



20
23

ANNUAL
REPORT



South Carolina Department of

**CHILDREN'S
ADVOCACY**

Advocacy. Accountability. Service.





DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY

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A MESSAGE FROM THE STATE CHILD ADVOCATE

Amanda F. Whittle, JD, CWS



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

It is my honor and privilege to share with you the Department of Children's Advocacy's 2023 Annual Report highlighting our 2022-2023 fiscal year progress to improve outcomes for children in South Carolina.

This fiscal year has been impactful for South Carolina, as the Department of Children's Advocacy and its divisions have created capacity and processes to advocate effectively and efficiently for children in our state who need help.

The DCA created a Critical Investigations Unit in response to a 542% increase in critical incident notifications in FY22. Critical incidents rose an additional 364% in FY23. The new unit, along with the Investigations Unit, responded to a combined 4,474 notifications, a dramatic increase from the approximately 500 complaints received July-December 2019.

We welcomed the agency's first IT Director, Steve McConnell, to coordinate with DTO Shared Services, maintain inventory, and provide hardware and technical support to offices across the state. We also welcomed Communications Director Rob Schaller, who reinvented our newsletter and has been working on initiatives to strengthen the agency's branding. He also built and launched the DCA's new website to comply with the state's Next Generation platform.

DCA leadership's careful analysis of vacancy rates, job descriptions, salaries, and professional and personal fulfillment initiatives brought many positive changes, such as increased hiring minimums. Further, current employees benefited from equity, performance, or position reclassification increases in some cases, while in others, they saw salary adjustments based on additional duties. In April 2023,

our telework plan was approved, increasing efficiency and cost-savings, boosting employee morale, and promoting a healthier work-life balance. There is more to be done, but we are excited about the progress made, including ending FY23 with a 21% turnover rate compared to 33% in FY22.

We will continue to strengthen the DCA team, so our staff and volunteers are equipped and able to support children and their families.

Two DCA divisions, Guardian ad Litem and Foster Care Review, have been working diligently this fiscal year to prepare for new case management systems that will launch in FY24. GAL's system will greatly improve the user experience and adds new quality assurance capabilities. FCRD will replace its 17-year-old database system that has become increasingly slow, unreliable, and unable to integrate with other programs. Both of the current systems are frustrating to use and insufficient to meet the divisions' needs. The replacements will greatly improve efficiencies, drive child advocacy, and improve staff morale.

GAL created or participated in 647 media or in-person forums highlighting the accomplishments of existing volunteers and recruiting new ones across the state.

FCRD and Foster Care Review Boards continued to identify and explore ways to increase their impact on permanency outcomes for children in foster care, including advocacy efforts to eliminate barriers to permanency.

Continuum of Care met their goal for the measure of improvement in the mental wellbeing of children with whom they partner, keeping these youth in their homes and out of state-funded care. The division remains committed to increasing its workforce, so that it can serve more youth and families in FY24 and beyond.

The DCA is an integral part of South Carolina's ability to create a sustainable system of care, which includes a robust array of integrated services and placement for children and youth. Our work to improve outcomes for children will continue in FY24.

Thank you for reading our report, outlining DCA's achievements and the State Child Advocate's activities, pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2270.



AMANDA F. WHITTLE, JD, CWLS

*State Child Advocate and Executive Director,
SC Department of Children's Advocacy*

CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY OVERVIEW

MISSION

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

VISION

Growing a community where children thrive.

BACKGROUND

The Department of Children's Advocacy (DCA) effectively began on July 1, 2019, pursuant to Act No. 160 (S. 805), which was signed into law on May 3, 2018. Amanda F. Whittle was appointed by Governor Henry McMaster on June 3, 2019, to serve as the State Child Advocate and Executive Director of the agency.

Since that time, and pursuant to statute, Whittle has developed a broad vision for reform regarding the services provided to children by child-serving state agencies. The DCA has engaged in child-specific staffings and systemic strategies to promote this broad vision and improve outcomes for South Carolina's children, including:

- 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

- Coordination of services and efforts for a system of care grounded in urgency, empathy, and sustainability
- Continued collaboration with child welfare partners regarding communication, service coordination, and planning strategies to improve the timeliness of court hearings and outcomes for children

DIVISIONS

The DCA administers:

- Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem Program
- Continuum of Care
- Foster Care Review Division
- System Improvement

The Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem Program, Continuum of Care, and the Foster Care Review Division were administered by the Office of Executive Policies and Programs through the Department of Administration from 2015-2019 and by the Governor's Office prior to 2015. The Foster Care Review Division supports the Foster Care Review Board and operates the South Carolina Heart Gallery. System Improvement has always been under the DCA and oversees the Investigations and Critical Investigations units.

CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY BUDGET

FY 2022 - 2023

The DCA's total FY 2022-2023 budget was **\$16.53M**, of which **\$9.2M** came from general funds. In addition, the General Assembly authorized pass-through funding for Children's Trust and the S.C. Network of Children's Advocacy Centers after considering testimony and documentation related to these entities during the budget hearing process. The Dickerson Children's Advocacy Center and Lowcountry Orphan Relief also received earmarked funding. For FY23, the DCA received \$0 federal funds related to COVID-19.

FISCAL YEAR 2022 - 2023 BUDGET

Table 1

State Funded Program Title	General	Other	Federal	Total
Administration and System Improvement	\$767,781	-	\$416	\$768,197
Guardian ad Litem Program	\$3,881,423	\$3,747,458	\$145,530	\$7,774,411
Continuum of Care	\$2,071,327	\$728,446	-	\$2,799,773
Foster Care Review Division	\$450,451	\$796,956	-	\$1,247,407
State Employer Contributions	\$2,025,812	\$1,851,943	\$62,860	\$3,940,615
Total	\$9,196,794	\$7,124,803	\$208,806	\$16,530,403

FY 2023 - 2024

The DCA's FY24 budget request was submitted in September 2022 and included the following seven items listed below, totaling **\$1,971,312 in recurring** and **\$315,900 in non-recurring** funds. All requests aligned with goals and targets in the DCA's Annual Accountability Report and with its mission, vision, and statutory mandates. For FY24, the agency received 2 of 2 FTEs for Investigations, 4 of 16 FTEs for GAL, and funding for additional fleet vehicles, which will be requested after July 1, 2023, when funding is allocated.

RECURRING:

COC SERVICE DELIVERY **\$106,500**

To provide COC with 10 fleet vehicles, allowing staff to travel to provide children necessary intensive care coordination.

IT CONSULTANT/LIAISON **\$187,750**

To centralize technical leadership and support for all employees.

FOSTER CARE REVIEW ADVOCACY **\$200,000**

To hire FCRD staff to support the reviews of children in foster care.

INVESTIGATIONS ADVOCACY **\$285,000**

To hire IU and CIU staff to support the response to complaints and critical incident notifications.

GUARDIAN AD LITEM ADVOCACY **\$792,062**

To hire GAL staff to support advocacy for children involved in court cases involving DSS abuse or neglect actions.

COC TRANSFER ALIGNMENT **\$400,000**

To offset the elimination of a \$400,000 transfer to COC from DMH pursuant to Proviso 35.1.

NON-RECURRING:

WORKSTATION REPLACEMENT **\$315,900**

To replace DCA's active devices as they approach end of warranty.

AGENCY STRUCTURE & ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

The DCA consists of approximately 200 FTE staff positions, 140 local and seven state Foster Care Review Board members appointed by the Governor, and more than 1,300 volunteer guardians ad litem. The 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 continues to be significant to the DCA.

During 2023, the agency also operated a Legal Extern Program and added a Critical Investigations Unit, a function previously being performed but with no formal designation. Work was also begun in FY23 to create a new division within the DCA that would encompass both the IU and the CIU, as well as an FTE for planning and research to support the new division. These changes have and will improve efficiencies within the agency and for the children of South Carolina.



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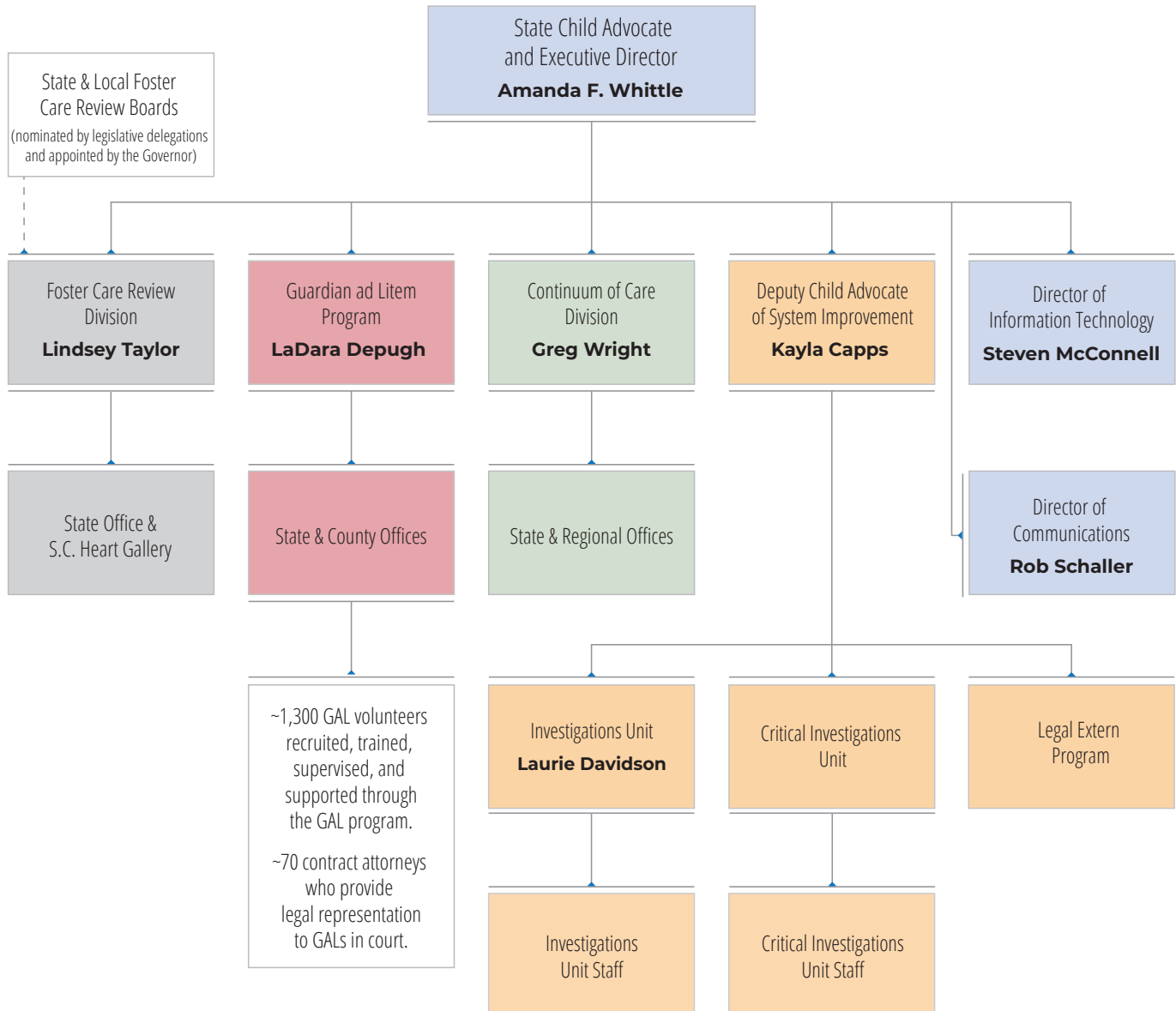
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South Carolina Department of
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ORGANIZATION CHART



CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY EDUCATIONAL EFFORTS

Educating the public about the services it and other child-serving agencies provide is not only a statutory requirement, but one that the DCA takes seriously. Ensuring our citizens are aware of the services available to them helps reduce incidences of abuse, neglect, and institutionalization of children. However, we also offer trainings to our staff and to other state agencies to improve awareness, accessibility, services, and relationships among child-serving agencies and organizations.

