et.al. hearings regarding child welfare reform
- DSS Advisory Council quarterly meetings
- Thriving Families (Fall and Winter, 2020)

S.C. School for the Deaf and the Blind

Director Whittle and Communications Director Keywa Thomas contacted the S.C. School for the Deaf and the Blind in July of 2019 to provide contact information and complaint submission messaging for SCSDB's website pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2260 Director Whittle and Deputy Capps scheduled a meeting with Dr. McCraw, SCSDB leadership, for March of 2020 at the SCSDB campus. That meeting was canceled due to illness, and, unfortunately, an in-person meeting could not be rescheduled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Investigations Unit has not received any calls, complaints or concerns about the S.C. School for the Deaf and the Blind since July 1, 2019.

- Phone and email communication with SCSDB leadership
- Scheduled to visit the School for the Deaf and the Blind campus on March 9, 2020

Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School

In July of 2019, Director Whittle and Communications Director Keywa Thomas initially contacted Wil Lou Gray (WLG) to introduce them to the Department of Children's Advocacy and to request that WLG post DCA's toll-free number and website in a conspicuous place on WLG's website. Director Whittle and Deputy Capps met with WLG Director Pat Smith and other WLG staff on January 27, 2020. Director Smith provided a tour of the 86-acre WLG campus in addition to providing information about the school's history

including the application process and graduation criteria. WLG offers a 14-week program with small class sizes for at-risk students to prepare them to earn their General Education Diploma (GED). The tour included seeing the "GED" Bell and the wall where parents write encouraging words for their students. The Investigations Unit has not received any calls, complaints or concerns about Wil Lou Gray since July 1, 2019.

- Phone and email communication with Director Smith, WLG leadership
- Visited Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School's campus on January 27, 2020

Governor's School of Agriculture at John de la Howe

Director Whittle and Communications Director Keywa Thomas contacted John de la Howe, now known as the Governor's School of Agriculture at John de la Howe, in July of 2019 to provide contact information and complaint submission messaging for JDLH's website as statutorily required. Director Whittle and Deputy Capps met with JDLH President Timothy Keown, President Gregory Thompson and other members of JDLH leadership on February 25, 2020. President Keown provided the school's historical background as well as a thorough tour of the beautiful campus. This included the opportunity to view the dorms and classrooms as well as some of the 1310 acres of forests and farmland. John de la Howe was closed following a Feasibility Study in 2017 that recommended that the school "undertake a mission for becoming a statewide residential high school for agriculture and mechanical studies." During the time it was closed, the school reimaged itself and invited the public to take a new look at the school and what it offers young people. During DCA's visit, plans were underway to accept new students in the Fall of 2020 with intentional admissions processes to support its agricultural mission. JDLH was officially recognized and renamed with S.613 during a ceremonial bill signing by Governor McMaster on December 8, 2020. The Investigations Unit has not received any calls, complaints or concerns about the Governor's School of Agriculture at John de la Howe since July 1, 2019.

- Phone and email communication with President Keown, JDLH leadership
- Visited the John de la Howe School campus on February 25, 2020

Community Engagement and Education

The State Child Advocate and Director of the Department of Children's Advocacy engaged with other leaders and community advocates to learn, share and create opportunities for ongoing communication, information-sharing and coordination. Some of the meetings, hearings, and conferences included:

- Bench Bar Committee ex officio member
- Children's Trust annual meeting
- Court Time Work Group subcommittee
- First Steps Annual Conference
- Children's Justice Act Task
- Governor's Complete Count Committee
- S.C. Behavioral Health Coalition member
- S.C. Bar Children's Law Committee
- Suicide Prevention Coalition
- United Way Midlands meeting
- Zero to Three Infant Toddler Courts presentation

Suicide Prevention Coalition meeting at Department of Mental Health in December, 2019

In addition to listening, learning, and collaborating, the State Child Advocate has a duty to educate the public about the services of other agencies as well as the role of the Department of Children's Advocacy. Some of the presentation and training provided by the State Child Advocate were:

- Children's Justice Act Task Force member presentation and trainings
- Foster Care Review Board Annual Professional Development Day presenter
- Guardian ad Litem Annual Meeting presenter
- Media Press Conference and Interviews
- Office of Indigent Defense training for parents' and Guardian ad Litem attorneys
- Rotary and Woman's Club presentations about the work and role of the Department of Children's Advocacy
- Sisters of Charity Kinship Caregiver Council
- University of South Carolina School of Law presentations and training sessions

