



SUPREME COURT OF GEORGIA

*COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE
FOR CHILDREN*

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2006



*The Supreme Court of Georgia
Committee on Justice for Children
Annual Report for 2006*

Introduction	3
Committee Members	5
Advisory Members	5
Staff Members	6
Background	7
Goals & Plans	9
Improving Legal Representation	9
Establishing Data Measures for Juvenile Courts	10
Expediting Appeals of Terminations of Parental Rights (TPRs) ...	11
Increasing Placement Stability	12
Preventing Unnecessary Removals	13
Key Strategies	14
J4C Summits	14
Conferences and Training	15
Court Improvement Initiative (CII)	16
Court Observations & File Reviews	17
Case Plan Reporting System	17
Georgia Juvenile Courts Profile	19
Measures for Court Data	19
Summary	30
Endnotes	31



Introduction

In 2006, there were more than 13,000 children in the care of the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS).¹ For each of those individual children, the impact of their interaction with the court system can be immense. It is the judiciary who will ultimately decide if they go home, if they are placed in foster care or even if the parental rights of their parents will be terminated.

Furthermore, these children are some of our most vulnerable. They have high incidence of chronic medical problems and extraordinarily high rates of moderate to severe mental health problems.² They are failing miserably in school when compared to their peers who are not involved with the judicial system. The court-involved youth are twice as likely to repeat a grade, they score 15 to 20 points lower on standardized tests and large numbers will never graduate from high school.³

The impact on society is tremendous as well. We know that maltreated children are significantly more likely than non-maltreated children to become involved in delinquent or criminal behavior; that the prevalence of childhood abuse or neglect among delinquent and criminal populations is substantially greater than that in the general population and that delinquent youth with a history of abuse and neglect are at higher risk of continuing their delinquent behavior than delinquents without such a history.⁴

Research shows us that even once they reach adulthood, the intervening experiences with the judicial system can have consequences that last a lifetime. A significant number of these youth will face unemployment and even for those who do find jobs, they are frequently underemployed with studies showing they often earn less than the wages of a full-time worker receiving minimum wage.⁵ It is no surprise that these youth face a higher risk of poverty - leaving large numbers facing serious money problems including being unable to pay for food, being reliant on public aid, experiencing homelessness or resorting to illegal acts such as stealing, prostitution or selling drugs in order to meet their basic needs.⁶

Societal trends carried from the 1990s into the new millennium - a mobile population, increasingly complex family situations, single parent homes, decreased supervision of children, parents who are less available to their children, reduction in public benefits, substance abuse including the spread of methamphetamine and increasing incidence of serious mental health issues in younger youth - have created significant chal-

lenges for the judiciary. Judges are on the front-line, dealing with some of society's most difficult problems.⁷

These dynamics have resulted in judicial system challenges such as burgeoning child welfare roles, high case worker turnover, insufficient resources and a lack of uniformity in court practice and decision-making from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.⁸

Children come before courts for protection from further harm, for guidance on the path to self-sufficiency and productive adulthood and for timely decision-making for their future. Judges are the gatekeepers of our state's foster care system and must ultimately decide whether children in crisis will be separated from their families or if they can safely remain in their homes and communities. Today the issues coming before the courts are more complex, requiring more hearings and more people than ever before. To perform their expanded oversight role, courts need a clear vision of court procedures and research-based best practices to ensure justice for children.

It is the goal of the Supreme Court Committee on Justice for Children to assist all of Georgia's juvenile courts in their efforts to improve the processing of civil child abuse and neglect cases.

Committee Members

Justice P. Harris Hines (Chair), Supreme Court of Georgia
Dr. Normer Adams, Exec. Dir. GA Association of Homes and
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Ms. Isabel Blanco, DFCS Deputy Director of Field Operations
Ms. Kathleen Dumitrescu, Esq., Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation
Judge Tom Rawlings, Juvenile Court Middle Judicial Circuit
Judge Jackson Harris, Superior Court Blue Ridge Judicial Circuit
Ms. DeAlvah Simms, Esq., State Child Advocate
Mr. Duaine Hathaway, Exec. Dir. Georgia CASA
Judge Lawton Stephens, Superior Court Western Judicial Circuit
Judge Michael Key, Juvenile Court Coweta Judicial Circuit
Judge Peggy Walker, Juvenile Court Douglas Judicial Circuit
Ms. Lisa Lariscy, Director Gwinnett County DFCS
Mr. W. Terence Walsh, Esq., Alston & Bird LLP
Judge James Morris, Senior Judge of the Courts of Georgia
Judge Desiree Peagler, Juvenile Court Stone Mountain Judicial Circuit

Advisory Members

Judge Steven Andrews, President, Council of Juvenile Court Judges
Judge Velma Tilley, President Elect, Council of Juvenile Court Judges
Judge Steven Teske, Vice President, Council of Juvenile Court Judges
Judge Robert V. Rodatus, Secretary, Council of Juvenile Court Judges
Judge Ellen McElyea, Treasurer, Council of Juvenile Court Judges
Judge James McDonald Jr., Immediate Past President,
Council of Juvenile Court Judges
Heidy Lough, Director of Family Services, Latin American Association
Attorney Lea Thompson, Juvenile Law Committee, State Bar of Georgia
Gwendolyn B. Skinner, Director, Division of MHDDAD
Attorney Suparna Malempati Joshi, Director, Fulton County Child
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Background

The Supreme Court of Georgia Committee on Justice for Children (formerly the Child Placement Project) was created in 1995 to assess and improve court proceedings involving abused and neglected children in our courts. The Committee on Justice for Children (J4C) is supported by the Georgia Administrative Office of the Courts and funded by federal Court Improvement Project (CIP) grant funds from the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children and Families, Children's Bureau.