COMMUNITY FORUMS

DCA participated in a number of public outreach events, sharing services and resources available to children, as well as tips on how to access them. Director Whittle and Deputy Capps alone attended more than 125 events where the audience consisted of more than just state agency employees. Such events included press conferences, media interviews, public forums, and community presentations. Our goal was to help people know where to turn for assistance and feel less intimidated, confused, and overwhelmed when navigating the process. Some FY23 highlights included:

HBCU College and Career Fair

Director Whittle, GAL Program Director LaDara Depugh, GAL Program State Recruiter Christy Vinson, and Continuum of Care Wraparound State Coaches and Trainers Yvonne Lee and Leslie Johnson attended the HBCU College and Career Fair to raise awareness about the agency's work and the many career and volunteer opportunities available.

Human Trafficking Work Group Convening

Director Whittle shared in the discussion aimed at addressing the need for service expansion/diversification to support youth victims of human trafficking. The convening was led by DSS and the Palmetto Association for Children and Families.

Safe Sleep Awareness

Along with other safe sleep advocates throughout the state, Director Whittle presented during the Safe Sleep Summit in October 2022.

Law School for Non-Lawyers

Director Whittle presented at the South Carolina Bar's Law School for Non-Lawyers program in Aiken. Her talk, "Child Protection Hearings," provided education and awareness about DSS abuse and neglect proceedings and the DCA's work.

Mental Health Advocacy Day

Donning a green dress in recognition of mental health awareness, Director Whittle was honored to be invited to speak in front of hundreds who attended Mental Health Advocacy Day in March 2023 on the State House grounds (*photo top right*).

STATE AGENCY FORUMS

DCA initiated or co-created forums specifically for state employees. Some examples during this fiscal year included:

Interagency System of Care for Emotionally Disturbed Children (ISCEDC)

In February 2023, Director Whittle called a meeting of all ISCEDC member representatives to seek joint exploration and consideration of updating the ISCEDC statute for the first time since its establishment in 1994.¹ These discussions led to the creation of the System of Care Roundtable, outlined on page 15.

The ISCEDC was originally created to align with federal law in determining levels of care, making placement decisions, and assigning lead agency responsibilities for children diagnosed with behavioral and emotional issues. At that time, Continuum of Care was involved with all of these cases. However, in approximately 2000, care was split between COC and DSS, after which COC was no



longer involved in making placement decisions for youth in foster care. More information about this can be found under the COC section of this report on page 28.

Additional reasons to re-evaluate the ISCEDC statute include:

- The 2018 passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act
- The 1915(C) Medicaid waiver, which was approved in 2021
- Renewed momentum for agency coordination and collaboration, particularly concerning youth with higher intensity of need

Joint Collaborative Trainings

Four regional joint collaborative trainings were held among DSS, GAL, and FCRD. The importance of collaboration and coordination among agencies was underscored at one of these meetings when a GAL employee shared that she had never interacted with the FCRD, despite both divisions having been in existence since the early 1980s and overseen by the same governmental authority since 1993. More information about the trainings can be found under the DSS section of the interagency summaries on page 43.

INTERNAL FORUMS

DCA also created forums for DCA's staff and volunteers to learn and share agency successes, as well as opportunities for the agency to strengthen its efforts to improve outcomes for children. These internal forums were in addition to the community forums tracked and reported as part of DCA's Annual Accountability Report.

Guardian ad Litem

GAL Director LaDara Depugh worked with the program's regional directors to schedule and host trainings in each of the state's four regions. Staff and volunteers were invited to these training events, which included presentations from volunteer panels, providers, family court judges, and Director Whittle.

Continuum of Care

Director Whittle visited with COC staff at each of its four regional offices throughout the state. The sessions were aimed at sharing the agency's mission, vision, strategic planning, and successes, as well as obtaining feedback from staff for program improvement.

COC Director Greg Wright and leadership also held a statewide training and team building event for COC staff in December 2022.

Foster Care Review Division

FCRD Director Lindsey Taylor worked with her team to arrange and host four regional trainings and one professional development training for Foster Care Review Board members during FY23.

Director-Hosted Training Events

Director Whittle created and presented training events for onboarding and updating employees in September 2022. Onboarding training about the DCA, especially its confidentiality requirements pertaining to children's information, supplemented training provided by the Department of Admin for new employees. A staff training in October provided agency-specific information about the DCA and South Carolina's system of care resources. Director Whittle seeks to enhance these trainings and develop them into modules that can be accessed by staff through SCEIS.

Employee Appreciation Ceremony

The Department of Children's Advocacy celebrated its staff during a virtual employee appreciation ceremony. Staff were recognized for their years of service and for their efforts over the past year. The latter recipients were nominated by their co-workers. Additionally, all employees received branded polo shirts and agency lapel pins.

¹ S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-1510.

CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY COMMUNICATIONS SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

Agency communications are aimed at recruiting and retaining staff and volunteers; improving education about safe sleep, suicide prevention, resource access, child abuse prevention and reporting; and raising awareness regarding the services provided to children and families by state agencies. Other forms of outreach included participating in staff meetings, conferences, and media interviews.

Communications Director Rob Schaller was hired in August 2022 and immediately began applying his creative insight and technical abilities to strengthen the agency's communication with DCA employees, volunteers, and the community. He worked closely with the Department of Administration to redesign the DCA's website within the new Next Generation platform. He also redesigned the agency's monthly newsletters and the FY22 Annual Report with a fresh approach. In fact, the annual report earned a 2023 Notable State Document Award from the South Carolina State Library. Director Whittle remains directly involved with the agency's internal and external communications.

NEWSLETTER

Twelve issues of our monthly newsletter were created and disseminated to more than 1,600 legislators, internal staff, staff at other agencies, volunteers, board members, organizations, and members of the community.

WEBSITE

The DCA's website transitioned to the state's NextGen platform in May 2023, and the agency began laying the groundwork for its divisional websites to transition in FY24. The new platform provides upgrades and a streamlined look.

MEDIA

The DCA and its divisions were the subject of a number of media stories across the state during FY23. Media included both print (Aiken Standard, and the Times and Democrat, among others) and electronic outlets such as WLTX and WIS.

Stories focused on the Guardian ad Litem program's need for volunteers and awareness of the many legally free children waiting to be adopted in South Carolina through the Heart Gallery.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The Department of Children's Advocacy has continued to grow its audience and presence on social media over the last year. In January 2023, it added LinkedIn to its existing Facebook and Twitter accounts. Director Whittle is the primary operator of the DCA's social media accounts.

The Guardian ad Litem Program and SC Heart Gallery also operate their own social media accounts.

Audience levels for each social media account at the end of FY23 can be found on Table 2.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS AT THE END OF FY23

Table 2

Division	Platform	Followers
DCA	Facebook	1,407
	Twitter	408
	LinkedIn	41
Guardian ad Litem	Facebook	826
SC Heart Gallery	Facebook	119



SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

As part of its enabling legislation², the DCA is responsible for ensuring that children receive adequate protection and care from services and programs offered by the following nine child-serving agencies:

- The Department of Disabilities and Special Needs
- The Department of Health and Environmental Control
- The Department of Health and Human Services
- The Department of Juvenile Justice
- The Department of Mental Health
- The Department of Social Services
- The Governor's School of Agriculture at John de la Howe
- The South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind
- The Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School

The DCA is also tasked with examining on a system-wide basis the services these agencies provide and making recommendations to improve the quality of those services to give each child the opportunity to live a full and productive life.

System Improvement (SI), under the direction of Deputy Child Advocate Kayla Capps, is key to fulfilling that mission. SI oversees the teams that are primarily responsible for ensuring children receive adequate protection and care from the child serving agencies:

- The Investigations Unit (IU) handles complaints from the public concerning these agencies. *The IU report is located on page 18.*
- The Critical Investigations Unit (CIU) handles critical incidents that are self-reported by these agencies. *The CIU report can be found on page 20.*



SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

Juvenile Court Program (JCP)

The JCP was a Title II grant-funded project that ran from October 2021 (FY22) to September 2022 (FY23). The mixed-methods project was aimed at addressing the issues of secure juvenile detention, alternatives to detention, and racial and ethnic disparities for justice-involved youth, particularly regarding status offenders.

At the conclusion of the grant, the DCA held stakeholder meetings in the pilot counties to share observations and discuss recommendations. A summary of findings was reported in the DCA's 2022 Annual Report. Information in this report focuses on stakeholder responses and can be found under the DJJ section of the interagency summaries on page 40.

System of Care Roundtable

Since the formation of the DCA, Director Whittle has witnessed children and families struggling to access appropriate placement and services when they are not involved with child protective services or juvenile justice agencies. In FY23, she gathered leadership from DDSN, DHHS, DJJ, DMH, and DSS to reassess the Interagency System of Care for Emotionally Disturbed Children (ISCEDC) statute. They addressed the need for increased collaboration to improve placement and resources for complex child-specific issues in instances when DSS and DJJ are not involved. More information about the ISCEDC can be found on page 10.

As an express result of these discussions, the DCA created and piloted the Roundtable System of Care Interagency Staffing process. The roundtable brought child-serving agencies together to assist families with accessing services that allow youth to avoid entry into DJJ and DSS, as well as help families who have not been able to access placement or other services.

STAFFING

When it launched on July 1, 2019, the IU had no full-time employees dedicated solely to investigatory duties. However, as the number of complaints has grown, so has the team. IU ended FY23 with four full-time employees, including Investigations Unit Director Laurie Davidson, two investigators, and an intake specialist.

While the CIU closed FY23 with only one full-time investigator (and a significant portion of investigations assigned to Capps), it had already started making moves to grow the team in response to the dramatic escalation in workload. Unfilled positions from other divisions were re-classified, allowing the CIU to plan for the hiring of a second assistant child advocate and an intake specialist in FY24.

Above: Members of the IU and CIU units are (l to r) Hope Able, Kayla Capps, Anna Ponds, Wanda Banker, Melissa Fowler, Laurie Davidson, and Melissa Pettinato-Irby. Not pictured: Kimberly Inabinet. | ² S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2210.



Both units continue to be supported by Director Whittle and Deputy Capps, with each carrying caseloads during FY23. To address the anticipated rise in cases in FY24 and FY25, and to ensure continuation of quality reviews, the DCA's FY25 budget request will include allocations for additional FTEs. The goal is to assign all cases to investigators, each carrying manageable loads of 25-30 cases.

TRAINING

During FY23, the IU team participated in professional training to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities concerning child-related investigations. Training sessions included:

- US Ombudsman Association Training and Conference
- Foster Care Review Division Annual Professional Development
- University of South Carolina Children's Law Center trainings
- Dually-involved youth training

All employees across both units maintained their credentials to access the Juvenile Justice Management System (JJMS) and the Child and Adult Protective Services System (CAPSS), DJJ's electronic case management system and DSS's electronic case management system, respectively.

SITE VISITS

During FY23, the DCA communicated with all nine statutorily defined agencies. Processes were also put into place to ensure face-to-face contact (as opposed to email and/or telephone only communications) occurs each fiscal year with each agency.