DSS Director Mike Leach, former FCRB member Linda Summerford and DCA Director Amanda Whittle at FCRB's 2019 Annual Professional Development Day

Director Whittle with volunteer Guardians ad Litem in Horry County in 2019

- Meetings and presentations with Guardian ad Litem (GAL) Program staff and volunteers throughout the state
- DSS Midlands Regional Leadership Meeting
- Anderson County Legislative Delegation Town Hall presentation
- GAL Attorney Training as coordinated by the Children's Law Center
- Provided testimony at the Senate subcommittee hearing regarding S.C. Network of Children's Advocacy Centers and child abuse response protocol
- Speaker at the Palmetto Association for Children and Families conference with a presentation regarding the role of the Department of Children's Advocacy (DCA)
- Provided joint trainings with DSS case managers and attorneys, Office of Indigent Defense parents' attorneys, and Children's Law Center regarding Pre-Merits Hearing Conferences for parties to gather and discuss cases prior to court hearings
- Presented DCA's annual report to the Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children in July, 2020
- Presented reports to the Governor and Lieutenant Governor at Cabinet Meetings in January, 2020 and August, 2020
- Addressed the Family Court Judges at their Annual Judicial Conference and provided information about the work of DCA and our broad vision of reform

Broad Vision for Reform

The State Child Advocate has sought not only to meet and connect with state agency leadership teams but also to join and engage in learning, sharing, coordinating, and strategizing solutions from interagency relationship issues to matters involving complex systemic impasses. In 2020-2021, the SCA seeks to strengthen DCA's communication with the public, with state agencies and organizations, and with the Legislature to promote the following broad vision of reform:

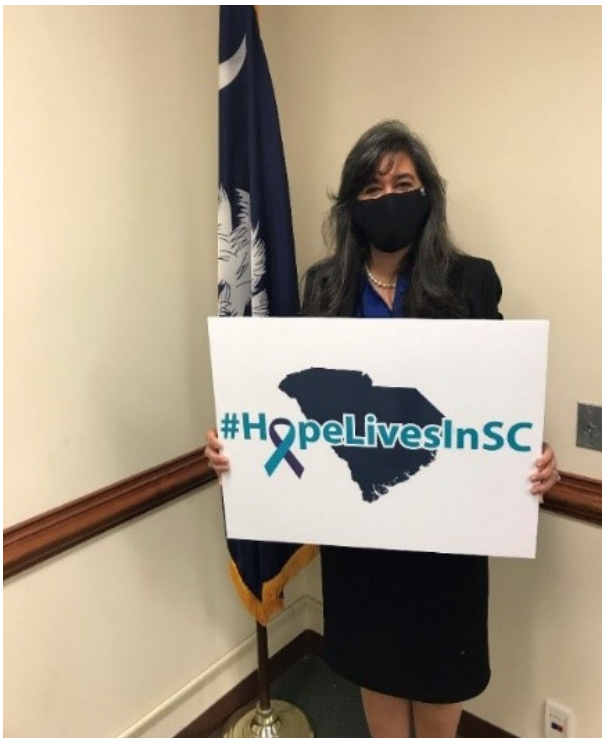
Joint trainings and meetings to promote access and awareness of an array of services that allow children to safely remain in their homes and communities or in the least restrictive, most family-like setting based upon their needs

Safe Baby Courts are an example of this broad vision. During a presentation to legislators and child-serving agency and organizational leaders in January of 2020, Zero to Three shared the enduring successes from implementation of the Safe Baby Court Team Model in other states. In July, in the midst of a health pandemic, South Carolina Infant Mental Health Association (SCIMHA) submitted a Zero to Three grant application with input and assistance from a State Leadership Team consisting of SCIMHA, S.C. Department of Mental Health, S.C. Department of Children's Advocacy, S.C. Network of Child Advocacy Centers, S.C. Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services, and Department of Social Services. This team worked remotely and virtually to collaborate, brainstorm and enlist help from other organizations, agencies, community partners and members of the Judiciary. As a result, South Carolina was chosen for a grant award of $425,000 to bring Safe Baby Courts to three South Carolina counties. Winning this grant was based on the readiness South Carolina displayed to work as a team. This grant creates a service that has never been available in this state for parents of infants and toddlers.