State Child Advocate Amanda Whittle, Deputy State Child Advocate Kayla Capps, and members of the IU and CIU units made visits to the following state-operated facilities that house children or youth:

- Coastal Evaluation Center (CEC)
- DJJ Broad River Road Complex (BRRRC)
- Governor's School for Agriculture at John de la Howe
- Juvenile Detention Center (JDC)
- Midlands Evaluation Center (MEC)
- Upstate Evaluation Center (UEC)
- Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School
- William S. Hall Psychiatric Institute

The primary goal in conducting visits is to ensure that children are receiving adequate services from state agencies. In addition, visits raise awareness of the IU and CIU units, the services they provide, and how to submit a complaint or critical incident.

A secondary goal is to learn about resources that can be added to the resource library page on the DCA website and provided to constituents who call the hotline.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION & RESPONSE TIMES

The DCA seeks to respond to complaints and critical incident notifications with urgency and empathy. As one of its FY23 annual accountability measures, the agency set a goal of responding to 98% of complainants within one business day.

In actuality, it responded to 100% of complainants within this time frame, surpassing its goal. The addition of an intake specialist has been a great asset to the IU, but workloads need to be reduced for investigators to continue responding at this rate.

IMPACT

The DCA provides a benefit to the public not only by identifying and partnering to resolve inadequate services, but also by providing information to constituents when services are adequate.

The establishment of a formal Critical Investigations Unit was significant, and the agency continues to seek improvements to its processes for capturing and analyzing data and for reviewing and evaluating services for children.

At the end of FY23, work had begun to create a new division within the DCA that would encompass both the IU and the CIU. The agency also plans to reclassify a vacancy to create a Director of Planning and Research position that will develop, manage, monitor, and report statewide and internal projects and evaluate program efficacy and outcomes. The employee will also be engaged in establishing baselines, benchmarking progress, managing regular reporting, and providing updates regarding targets.

LEGAL EXTERN PROGRAM

During FY23, SI saw the continuation of the Legal Extern Program, which was established in 2020 with the University of South Carolina School of Law. The DCA has had six legal externs between Fall 2020 and Summer 2023, including one during FY23. All have been third-year law students who are enrolled in the Children's Law Concentration program at the law school.

In exchange for school credit, the externs provide research and logistical support to the DCA. The externship program allows the DCA to ensure new lawyers have an awareness and understanding of not only the DCA, but also the overall system of care provided by child-serving agencies.

INVESTIGATIONS UNIT

2,955

*complaints
received*

28%

*year-over-year
increase*

349

*complaints
investigated*

Since the DCA's founding, the Investigations Unit (IU) has been integral to child protection by receiving, referring, investigating, and/or monitoring complaints from the public against nine child-serving agencies. It is led by Unit Director Laurie Davidson and includes state office investigative staff. The information they collect helps the DCA and other agencies provide better services and assists the State Child Advocate in promoting and advocating for a broad vision of reform, including recommendations for improvement.

In individual cases, the IU team advocates for services that children should be—but are not—receiving. It also identifies areas needing improvement on a systemic level and brings those deficiencies to the attention of agency leadership. Complaints are received by telephone, email, or via the DCA website. IU is unable to accept complaints or reports of abuse or neglect. In these instances, IU is required to direct the complainant to the appropriate agency.

There were **2,955** complaints received in FY23 that were determined to involve services provided to children by one of the nine child-serving state agencies under the DCA's purview. This

represents a **28% increase** over the 2,126 complaints received in FY22. Of those **2,955** complaints:

- **2,511** were resolved by referral instead of an investigation, with complainants being directed to the appropriate state agency or community organization for assistance
- **349** were deemed within IU's scope and investigated
- **49** were closed after complainants were unresponsive to follow-up inquiries
- **42** were found to be non-agency referrals
- **4** lacked resources to assist in complainant's area

Of the **349** investigated complaints against state agencies:

- **157** identified that adequate services were provided
- **102** identified inadequate services that were remedied
- **33** identified inadequate services that were not remedied
- **20** were closed after ongoing monitoring efforts were completed
- **37** were still open and carried into FY24



CRITICAL INVESTIGATIONS UNIT

A second category of notifications—known as "critical incidents"—have been fielded since the agency's inception. Critical incidents were reported directly by the same nine child-serving agencies and involved fatal, near-fatal, or serious bodily or emotional injuries to a child in the care of, or receiving services from, the state.

Because of their sensitivity, critical incidents were only handled by Director Whittle and Deputy Director Capps, and initially, the caseload was relatively small and manageable, with 30 in the first year (FY20). However, as the DCA strengthened its relationship with reporting agencies, the number quickly began to snowball, ending FY23 with a staggering 1,519 incidents reported. [Fig. 1](#) The dramatic rise in notifications may be attributed to potential differences in an agency's definition of "critical incident" prior to the creation of the DCA and/or heightened awareness of the requirement to report these incidents to the DCA.

Recognizing this trajectory was unsustainable, Whittle and Capps established the Critical Investigations Unit (CIU). In January 2023, an assistant child advocate was hired as the new unit's first employee solely dedicated to reviewing and investigating critical incident notifications. Additionally, IU's case management system was modified to include critical incident notifications and the resulting investigations by the CIU. This allows critical incident data to be tracked and the CIU to identify and report trends to agency leadership.

In FY23, there were **1,519** critical incident notifications received. Of those:

- **895** were reviewed only
- **624** were reviewed and investigated

Of the **624** investigated incidents:

- **335** identified that adequate services were provided
- **136** identified inadequate services that were remedied
- **151** identified inadequate services that were not remedied
- **2** were still open and carried over into FY24

“

A critical incident is defined as:

A fatality, near-fatality, or serious bodily or emotional injury of a child who is in the custody of or receiving services from a state agency, or circumstances that result in a reasonable belief that a state agency failed in its duty to protect a child, resulting in the imminent risk or suffering of serious bodily or emotional injury, or death of a child.³

The DCA takes its responsibility for critical incidents very seriously and has worked closely with all child-serving agencies to ensure they are aware of both the requirement to report critical incidents to the DCA, and to do so within the statutory 24-hour time frame.⁴ Thereafter, the State Child Advocate may perform an independent investigation or review a completed investigation.

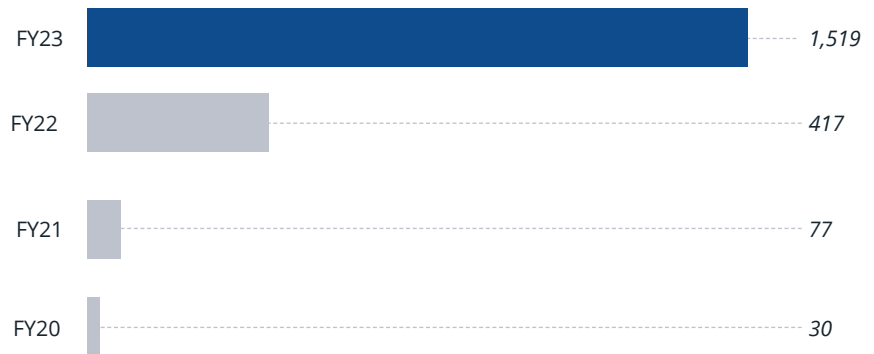
FY23 CRITICAL INCIDENT NOTIFICATIONS

In FY23, Critical Investigations received 1,519 CINs, compared to 417 in FY22. This represents a more than 360% increase year over year, and a 5,063% increase over the DCA's first year in existence [Fig. 1](#).



TOTAL CINs BY FISCAL YEAR

Fig. 1



24-HOUR CRITICAL INCIDENT NOTIFICATION RESPONSE TIMES

FY23 saw six agencies reporting critical incidents (outlined on page 23), one more than FY22. Additionally, the percentage of CINs received within the statutorily defined notification period also rose slightly to 65% from 62% in FY22. [Fig. 2](#)

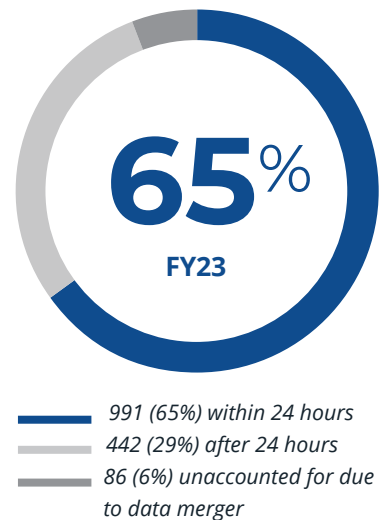
24-HOUR CIN RESPONSE TIMES⁵

Table 3

Agency	Notifications	Within 24 hours
DDSN	4	-
DHHS	87	47
DJJ	1021	661
DMH	242	205
DSS	162	73
SCSDB	3	1
Other ⁶	-	4
TOTAL	1519	991

CIN RESPONSE TIME COMPLIANCE

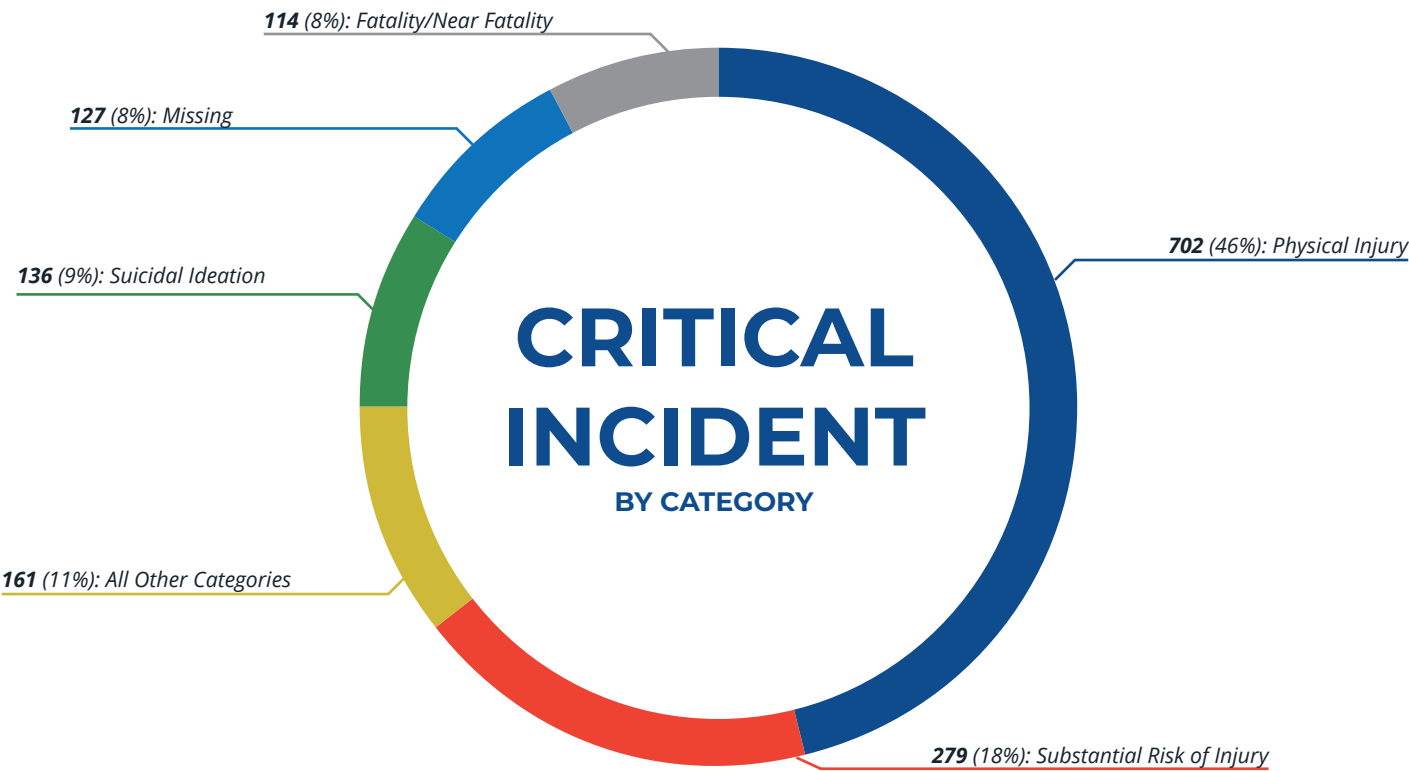
Fig. 2



³SC Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2230. ⁴SC Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2280. ⁵Child-serving agencies that have not in FY23 or have never reported a notification are not represented. A dash "-" indicates that no cases were reported. ⁶A critical incident was reported about, and assigned to, one of the nine-child serving agencies under DCA's purview by another agency/entity.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS BY CATEGORY

Fig. 3



CRITICAL INCIDENT NOTIFICATIONS BY AGENCY⁵

Table 4

Agency	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23
DDSN	-	-	-	4
DHEC	-	-	17	-
DHHS	-	-	22	87
DJJ	15	15	299	1021
DMH	-	-	19	242
DSS	15	62	60	162
SCSDB	-	-	-	3
TOTAL	30	77	417	1519

AGENCIES REPORTING



Seven agencies have begun reporting critical incidents in FY23, up from five in FY22 [Table 4](#). For the first time, DDSN and SCSDB submitted critical incidents. However, DHEC, which has previously reported, did not report any this fiscal year.

⁷ During a data merger, some data was imported with an agency designation, but no closure code. These have been assigned to "Other."

DSS Table 5		162
Fatality		38
Drowning	1	
Drug /Alcohol Exposure	6	
Gunshot Wound	5	
Hot Car	1	
Medically Fragile	12	
Severe Bodily Injury	3	
Suicide	4	
Gunshot Wound (1)		
Strangulation (2)		
Overdose (1)		
SUID/SIDS	3	
Unsafe Sleep	2	
Undetermined	1	
Medical Emergency		16
Missing		71
Near Fatality		18
Attempted Suicide	8	
Cutting (1)		
Gunshot Wound (1)		
Overdose (3)		
Severe Bodily Injury (1)		
Strangulation (2)		
Car Accident	1	
Dog Bite	1	
Drug/Alcohol Exposure	1	
Gunshot Wound	2	
Medically Fragile	1	
Severe Bodily Injury	4	
Physical Injury		4
Self Harm		2
Sexual Assault		2
Substantial Risk of Injury		2
Suicidal Ideation		9

DHHS Table 6		87
Attempted Sexual Assault		1
Fatality		2
Medically Fragile	1	
Suicide	1	
Medical Emergency		8
Missing		25
Near Fatality		4
Attempted Suicide	4	
Other⁷		3
Physical Injuries		29
Self Harm		3
Sexual Assault		6
Suicidal Ideation		6

DMH Table 7		242
Attempted Sexual Assault		1
by Youth	1	
Elopement		1
Fatality		3
Suicide	3	
Gunshot Wound (2)		
Other (1)		
Improper Restraint/Isolation		6
Medical Emergency		2
Missing		26
Near Fatality		28
Attempted Suicide	26	
Other (2)		
Overdose (18)		
Strangulation (6)		
Gunshot Wound	1	
Poisoning	1	
Other⁷		10
Physical Assault		3
Physical Injury		101
Self Harm		11
Sexual Assault		12
Substantial Risk of Injury		21
Suicidal Ideation		17

SCSDB Table 8		3
Physical Injury		1
by Youth	1	
Sexual Assault		2
by Youth	2	

DDSN Table 9		4
Medical Emergency		1
Missing		1
Physical Injury		2
by Youth	2	

DJJ Table 10		1021
Attempted Sexual Assault		7
by Youth	7	
Emotional Injury		6
Fatality		1
Gunshot Wound	1	
Improper Isolation/Restraint		2
Medical Emergency		6
Missing		4
Near Fatality		20
Attempted Suicide	19	
Severe Bodily Injury	1	
Other⁷		2
Physical Injury		565
by Staff	6	
by Youth	559	
Self Harm		24
Sexual Assault		24
by Staff	1	
by Youth	23	
Substantial Risk of Injury		256
Suicidal Ideation		104



CASS ELIAS McCARTER GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM

12,058

*children served
in FY23*

6,872

*average cases
each month*

52%

*of cases handled
by volunteers*

The Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem Program is statutorily⁸ responsible for assigning a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) to each child who is involved in a Department of Social Services abuse and neglect case in family court in 45 counties (Richland County operates its own program). As a result, GALs are assigned to children who are in foster care, as well as children who are placed with their family or other adults through family preservation, if there is a DSS legal proceeding in family court. GALs provide invaluable contributions for South Carolina's children by directly advocating for their best interests and through their feedback for systemic improvements.

Our Guardians ad Litem are not "private" Guardians ad Litem.

Since its inception, the Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem Program has operated with a volunteer business model and provides training, monitoring, and supervision to the volunteers who serve as court-appointed special advocates for children in these cases.⁹ The program was named after Cass Elias McCarter, a volunteer who started the state's first GAL program in Marlboro County in 1984.

Cass Elias McCarter GALs are not "private Guardians ad Litem" who are appointed in private cases, such as divorces, child custody, and visitation cases.¹⁰

All DCA GALs must undergo:

- Criminal background and DSS database checks
- 30 hours of initial training plus ongoing yearly training in collaboration with National CASA/GAL and the University of South Carolina Children's Law Center
- Verification to the court that they have met the eligibility requirements
- Representation through contract attorneys in court proceedings

MEETING THE NEED

During FY23, GAL provided advocacy for **12,058 children**, with an average of **6,872** open cases month to month.

The operational model anticipates that all court-appointed GALs will be volunteers. Because of the small number of cases they may handle at once, volunteers often have more time to devote to fulfilling their court-appointed duties as a best-interest advocate.

However, limited caseloads also mean there is an insufficient number of volunteers to serve all of the abused and neglected children involved in DSS family court legal actions. When a case cannot be assigned to a volunteer, a GAL program employee steps in to handle the case.

Even with **1,381 active volunteers**, GAL staff worked **5,788** (48%) cases in FY23, an average of more than 40 cases per employee.

⁸ S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-500. ⁹ S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-7-1620. ¹⁰ S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-3-810, et. seq. pertains to the appointment of GALs for private custody cases where DSS is not a party to the case.

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT

In 2019 and based on existing data, DCA committed to have enough volunteers to serve as GALs for all children by 2024. The DCA has continued to assess this target as data has been cleaned, and the analysis revealed that 55% is a more realistic goal. The FY24 goal has been adjusted accordingly [Table 11](#).

VOLUNTEER SATISFACTION

For the GAL program to be successful, it is imperative volunteer GALs are satisfied with the support and guidance they receive from GAL Program staff. The DCA has asked volunteers to complete a satisfaction survey each February since 2020. The program is continually evaluating these results to make improvements to the volunteer experience [Table 12](#).

GAL VOLUNTEERS APPOINTED TO CASES

[Table 11](#)

Year	Baseline	Goal	Actual
FY20	51%	60%	59%
FY21	59%	70%	61%
FY22	61%	80%	56%
FY23	56%	65%	52%
FY24	52%	55%	TBD

VOLUNTEER SATISFACTION SURVEY

[Table 12](#)

Year	Baseline	Goal	Actual
FY20	n/a	80%	70%
FY21	70%	80%	83%
FY22	83%	90%	76%
FY23	76%	85%	80%

STAFF VACANCY RATE

[Table 13](#)

Year	Baseline	Goal	Actual
FY20	37%	25%	20%
FY21	20%	10%	13%
FY22	13%	10%	18%
FY23	18%	10%	11%

One such improvement was being more deliberate in highlighting the advocacy and accomplishments of our volunteers. The FY23 goal of 100 volunteer highlights was surpassed by more than 600% with 647. Although the recruitment and training team will continue to perform these tasks, GAL will no longer track this as a strategic goal.

STAFF RETENTION AND ADMINISTRATION

A major goal for the GAL program in FY23 was the retention of current and recruitment of additional staff. Meeting this goal would reduce existing workloads, improve resources to recruit volunteers, and provide additional support for volunteers and the court system.

GAL Program Director LaDara Depugh used the following tactics towards meeting this goal:

- Developed a tool for tracking vacancies, monitoring the hiring process, and regularly communicating with her team to ensure the process was consistently moving forward.
- Met with USC-Aiken Career Service director to promote internships and volunteer/employment opportunities.
- Applied for and received a Victim of Crimes Act grant that allowed the program to strengthen its staffing capacity. VOCA positions continue to be allocated based upon program needs.

Her intentionality and focus brought the vacancy rate to 11% at the end of FY23, from 18% at the end of FY22 and 37% in FY20 [Table 13](#).

Depugh's leadership efforts extended to National CASA as well, as she joined the State Leadership Council for National CASA in FY23, where she will help establish standards for all state agencies.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Significant progress has been made on the quality assurance process that began in FY22 and aims to streamline and improve staff and volunteer service delivery across the state. In FY23, the program hired quality assurance staff and developed standards, best practices, scoring metrics, and procedures. These efforts will allow quality assurance staff to complete audits for all county offices by the end of FY24. GAL leadership continues to participate in virtual and in-person meetings to discuss barriers, develop solutions, and identify accomplishments.

GAL's new case management system, CasaManager, is in development and expected to roll out in FY24. The new system will support GAL's child-focused mission and data needs, and integrate with the quality assurance measures to provide a more complete picture of the program.



CONTINUUM OF CARE

Continuum of Care (COC), led by Division Director Greg Wright, is an essential part of South Carolina's system of care for children, helping those with serious emotional, behavioral, and psychiatric issues be able to remain in their homes, schools, and communities. Because youth are not removed from their homes, they and their families experience less trauma, and the state sees fewer children under its care, either through foster care or the juvenile justice system.

COC is South Carolina's only state program to provide High Fidelity Wraparound. It adopted this evidence-based intensive care coordination model in 2014 to improve outcomes for children and youth with serious mental health and behavioral challenges. High Fidelity Wraparound "uses an individualized, team-based, collaborative process to provide a coordinated set of services and supports,"¹¹ and allows families—not service providers—to determine the goals they want to achieve based on their own needs.

During FY23 Continuum of Care provided services for an average of 195 youth each month across all four regions.

COC was established in 1983, to support children with severe mental health illnesses,¹² but responsibility for services was divided in approximately 2000. Youth who remained in the custody of their parents continued to be served by COC. Youth who were placed in foster care received case management services from DSS.

CHILDREN SERVED

During FY23, a total of **208** youth received COC services, with an average of **195** children served per month [Table 15](#).

Of those, **162** were eligible for services through a Palmetto Coordinated System of Care (PCSC) waiver [also known as a 1915(C) Medicaid Waiver]. This represents an increase over the 149 waiver-approved youth served in FY22, but still well short of COC's FY23 goal of 300. The waiver anticipates that COC will partner with up to 350 youth in its fourth year, which is COC's goal for FY24.

IMPROVED OUTCOMES

COC uses the Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS) to objectively measure a youth's improvement and the efficacy of the High Fidelity Wraparound model. CAFAS gauges how children function in daily life activities and assesses the level of impairment of children and adolescents who have been or are at risk for emotional, behavioral, substance abuse, psychiatric, or psychological problems. Youth are evaluated at enrollment to record a baseline number and then every 90 days until treatment concludes. By the end of the program, youth should see a significantly reduced CAFAS score. That score, coupled with a team decision, helps determine when High Fidelity Wraparound care coordination is no longer needed.