Coordination of services and efforts for a system of care grounded in urgency, empathy and sustainability

Suicide prevention needs our urgency, empathy and sustainability. Suicide prevention is a vital issue to child health and wellness in South Carolina. The JCLCC Children's Committee's 2019 Data Reference Book indicates that suicide was the number one cause of death among children ages 10 to 14 and number two cause of death among children ages 15 to 17 in South Carolina in 2017. (JCLCC 2019 Data Book, https://childaw.sc.edu)

Through an invitation by the Department of Mental Health's Office of Suicide Prevention (DMH OSP), DCA's Deputy Child Advocate of Investigations completed suicide prevention training programs which equipped her to bring life-saving intervention skills to DCA as well as to communities. Thereafter, in partnership with DMH OSP and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's (AFSP) South Carolina Chapter, all DCA staff and volunteers will be provided with valuable suicide prevention online training which is funded by OSP's Garrett Lee Smith SAMHSA grant (Grant: SM062901). Eliminating suicide as a cause of death is a priority.



While I breathe, I hope

Complex behavioral and mental health needs require coordination of services and efforts. The State Child Advocate has had regularly-scheduled meetings which include directors or their designees of DDSN, DHHS, DJJ, DMH, DSS, DHEC, DAODAS, Department of Education, First Steps, Children's Trust, SCIMHA, NAMI, and Continuum of Care and other organizations. The relationships formed from communication and meetings are part of what is required for identifying cross-cutting program improvements; articulating recommendations that provide outcome-based solutions; and implementing effective complex and sustainable system changes. This collaboration has revealed that a relatively small number of children and adolescents in South Carolina have complex mental health and challenging behavioral needs, and their inability to get the help they need in their homes/communities increases foster care entries, involvement with juvenile justice and hospitalization. Part of the Department of Children's Advocacy's broad vision for reform is to promote access and awareness of an array of services that allow children to safely remain in their homes and communities or in the least restrictive, most family-like setting based upon their needs with the understanding that some children will need to receive services in a Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) or other out-of-home setting. DCA is engaged in sharing and identifying coordinated solutions regarding gaps in services primarily concerning qualified, quality intensive community service providers. The resulting recommendations should include measuring and tracking outcome data.

Continued collaboration with child welfare partners regarding communication, service coordination and planning strategies to improve outcomes for children

Child Fatality Advisory Committee uniquely positioned to communicate and strategize improvement outcomes. Pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-1930(A), the State Child Advocate is a member of the Child Fatality Advisory Committee. The State Child Advocate worked with South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) to be screened and approved for access to confidential child fatality information. The State Child Advocate has participated in CFAC meetings every other month beginning in June of 2019. The committee continued to meet through web-based platforms. This committee's annual report is published at https://scfacsc.wordpress.com/annualreports/, and DCA has shared research information relevant to this committee through social medial and newsletters specifically regarding dangers associated with unsafe sleep, drowning, and leaving children in hot cars. DCA is working with other members of the committee for campaigns to educate and equip parents and professionals with the information learned from fatality reviews.

Bench-Bar Committee is an example of how collaborative communication and coordinated planning can improve outcomes. The State Child Advocate is a member of the Bench-Bar committee which recognizes that court continuances negatively impact childhood wellbeing and timely permanence. The Department of Children's Advocacy, members of the Judiciary, Commission on Indigent Defense, Children's Law Center, Court Administration and Department of Social Services have been engaged in a court time work group subcommittee and recognize the need to gain traction and enhance momentum to reduce delays. During the Summer, 2020, virtual trainings were provided to hundreds of child welfare professionals, and dates were set to being Pre-Merits Hearing Conferences throughout the state. Pre-Merits Hearing Conferences will provide a forum and a structure for respectful, meaningful pre-court conferences among DSS, Guardians ad litem, parents and parents' attorneys. The goal is to decrease unnecessary delays for children who can safely return home.

The report outlines the work of the Department of Children's Advocacy *Team*. By identifying and resolving the challenges regarding services provided to children, we are growing a community where children thrive.

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