Between July 1, 2022, and June 30, 2023, CAFAS scores dropped by an average of 30 points across the state's four regions¹³ [Table 14](#), meeting the goal set forth by COC in the DCA's FY23 accountability report. This points not only to considerable improvement in a youth's mental health wellbeing, but to the success of the Wraparound treatment model.

To continue effectively providing intensive care coordination and maintaining the high fidelity of the evidence-based model, COC identified the following needs when it became part of the DCA in July 2019:

- Sustainable reimbursement
- Engaged workforce
- Increase in referrals
- Robust array of services

FINDING FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY

In FY21, COC was identified as the sole provider for intensive care coordination through a PCSC waiver, which has helped provide some fiscal sustainability in FY22 and FY23. This reimbursement model makes COC the only DCA division that can receive funds for the services it provides. Using these funds to increase staff will allow us to serve more youth, which is why DCA and COC are focused on increasing enrollment of waiver-qualified youth in FY24.

INCREASING THE WORKFORCE

During FY23, COC employed various tactics to reduce its vacancy rate, including the creation of a LinkedIn page to list open positions and adding these vacancies to the agency's monthly newsletter and other social channels. To minimize further attrition, COC and DCA leadership conducted a salary analysis, proposed equity increases for staff, and implemented both a performance pay increase and a telework plan for staff. COC also reviewed, updated, and disseminated more than 50 divisional policies and forms in order to ensure consistency and clarify job duties and expectations.

The division ended FY23 with a 40% vacancy rate. In FY24, the DCA intends to continue its focus on recruitment and retention efforts to close this gap, allowing the division to increase the number of youth and families it serves.

INCREASING REFERRALS

At the end of FY23, COC participated in a Department of Health and Human Services summit to address the state's efforts in placing children in residential or behavioral health settings. COC emphasized creating a system of seamless care coordination for children at all stages of their behavioral health needs. This includes ensuring DHHS and other agencies are aware of COC's services and are incorporating referrals to COC in their protocols any time a child is ready to step-down to in-home care or as an intervention before a child needs to be removed from the home.

AVERAGE YOUTH CAFAS SCORE IN FY23

Table 14

Region	Baseline Score	Most Recent Score	Difference	Percent Change
Region A - Midlands	121	101	-20	-17%
Region B - Upstate	140	94	-46	-33%
Region C - Pee Dee	150	111	-39	-26%
Region D - Lowcountry	135	121	-14	-10%
TOTAL AGENCY AVERAGE OF DIFFERENCE			-30	-21.5%

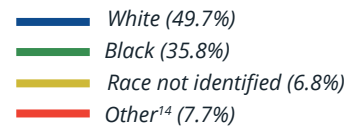
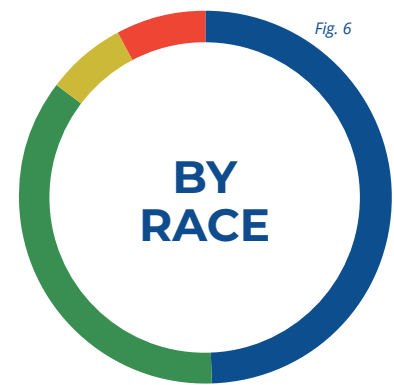
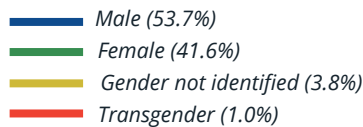
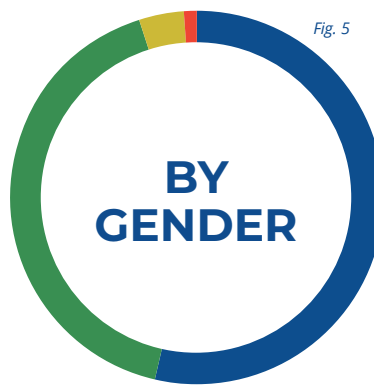
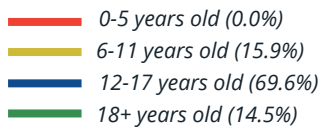
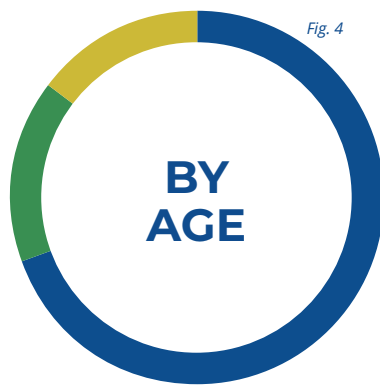
AVERAGE YOUTHS SERVED PER MONTH

Table 15

Region	Number of Youth
Region A - Midlands	56
Region B - Upstate	34
Region C - Pee Dee	76
Region D - Lowcountry	29
TOTAL AVERAGE SERVED PER MONTH	195



DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR FY23



STRENGTHENING THE SERVICE ARRAY

A robust array of appropriate and high-quality services are needed to help families safely maintain children and adolescents in the home. In March 2023, DCA Director Amanda Whittle created a survey for COC staff to identify the most commonly required services in their counties and the barriers, if any, to accessing those services.

Staff reported they had trouble accessing the following commonly used services:

- Behavior Modification
- Out-of-Home Respite
- Family/Youth Peer Support
- Family Support Services
- Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), Group Therapy, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), and other Evidence-Based Therapy (EBT)
- Workforce issues among providers

Notable from this survey was a lack of any benefit from the Department of Mental Health's statewide rollout of DBT services during the last two years. COC staff observed that many

clinicians who became DBT-certified were thereafter no longer employed with DMH. A seasoned and well-respected child-serving professional and clinician from another agency remarked, "Such is often the case when major clinical tools are rolled out like that. People leave, and the initiatives fall apart. I was so hopeful it would be a significant benefit." This underscores the importance of not only creating an array of services but also ensuring that these services are sustainable.

Of course, COC is not alone in experiencing a dearth of services that would help families keep children in their homes, schools, and communities. The Department of Disabilities and Special Needs also expressed similar difficulties.

Children's Advocacy has and will continue to seek collaborative strategies with other agencies to successfully connect families to services, particularly for situations where referrals went unfulfilled due to a lack of access or workforce struggles for providers in specific areas. Key to this success is meeting with Department of Health and Human Services leadership to discuss Rehabilitative and Behavioral Health Services (RBHS), intensive in-home services, out-of-home respite, and goods and services to support youth and their families.

¹¹ <https://preventionservices.acf.hhs.gov/programs/660/show> | ¹² S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-1310 et. seq. | ¹³ For both active and inactive youth

¹⁴ Other races included: Mixed race (3.98%); Hispanic (2.35%); Native American/Alaska Native (0.26%); Asian (0.0%); Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (0.0%); and Other (1.11%).

FOSTER CARE REVIEW DIVISION

The Division for Review of the Foster Care of Children (herein called Foster Care Review Division or FCRD) is led by Director Lindsey Taylor and includes state office staff who support the work of the South Carolina Foster Care Review Board (FCRB).

The FCRB was created in 1974 to provide external accountability for the foster care system, review the cases of children in foster care, and advocate for permanency.¹⁵ Board members are nominated by their legislative delegations and appointed by the governor. South Carolina was the first state to enact a system of citizen review responsible for improving permanency outcomes for children in foster care. FCRB consists of a state board of directors and 43 local review boards. The local boards review cases of children who have been in foster care for four months and then every six months thereafter, so long as the child remains in the custody of the Department of Social Services (DSS).

REVIEWS OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

During FY23, FCRB reviewed the cases of a total of **3,233** children. The division and board members embraced the enhanced accessibility provided by virtual reviews via WebEx. This allowed invited participants greater opportunities to participate, as they could attend from anywhere.

ANNUAL AND QUARTERLY REPORTING

FCRD monitors and reports quarterly and annually its progress in achieving permanent plans for children in foster care. However, during this fiscal year, FCRD's inefficient and outdated system, CASPER, adversely affected its ability to submit timely reports. While it published its annual report,¹⁶ FCRD struggled to timely submit quarterly reports, issuing only three of four to DSS. The system was also unable to provide data and reports that could improve advocacy and permanency for children, including specific data regarding overdue hearings. FCRD anticipates these issues will be resolved with the launch of a new case management system in FY24.



TRAINING AND TEAM BUILDING

The flexibility of virtual meetings allowed FCRD to host four regional trainings and one statewide board member training regarding child welfare practice, available services, and collaboration opportunities with a variety of partners. Trainings were designed to ensure that board members have relevant and updated information concerning our state's foster care system. The statewide training was the division's annual professional development day and included more than 100 participants.

In addition to trainings, FCRD held various events to build morale and foster a positive work environment. By the end of FY23, FCRD reduced its staff vacancies from eight to two.

During Employee Appreciation Week, FCRD coordinated with the Bureau of Protective Services and the Attorney General's Victim Services Division to have food trucks at the State House complex for state employees, encouraging them to enjoy lunch together on the State House grounds. Also during FY23, FCRD's Heather Valentine was awarded the DCA's Team Spirit Award, one of four awards presented to employees based on nominations by their co-workers.

CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

As reported in the DCA's 2022 Annual Report, Director Amanda Whittle asked the Office of Inspector General to conduct an efficiency study of the FCRD and FCRB to assist with improving processes, workflows, workloads, and outcomes. Foundational work to address these concerns began in FY22 and continued in FY23. Key recommendations—followed by its progress—included:

Replacing the outdated and unsupported CASPER database system

Funding to replace CASPER, a 17-year-old database, with an updated and flexible case management system was approved in the FY23 budget. Working with a state-approved vendor, the new system, CAMS (Child Advocacy Management System), was designed and built during FY23 with a launch date set for the first half of FY24. The new case management system will improve the division's ability to track, analyze, and use data to advocate for children. It will also heighten employee morale and efficiency.

Move to a paperless process

Once up and running, CAMS will allow FCRD to begin the move toward paperless record keeping.

¹⁵ Pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. 63-11-700, et. seq. ¹⁶ The division's Annual Report can be accessed at fcrd.sc.gov.



Create a system of accountability for areas of concern

FCRD began making updates to existing areas of concern that more specifically identify and target barriers to permanency for children in foster care. Once completed, the causes of these barriers will be provided to DSS and other responsible partners to address and/or eliminate.

Improving communication through updating policies with executive director review and approval

FCRD continued to review division policies and procedures. It expects to complete its assessment by the end of Q1 of FY24, coinciding with the implementation of CAMS.

Review and update inconsistent statutes between DCA and FCRD, and among DSS, FCRD, and GAL

Statutory changes remain a long-range goal on both fronts, and efforts begun in FY23 to effect these changes will continue into FY24. Progress included the diligent work of division leadership to clearly articulate and train both FCRB members and FCRD and DSS staff on the existing statutory requirements for reviews to ensure compliance.

Improve communication among DCA, DSS, FCRD, GAL, the judiciary, and other partners

FCRD engaged in increased and improved communication and collaboration with several key partners, most notably with DSS:

- Joint collaborative trainings with DSS and GAL. More information about the trainings can be found on page 43.
- Dissemination of a survey completed by both board members and DSS staff designed to assess the current state of FCRB and DSS relationships and perceptions.
- Participating for the second year in a row in the same Child Welfare Academy certification training required for new DSS child welfare staff.

These initiatives strengthened FCRD staff's understanding of updated DSS policies and practices. It also afforded FCRD the opportunity to educate new DSS staff on the division's mission, values, and statutory requirements.

Finally, the division created and filled a new volunteer and training coordinator position designed to enhance communication with board members.



Identify more efficient ways to fill board and staff vacancies

The number of board vacancies continue to be a concern for FCRD's efforts to improve the FCRB's impact on permanency outcomes. During FY23, the division developed a comprehensive communication plan and feedback loop to ensure that local legislative delegations are aware of the vacancies and the impact vacancies have on FCRB functionality. Local board members have expressed interest in having more involvement with the process of recruiting new board members and following up on their candidacy.

While FCRD keeps track of the number of board members and vacancies by appointment, reappointment, or resignation, it has not done so on a monthly basis. Because of requests for point-in-time data, we know that there were 62 board vacancies as of May 2022 and 55 as of October 2022. It is unclear how many vacancies existed at the end of FY23.

FCRD will continue to be intentional in FY24 regarding the tracking and reviewing of vacancies and raising awareness in the community and among legislative delegations about vacancies.

Adhere to the statutory names for the Foster Care Review Division and the Foster Care Review Board

Agency and division leadership and staff continued earlier efforts to clearly define and consistently communicate the difference between FCRD and FCRB.

Improving Data-Sharing with DSS

While not a part of the OIG's recommendations, significant progress in data-sharing was also achieved in FY23. After months of collaboration with FCRD, DSS launched a redesigned FCRB portal, which includes:

- Document Upload
- Legal Document Storage
- ICPC Status Updates
- Foster Care Case Management Reports

"Thanks to each of you for your knowledge and expertise," said Paulette K. Salley, DSS director of Human Services Systems/CCWIS, about the project. "We could not have done this without the wonderful teamwork displayed during this process."

SOUTH CAROLINA HEART GALLERY

The South Carolina Heart Gallery (SCHG) works to find forever families for children in foster care who are legally free and awaiting adoption. To fulfill its mission, SCHG recruits photographers who volunteer to take photos of these children at scenic locations around the state. Staff share the photos on the SCHG's website and social media accounts, partner with media outlets, and work with public and nonprofit organizations to host exhibits of the framed portraits. A part of the Foster Care Review Division (FCRD) since 2005, it has been funded through a contract with the Department of Social Services since 2008.

Over the years, SCHG has expanded and enhanced adoption recruitment for children in foster care. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, SCHG experienced multiple obstacles to fulfilling its mission, including the inability to hold regular photo sessions.

During FY22, after careful consideration and assessment, SCHG was re-imagined, ensuring that the program would be able to maximize its impact on the adoption recruitment landscape in South Carolina.

In FY23, Christina Grant was hired as the new program coordinator, and SCHG once again began holding group photo sessions across the state. A shoot held at the Riverbanks Zoo in March 2023 was particularly special because many of the children shared that it was their first visit to the zoo. Grant also partnered with photography students at Benedict College who joined veteran photographers for the daylong event. This brought in a new slate of volunteer photographers, while also giving the students practical experience they can use for their careers.

Another significant development in FY23 was the signing of a memorandum of understanding between FCRD and Grant Me Hope, a nonprofit organization that creates videos of legally free children. These videos, which provide even stronger connections with prospective families, are posted to SCHG's website and shared with local news organizations for broadcast.

During FY23, a total of nine group sessions were held, with at least two shoots scheduled in each region. In all, SCHG was able to add more than 70 children and 20 videos to the gallery.





CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY INTERAGENCY SUMMARIES

The DCA works diligently to create and strengthen relationships with other state agencies and looks for collaboration opportunities that will lead to better outcomes for children. Summaries regarding interaction with the nine child-serving agencies are provided below.

DEPT. OF DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL NEEDS (DDSN)

DCA continues to advocate for coordinated access to services through DDSN for children with intellectual disabilities (ID), related disabilities (RD), and autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Children Placed on Waiting Lists:

During FY23, DCA requested data regarding youth served by DDSN. DDSN did not include data from local Disabilities and Special Needs boards, and it is unclear whether DDSN has local DSN data.

Data showed that at the end of FY23, there were approximately:

- **17,375** individuals on the ID/RD waiver waiting list¹⁷
- **13,432** individuals on the Community Supports waiting list¹⁷
- **44** DDSN-eligible youth in in-state PRTF or GCIS placements
- **0** youth being supported out-of-state
- **253** youth "screened in" and awaiting testing for DDSN eligibility under the categories ID, RD, or At Risk
- **419** youth "screened in" and awaiting testing for eligibility under the category ASD

DCA recommends that DDSN either contract with providers to create more residential options for youth or create its own facilities and programs to serve as the backstop for residential

treatment needs for children and youth with ID, RD, and ASD. Specifically, our state needs residential skills-based learning and treatment for youth with complex needs, which often include intellectual disabilities, mental illness, and aggressive or other behavioral challenges.

In addition, if children can avoid lengthy waitlists and be assessed and provided with services sooner, families may have their needs met in the community, thus preventing situations from escalating, including possibly having a child placed in a more restrictive environment like an emergency department, DSS, or DJJ.

Residential Habilitation Services:

DDSN is working with providers to create more residential options for youth and has requested funding to respond to the waitlists.

As outlined in DCA's 2022 Annual Report, the challenges with finding appropriate residential services for children with intellectual disabilities rival the challenges of finding residential placements for children diagnosed with serious mental illnesses. During FY23, the General Assembly allocated \$1.3 million to DDSN to procure residential services for children and youth with intellectual disabilities and special needs. DDSN plans to issue a Request for Proposal (RFP) for a youth residential habilitation facility in FY24.

¹⁷ Duplication in these numbers may be possible, since some youth who are enrolled and receiving services through the Community Supports Waiver may also be awaiting ID/RD waiver enrollment.

¹⁸ S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Sections 63-11-2230, 63-11-2240 and 63-11-2280.

DCA regularly communicates with DDSN leadership as follows:

- Interagency staffings concerning specific children
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children hearings
- State Child Fatality Advisory Committee

DEPT. OF HEALTH & ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL (DHEC)

Issues with Critical Incident Notifications:

Since its inception in 2019, DCA has only received 17 critical incident notifications from DHEC. All 17 were sent to DCA in FY22, with 12 being for elopements. However, DCA has learned about additional unreported critical incidents through media reports and at interagency meetings. In January 2023, Director Whittle contacted DHEC to express concern regarding its non-compliance with the critical incident reporting statutes.¹⁸

DHEC indicated that they were not sufficiently staffed to provide notifications to DCA within the mandatory 24-hour timeframe. While DHEC indicated the other eight child-serving agencies listed in DCA's enabling legislation can and should be providing notifications when appropriate—and DHEC notifications will often be duplicative—DHEC also acknowledged that, by statute, DHEC is independently responsible for reporting those incidents. DHEC committed to submitting notifications moving forward. DCA recommends that DHEC ensure it has capacity to license and monitor child-serving facilities and to provide timely critical incident notifications to DCA as required by state law.

DCA regularly communicates with DHEC leadership as follows:

- Requested meetings as mentioned above
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children hearings
- Safe Sleep Awareness month and awareness meetings
- State Child Fatality Advisory Committee

DEPT. OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES (DHHS)

A robust and collaborative relationship exists between DCA and DHHS, who work closely together on a myriad of issues aimed at addressing the behavioral health needs of South Carolina's children.

Palmetto Coordinated System of Care 1915(C) Medicaid Waiver

Medicaid is the healthcare coverage provider for 600,000 children in South Carolina, and DHHS is the state's Medicaid agency. The DCA works closely with DHHS through implementation of a

1915(C) waiver that approves Continuum of Care, a division of the DCA, as the state's sole provider of High-Fidelity Wraparound to youth with serious emotional and behavioral challenges. The waiver provides a sustainable reimbursement rate, and services are rendered at no cost to families. More information about COC's services can be found on page 28.

Multi-Agency Collaboration

DHHS and DCA, along with DSS, DJJ, and DMH, regularly collaborate and cooperate on issues including rate-setting, Rehabilitative Behavioral Health Services (RBHS), and the proposed Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) for seriously mentally ill, justice-involved youth. More information on the PRTF can be found on page 41.

At the end of FY23, DCA participated in a DHHS-initiated interagency summit aimed at improving coordination for the placement of children in residential or behavioral health settings. The goal of the summit was to develop a streamlined approach to resolving issues and escalation protocols that involve agency executive directors when frontline staff have exhausted available resources or experienced serious impediments. DHHS gathered and shared an overview of existing services and care coordination-related activities for each agency, as well as scenarios that expose the challenges of placing children under these conditions. DHHS will continue coordination efforts in FY24.

Master Plan Advisory Committee (MPAC)

Director Whittle continues to serve as a member of the MPAC, facilitated by DHHS. This committee is engaged in intentional and focused analysis and problem-solving to create a continuum of behavioral health services for South Carolina citizens.

MPAC was integral to two DHHS initiatives that were both unveiled in FY23. The first was a behavioral health crisis stabilization grant program that awarded 13 hospitals a total of \$45.5M to build specialized hospital-based emergency department units dedicated to behavioral health crises.

The second was the creation of the Florence Behavioral Health Hub, which will include a combination of triage, crisis stabilization, telehealth, outpatient, and inpatient services that will expand much needed behavioral health resources in the Pee Dee region. The hub was created with an investment of up to \$100M in state funds appropriated to DHHS by the General Assembly and \$5M in funding committed by the City of Florence.

Medical Care Advisory Committee (MCAC)

Director Whittle continues to serve as a member of the MCAC, also facilitated by DHHS. Through this committee, the public is informed of rate increases, beneficiary rolls, and State Plan changes. The committee also ensured the public and other

agencies were continuously aware of the impact on Medicaid from both the federal government's declaration of a state of emergency related to COVID-19 (when no one was un-enrolled nor required to re-apply) and the repeal of the state of emergency (when re-application was again required).

DCA commends DHHS for its work to reimagine the behavioral health care system in South Carolina through the MPAC and MCAC, among other initiatives and developments.

DCA regularly communicates with DHHS leadership as follows:

- Interagency staffings concerning specific children
- 1915(C) Medicaid Waiver
- Medical Care Advisory Committee (MCAC)
- Master Plan Advisory Committee (MPAC)
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children hearings

DEPT. OF JUVENILE JUSTICE (DJJ)

Director Whittle and Deputy Child Advocate Capps met with DJJ Director Eden Hendrick and her leadership team during FY23 to discuss various topics, including critical incident tracking, DJJ's video surveillance system, potential use of body-worn cameras for JCOs and PSOs, facility improvements, and individual matters.

Juvenile Court Program (JCP)

DCA continued operation of its JCP through September 2022 and held stakeholder meetings in the pilot counties to share observations and discuss recommendations. Findings from the JCP were reported in the FY22 annual report. Information in this report focuses on the stakeholder responses:

- **Detention**

Aiken County Deputy Public Defender Kelley Perkins Brown said, "Counties with their own detention centers detain more. Counties with larger budgets detain more." This could account for the rise in detained youths in areas where those youth would have otherwise gone to the Greenville Juvenile Detention Center, had it not closed in March 2022. Although there was a stated intention to reopen the facility, it remains closed, significantly contributing to overcrowding at the Columbia Juvenile Detention Center.

- **Raise the Age (RTA)**

Attorney Brown also reflected on the unintended consequences of Raise the Age (RTA). Through this 2019 legislation, 17-year-olds charged with offenses carrying sentences of 10 years or less are not automatically tried

as adults. Before RTA, the solicitor would have to change the offense to send the case back to juvenile court. Now it's at the solicitor's discretion to remand on the original charge. While there has not been an increase in requests to waive minors through to adult court, when those requests are made they usually involve murder charges. The tradeoff, according to Brown, is that "the number [of youth referred to DJJ] skyrocketed."

- **Short-Term Alternative Placement (STAP)**

Deputy Capps worked with DCA legal extern and then UofSC law student Nicole Laing to prepare a "Referral Process Overview and On-Call Information Protocol," along with a list and map of STAP providers. Aiken County DJJ supplied a template, as they already have this information and are known for having a model referral process. Aiken also shares this information with law enforcement, whereas other counties may not. DCA recommended that this type of protocol be provided to law enforcement in every county.

- **School-Based Offenses**

Public defenders shared that there are fewer school-based offenses due to statutory changes for the offense of "Disturbing Schools," and alternative schools have impacted federal protections such as IEP and 504 requirements. Stakeholders recommended conducting deeper research into the distinctions and ramifications of schools handling a school-based offense through disciplinary measures vs. contacting law enforcement. They also said it would be helpful to learn more about how often law enforcement is contacted by families not for actual offenses, but instead for family dynamic or behavioral challenges.

Gateways Licensure

During FY22 and into FY23, DCA advocated for coordination and expedited consideration of licensure of Gateways, an intensive group home serving up to 12 DJJ-committed males ages 12 and older who are seriously mentally ill but do not require placement in—or step down from—a PRTF. Despite a contract being awarded to Associated Marine Institutes for the facility on Shivers Road, it was still not operational at the close of FY22. DCA reached out to DSS, the State Fire Marshall, and LLR to help DJJ successfully obtain licensure in October 2022 (FY23).

Integrated Service Delivery at DJJ

DCA acknowledges the state cannot build a facility in response to each of the many co-occurring needs of youth. With that in mind, DCA Director Whittle and Deputy Capps recommended to DJJ leadership the establishment of "wings" at DJJ facilities that, similar to Gateways, are for committed and detained

youth who do not meet acute or PRTF levels of care and/or may not have a serious mental illness as a primary diagnosis but nonetheless have complex needs involving mental health, intellectual disabilities, substance use disorders, and/or other needs. Providers would come to these wings to administer the appropriate bundled services to these youth.

DJJ leadership shared that such a proposal would require appropriate staff levels, physical facilities, and budget, particularly since there is no Medicaid funding for youth in a DJJ facility. Additional challenges to creating such specialized pods are the priorities created by overcrowding at the Juvenile Detention Center and an emphasis on placement at the Broad River Road Complex. Significant funding and time are needed to complete the necessary renovations to enhance safety and improve living conditions. Work is underway at BRRC, and all projects must be sequenced to move youth to other areas during renovation.

Procurement Code Exemption for Specific Placement Needs

In Spring 2023, Director Whittle joined DSS, DMH, DDSN and DJJ to request State Fiscal Accountability Authority approval of a procurement code exemption that would give these same agencies more flexibility in placing youth with providers not already on contract. DJJ will rarely use this exemption because youth they place are not eligible for Medicaid. But since many youth served by DJJ are also served by other agencies, it is a significant change for these agencies and the children in their care.

Federal Collaboration

In May 2023, DCA and DJJ leadership met with US Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Administrator Liz Ryan and officials from OJJDP's State and Tribal Relations Assistance Division, members of the Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Council, DSS, and other stakeholders regarding challenges within South Carolina's juvenile justice system. During the meeting, Director Whittle presented DCA's observations as well as her observations as chair of the Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Council's System Improvement Subcommittee. Director Hendrick also expressed her concerns and suggestions regarding the state's juvenile justice system.

SCDJJ Graduation Ceremony

Director Whittle, Deputy Capps, and Legal Extern Nicole Laing were honored to be invited and proud to attend DJJ's first graduation ceremony in two years in July 2022.

Parole Board Hearings

During FY23, Deputy Child Advocate Capps began attending parole board hearings. She reported that during the hearings, parole board members expressed the need for recommendations for youth and information about the success rate of rehabilitative

programs. They also shared concern about long term offenders being placed in short term evaluation centers. Director Hendrick detailed DJJ's capital projects and initiatives to improve the living environment of youth and their work towards rehabilitation.

DCA regularly communicates with DJJ leadership as follows:

- Individual meetings with Director Hendrick and DJJ leadership
- PRTF meetings among DJJ, DMH, and DHHS
- DJJ site visits by Investigations and Critical Investigations units
- Parole Hearings attended by Deputy Capps
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children hearings
- Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Council meetings
- Interagency staffings concerning specific children and youth
- Regularly scheduled meetings among DJJ, DSS, DMH, DHHS, and DDSN

DEPT. OF MENTAL HEALTH (DMH)

DCA has been working with DMH on multiple efforts to create and strengthen a robust and sustainable placement array to provide mental health care for children and adolescents. This is part of Director Whittle's broad vision of reform for children's services, specifically in the areas of behavioral and mental health services.

State-Operated Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF)

DCA has met regularly with DMH, DHHS, and DJJ since the General Assembly allocated \$20M for a state-operated PRTF to serve the long-term needs of South Carolina's justice-involved, mentally-ill youth. A Request for Proposal (RFP) was released on June 14, 2023, for the design, construction, operation, and maintenance of the PRTF. Director Whittle has been actively engaged in the process, working with multiple agencies and providing input to modify the original RFP, helping arrange executive-level interagency meetings on the progression of the RFP's issuance, and testifying before the State Fiscal Accountability Authority for its approval.

Interim Placement Planning

DCA also met with DHHS, DJJ, and DMH to discuss short-term and interim placement planning. During March 2023, DMH announced it was accepting seriously mentally ill, justice-involved youth at William S. Hall Psychiatric Institute. Its plans to harden the facility were to be completed by July 1, 2023, with one unit having capacity for 25 beds.

Step-Down Residential Treatment Facility

At the beginning of FY23, Director Whittle asked to examine DMH's budget request. After evaluation and based on her review of similar statutes and models in other states, Whittle

recommended inclusion of funding for step-down placement that she called a Residential Intensive Treatment Services (RITS) facility. This facility would provide placement and support for children stepping down from—or help them avoid stepping up to—higher levels of care. This aligns and sequences with Whittle's previous recommendations for a state operated PRTF.

DMH included a request for step-down placement funding in its budget request, and funding was allocated effective July 1, 2023.

DMH-DJJ Memorandum of Understanding.

During FY23, DCA strongly urged DMH and DJJ to renew their Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). DMH and DJJ have operated without an MOU since the previous one expired in December 2019. Although discussions for a new MOU began in 2019—and DCA has been assured of progress towards a resolution—efforts have failed due to disagreements over protocols for handling seriously mentally-ill youth.

This has caused issues, including in FY23 when DJJ made multiple requests for a youth removal staffing, believing that while awaiting the new MOU, there should be a staffing pursuant to the previous one. DMH's position was without a current MOU, there would be no staffing. Upon learning of this youth's situation, DCA interceded and worked with both agencies to ensure a staffing for this child was held. However, at the end of FY23, a new MOU was still not signed.

DCA regularly communicates with DMH leadership as follows:

- Individual meetings with Director Bank and DMH leadership
- PRTF meetings among DJJ, DMH, and DHHS
- Master Plan Advisory Committee meetings
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children hearings
- Director-to-director regularly-scheduled meetings
- Interagency staffings concerning specific children and youth
- Regularly-scheduled meetings with DJJ, DSS, DMH, and DHHS

DEPT. OF SOCIAL SERVICES (DSS)

There has been an increase in the number of children who are being referred to DSS and/or entering foster care because they need mental health treatment or services related to an intellectual disability, and there is a lack of capacity in other parts of the system (ie. other state agencies and private service providers). In response, DSS Director Michael Leach and his leadership team have worked to strengthen the placement and service array in South Carolina. DSS can, and does, provide community referrals so families can avail themselves to voluntary treatment services without court intervention. In addition, a child's entry into foster

care (which requires the initiation of a legal action) sometimes facilitates access to resources and services to a child and family that are not available outside of foster care.

DSS Family Court Hearings

DCA leadership has been asked by family court judges to attend and participate in DSS and DJJ hearings regarding complex matters. DCA can utilize its multi-agency engagement to support and promote children's and families' access to the full array of South Carolina's child-serving agencies' services, including efforts to overcome barriers to appropriate placements and services.

The following is a typical example of DCA's involvement: In November 2022, an active DSS case in family court was referred to DCA. DCA reviewed information about the youth and family, participated in multi-agency staffings, and attended hearings. During interactions with DCA, DDSN, DJJ, DMH, DSS, and Justice Works, the youth's parent exhibited a commitment to the youth's care and wellbeing. The parent also expressed a desire to avoid foster care, preferring to maintain the child in the home until an appropriate therapeutic placement could be secured to meet the child's developmental and behavioral needs. DCA used its system-wide perspective to work with the agencies, make connections, and advocate for services to help the youth.

A safety plan was created to support the youth in the home, with DSS procuring sitter services and DDSN pursuing placements and ultimately providing ABA services in the home. DMH did not believe the youth should be served by them because the primary diagnoses were autism and intellectual disability. The DSS case remains open, primarily to ensure the family gets what they need, and DCA continues to be involved with court hearings, conversations, and follow-ups regarding the youth. At the time of the issuance of this report, the youth is doing well in the home with services in place.

This example is not provided as a model for how foster care should be used to provide services for children and families. Rather, it exemplifies the complexity of children's behavioral health needs that are impacting foster care and the child and family wellbeing system as a whole.

Small Test of Change

DCA Deputy Kayla Capps joined DSS, DJJ, and other organizations for an initiative called "Small Test of Change" that would test various strategies aimed at reducing challenges and improving outcomes for youth who are dually involved with both DJJ and DSS. The initiative was piloted in three counties selected by DSS (Anderson, Greenville, and Spartanburg). One of the strategies included a request to pool funding for preventative services to help teens at risk of entering foster care or DJJ as a result of status offenses and/or parent-child relational problems.

Joint Collaborative Trainings

In Spring 2023, DSS and DCA held a second round of joint collaborative trainings, building upon the successes of the first round held in 2021. During the trainings, DSS, GAL, and FCRD shared their agency/division missions, roles and responsibilities, priorities, and new initiatives. The purpose was to break down barriers, recognize mutual goals, and encourage interagency cooperation for the children and families they serve. Notable outcomes included:

- Distribution of an updated list of the DSS service array, ensuring GAL and FCRD staff were aware of which resources could be used to assist families in each county
- FCRD unveiled CAMS, its case management system launching in FY24, and shared a shift in how reviews are being conducted

KinGAP Law

During FY23, DSS successfully advocated for legislation to establish financial assistance payments to relatives and fictive kin after a court appoints them as a child's legal guardian. The KinGAP bill, which Governor McMaster signed into law, defines legal guardianship, provides an alternate permanent pathway for children, and helps kinship foster parents meet the child's needs.

Weekly Director Meetings

In September 2022, directors Leach and Whittle began meeting weekly to discuss system concerns as well as child-specific issues. These meetings have allowed the directors to share information and troubleshoot matters in real-time and have resulted in a positive professional relationship with effective communication.

GPS and FFPSA Court Training Project

FCRD Director Lindsey Taylor and GAL Program Director LaDara Depugh helped DSS provide training for court personnel and legal partners regarding DSS' Guiding Principle Standards (GPS) Practice Model and the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) by participating in project planning and facilitating focus group discussions. The training is intended to improve the ways in which the system interacts and works with families, particularly at child protection and permanency hearings concerning safety, reasonable efforts, and case planning, among other key activities.

Partnership with DSS's Michelle H. Co-Monitoring Team with DJJ Support

DCA participated in case reviews and discussion groups to address issues and experiences of youth who are dually involved with DSS and DJJ. DCA also engaged in conversations with other stakeholders and provided feedback to support DSS's work to improve the experiences and outcomes for these youth. DSS provided a report and co-hosted with the monitoring team a symposium to present the findings of this report in January 2023.

DCA regularly communicates with DSS leadership as follows:

- Weekly director-to-director meetings
- Individual meetings with Director Leach and DSS leadership
- Bench-Bar meetings
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children hearings
- Children's Justice Act Task Force
- Racial Justice Action Team
- Interagency staffings concerning specific children and youth
- Regularly-scheduled meetings with DJJ, DSS, DMH, and DHHS

GOVERNOR'S SCHOOL OF AGRICULTURE AT JOHN DE LA HOWE (JDLH)

No complaints about nor critical incident notifications from JDLH were received by the DCA in FY23. A visit to the campus was planned by the Investigations Unit in Fall or Winter of 2023.

SC SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF & THE BLIND (SCSDB)

No complaints about SCSDB were received by the DCA in FY23. However, three critical incident notifications were reported (see page 23). The Investigations Unit visited the campus and met with SCSDB President Jolene Madison and her leadership team during the fiscal year.

WIL LOU GRAY OPPORTUNITY SCHOOL (WLG)

No complaints about nor critical incident notifications from the WLG were received by the DCA in FY23. The Investigations Unit visited the campus and met with President Pat Smith and his leadership team during the fiscal year.



State of South Carolina Governor's Proclamation

WHEREAS, South Carolina's 11 million children, residing in the diverse communities across our state are our most valuable resource and will shape the future of our great state; and

WHEREAS, childhood trauma, including neglect and abuse, is a serious problem affecting every segment of our community, and finding solutions requires input and action from everyone; and

WHEREAS, childhood trauma can have long-term psychological, emotional, and physical effects that have lasting consequences for victims of neglect and abuse; and

WHEREAS, protective factors are conditions that reduce or eliminate risk and promote the social, emotional, and developmental well-being of children; and

WHEREAS, effective child neglect and abuse prevention activities succeed because of the partnerships created between child welfare professionals, educators, health, community, and faith-based organizations, law enforcement agencies, and families; and

WHEREAS, communities must make every effort to provide programs and activities that build strong children and families; and

WHEREAS, it is necessary to work together as a community in partnering to build awareness about child neglect and abuse and contribute to preventing the social and emotional well-being of children and families in a safe, stable, and nurturing environment; and

WHEREAS, prevention remains the best defense for our children and families; and

WHEREAS, in fiscal year 2021-2022, there were 9,031 substantiated Child Protective Services investigations with 15,519 children in South Carolina;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Henry McMaster, Governor of the great State of South Carolina, do hereby proclaim April 2023 as

CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION MONTH

throughout the state and encourage all South Carolinians to dedicate themselves to protecting the quality of life for all families and children so that we end child abuse and neglect.



Henry McMaster
HENRY McMASTER
GOVERNOR
STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA

STATE CHILD ADVOCATE

Amanda Whittle was appointed as South Carolina's first State Child Advocate and Director of the South Carolina Department of Children's Advocacy by Governor Henry D. McMaster on June 3, 2019. In addition to her role as the DCA's agency director, participating in events to educate the public, and evaluating the services provided by child-serving state agencies, the state child advocate has also been a member of leadership teams and committees related to improving services and outcomes for children in South Carolina:

CHAIR, SC BAR CHILDREN'S LAW COMMITTEE

Director Whittle was appointed as chair of the South Carolina Bar Children's Law Committee in June 2023. She was asked to create, and received approval to conduct, training during the January 2024 S.C. Bar Convention, and she is working with committee members and presenters to plan the committee's portion of the conference.

CHAIR, STATE CHILD FATALITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SCFAC)

Director Whittle was elected chair of the SCFAC in September 2022. As chair, Whittle reclaimed the committee's domain name and updated the website, which had not been updated in approximately three years. She modified meeting agendas to review child deaths by discreet cause/manner of death rather than by the SLED agent assigned to the investigation. She prepared data summaries for the committee members and facilitated the reviews of individual child deaths. She has advocated for a safety science approach to reviewing child deaths to strengthen the committee's ability to identify data, trends, gaps, and opportunities to reduce child fatalities. Whittle has also invited speakers to raise awareness about state initiatives and opportunities.

MEMBER, CHILDREN'S JUSTICE ACT TASK FORCE (SUBCOMMITTEE CHAIR)

During FY23, Director Whittle was a member of the Children's Justice Act Task Force and served as a subcommittee chairperson. She worked closely with this task force, which includes law

enforcement, the S.C. Network of Children's Advocacy Centers, and other agencies to identify training opportunities and coordinate investigation and prosecution of child abuse cases.

MEMBER, GOVERNOR'S JUVENILE JUSTICE ADVISORY COUNCIL (SUBCOMMITTEE CHAIR)

Director Whittle was appointed to the Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Council by Governor Henry D. McMaster, and she was invited to serve on the Council's Executive Committee by Council Chair John Holler. Whittle also served as chair of the Systems Improvement Subcommittee, which identifies opportunities for system support at the local and state levels, and as a member of the Grants Committee, which recommends grant awards to organizations that align with the requirements of the US Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

MEMBER, SUICIDE PREVENTION COALITION (SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBER)

In the absence of a chairperson, Director Whittle arranged and facilitated the Enhancing Access Subcommittee. This included creating agendas and inviting speakers to discuss 988 and mobile crisis from both systems and lived experience perspectives. She provided presentations to the coalition about suicide trends and the subcommittee's efforts regarding 988. At the end of FY23, Director Whittle was working on launching a children's mental health/suicide screener with DMH's Office of Suicide Prevention and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

MEMBER, 988 STATE ADVISORY BOARD

The 988 suicide and mental health crisis line was implemented in July 2022, and Director Whittle has continued to advocate not only for the call centers but also for the infrastructure of services to support individuals who experience suicidal ideations and mental health crises. She has created graphics and social media posts to raise awareness about 988.

MEMBER, BENCH-BAR COMMITTEE

Director Whittle serves on the Bench-Bar Committee facilitated through the University of South Carolina Children's Law Center. She has provided presentations about the DCA's work and the need for partnership regarding children's issues, particularly those involving juvenile justice, child welfare, mental illness, and intellectual disabilities.

MEMBER, HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE

Director Whittle serves on the Attorney General's Human Trafficking Task Force. She identified priorities for addressing the needs of survivors during state leadership summits and helped organize a panel on human trafficking (including a family court judge, a survivor, and a therapist) to speak at the MUSC Annual Judges and Attorneys Conference in December 2022.

MEMBER, JOINT CITIZENS & LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN (JCLCC)

Director Whittle was named an ex officio member of the JCLCC pursuant to legislation signed into law by Governor McMaster in Spring 2023. Whittle had already been regularly attending committee meetings, including their Fall 2022 hearings in each region of the state.

MEMBER, JOINT COUNCIL ON CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Director Whittle is a current member and former chair of this committee, which brings together state agencies, child-serving private providers, and individuals with lived experience to discuss children's issues, ensuring efficient and effective delivery of services to children and adolescents.

MEMBER, MASTER PLAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Director Whittle serves on the Master Plan Advisory Committee. More information about this committee is in the DHHS section of this report (see page 39).

MEMBER, MEDICAL CARE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Director Whittle serves on the Medical Care Advisory Committee. More information about this committee is in the DHHS section of this report (see page 40).

MEMBER, SAFE BABIES COURT STATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Director Whittle was identified as a Safe Babies Court Champion and has communicated with state leadership, judges, children's advocacy centers, and guardians ad litem about the benefits of working intentionally with families of young children to provide services with sustained, positive outcomes. During FY23, she attended the national convening of state leadership teams and wrote an article regarding Safe Babies Courts that was published in the South Carolina Bar's S.C. Lawyer Magazine. The program is currently in three counties, and is expected to double in FY24 as a result of additional state funding.

MEMBER, SOUTH CAROLINA BAR

Director Whittle is a licensed attorney and member in good standing with the South Carolina Bar. She is admitted to the United States District Court and the United States Supreme Court. During FY23, she completed 77 hours of continuing legal education, including a family court mediation and advanced negotiation workshop, as well as other sessions, such as "Mental Health Diversions from the Justice System Through Leadership, Collaboration, Building Momentum and Moving Forward with Lessons Learned," "The Future of Crisis Care," and "Systems, Struggles, and Strategies: Opportunities at the Justice and Behavioral Health Interface." She presented at the SC Bar Convention and the Family Court Hot Tips seminar about children's issues in family court.

Director Whittle issued one subpoena in FY23 in her role as the state child advocate and pursuant to the statutory authority of S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2280.

MEMBER, STATE CRISIS INTERVENTION ADVISORY BOARD

In February 2023, Director Whittle was selected to join the State Crisis Intervention Advisory Board "that will inform and guide the state's gun violence reduction programs/initiatives and approve the program and budget plans for the Byrne State Crisis Intervention Program (SCIP) grant funding." The board includes representatives from law enforcement, the community, courts, behavioral health providers, victim services advocates, and attorneys.

MEMBER, UNITED STATES OMBUDSMAN ASSOCIATION

While searching for a professional organization of state child advocates, Director Whittle found the United States Ombudsman Association. She has been a member of the Child and Family and Healthcare chapters since 2021, and she attended the annual conference in New Hampshire in FY23. She has benefited from learning and sharing with other states' offices of the child advocate and children's ombudsman agencies regarding a variety of topics including new investigator training, resource arrays, complex advocacy issues, and publicizing reports.

ORGANIZER, MEDICAL UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA (MUSC) ANNUAL JUDGES AND ATTORNEYS CONFERENCE

Director Whittle was invited by John H. Magill to serve as a conference organizer for the 2022 MUSC Annual Judges and Attorneys Conference, where she organized a panel on human trafficking (including a family court judge, a survivor, and a therapist). The seminar brings together legal and clinical experts to present the latest information on substance abuse and related mental health problems. It also addresses how the legal system responds to those issues.

STUDENT, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Director Whittle began a Certificate of Graduate Study in the area of Psychiatric Rehabilitation from the University of South Carolina School of Medicine's Neuropsychiatry Department in Fall 2022 to strengthen her recommendations to the governor and General Assembly regarding services provided to children by child-serving agencies. She also intends to use the certificate to enhance her abilities in creating and promoting a broad vision of reform for improved outcomes for children. Coursework focused on psychiatric disabilities, dual diagnosis of mental health and substance use, diagnosis and treatment of psychopathologies, and the fundamentals of psychiatric rehabilitation, among others. Her independent study will include an exploration of other states' child-serving systems, outreach to child welfare leaders across the country, research concerning prevalence, data, and best practices, and state and federal law, all of which will culminate in her proposal for enhancements to South Carolina's behavioral health system of care for children. This program of study complements her Juris Doctorate, certification as a Child Welfare Law Specialist through the National Association of Counsel for Children and the South Carolina Bar, and formal training as a family court mediator. She paid for this challenging program herself and attended classes during non-working hours.

PRESENTER/SPEAKER AT THE:

- Child Abuse Prevention Month press conference
- Children's Advocacy Centers Day press conference
- DCA agency-wide training sessions
- DCA's Continuum of Care statewide annual meeting
- DCA employee appreciation ceremony
- DCA executive leadership meetings
- DCA's FCRB state board meetings and annual conference
- DCA's Guardian ad Litem Program regional trainings and meetings
- Fostering the Family meetings
- Legislative delegation meetings and subcommittee hearings
- Medical University of South Carolina 39th Annual Judges and Attorneys Conference (moderator)
- Safe Sleep Summit
- S.C. Bar Convention 2023

ADDITIONAL COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS:

- DCA's The Advocate newsletter
- DCA's social media channels
- Media interviews, articles, and press conferences





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