Each recipient state of CIP funds is required to complete an assessment of court improvement progress periodically, to make recommendations to improve the court system and implement the recommended improvements. The first assessment was conducted in 1995-1996 and set goals related to record keeping and court management, development of standards of practice, education of juvenile court stakeholders, access to representation and increases in state funding for juvenile courts. To see a copy of the 1996 Final Report, go to <http://www.georgiacourts.org/agencies/cpp/publications.php>.

Over the past ten years, much progress has been made in Georgia's juvenile courts. There is now state funding for juvenile court judges' salaries, there has been an increasing standardization of record keeping and court management including the use of model orders by many courts, aspirational guidelines were developed for many of the juvenile court participants, a court improvement initiative was begun to foster development of best practices and there has been a general increase in interest and commitment to Georgia's juvenile courts. Still, we have a long way to go. Some of our goals have needed refinement as we have advanced towards their completion and other new goals have shown themselves to be equally worthy. As we close out a decade of court improvement work and enter into a new era for the Court Improvement Project, J4C is committed to the following five goals:

1. Improving the quality of representation for all parties
2. Expediting the appellate process for TPR cases
3. Developing, reporting and actively using data measures for courts
4. Increasing placement stability for children in foster care
5. Preventing unnecessary removals of children from their homes

It is hoped that this annual report will provide insight into the past year's work but also into our plans for the future. Feedback is always welcome.

Goals and Plans

1. IMPROVING LEGAL REPRESENTATION

In order to improve legal representation, J4C will seek to:

Establish standards of practice for all attorneys practicing in juvenile court.

Moving from aspirational guidelines to standards of practice will provide the necessary guidance and increased professionalism for representation of any party in a child's court case. The American Bar Association, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the National Association of Counsel for Children have already written standards of practice that could be adopted in this state. J4C is currently working with the Georgia Public Defender Standards Council (GPDSC) to develop standards for Georgia's parent attorneys and with the Georgia Association of Counsel for Children (GACC) to develop standards for Georgia's child attorneys. Work continues, as well, on representation by Special Assistant Attorneys Generals (SAAGs).

Ensure attorney access to high-quality training that aligns with the above mentioned standards.

Institutionalizing education for attorneys representing parties in children's cases is one of the best ways to improve representation.⁹ Both beginner (before the first case is accepted) and advanced training needs to be offered at least twice a year. In addition, trial skills training (NITA type)¹⁰ can and should be developed which will also cultivate expert attorneys and trainers for Georgia. J4C currently sponsors semi-annual trainings for all juvenile court attorneys, presents at conferences across the state, provides financial support for trainings and is currently launching J4C summits which incorporate stakeholder training.

Develop a method for providing quality assurance.

Several states have developed quality assurance instruments that assist with reviews of attorney case files, observations of attorneys in court and interviews to test knowledge and practice. Those instruments could be developed for Georgia's law and piloted with an experienced, respected practitioner. The Georgia-specific-instruments would be the foundation of a system of quality assurance for monitoring compliance with stan-

dards of practice and identifying excellence in representation. As with development of standards of practice, J4C is working closely with GPDSC and GACC to develop quality assurance systems.

2. ESTABLISHING DATA MEASURES FOR JUVENILE COURTS

For civil child abuse and neglect cases, state and federal law establishes three goals for children; that they shall: 1) be safe, 2) have permanency and 3) have their well-being needs met. All systems need measurements to ensure the end goal or product is being accomplished. In order to establish outcome measures and thereby improve health, safety and well-being for children, J4C will seek to:

Establish a standard set of data measures in consultation with federal, state and local leaders.

Georgia's Division of Family and Children's Services and assorted juvenile courts already collect a variety of data on a regular basis. In addition, J4C was a part of the federal Strengthening Abuse and Neglect Courts of America (SANCA) data project over the last two years. J4C also has a close working relationship with the newly formed Fostering Court Improvement Project which is dedicated to using data measures to improve juvenile court outcomes on a national scale. Guidance and materials for creating measures for juvenile courts already exists within the National Center for State Courts and the American Bar Association.¹¹ The task for J4C in the coming year is to determine the most relevant measures for our work and to develop a reporting system that is most relevant and useful to our courts so that these measures become a catalyst for change.

Facilitate local J4C summits at the county and circuit level around court measures.

Much of the Georgia court system operates under a mixture of county and state funding. These summits will have many goals including serving as a vehicle for sharing individual county and circuit data and helping juvenile court stakeholders understand the power in this data. Working with court measures at the local and regional level with all the stakeholders instead of a selected few attending a state conference can be the most effective way to get the most “buy-in” for using the data measures as a basis for needed reforms and resources.

3. EXPEDITING APPEALS OF TERMINATIONS OF PARENTAL RIGHTS (TPRS)

“Timeliness is a consideration in the resolution of all court disputes, but it is particularly important when children are involved and forced to remain in unstable, and perhaps violent, situations.”¹² When parent-child relationships remain in legal limbo, they are unable to provide security and stability for a developing child.¹³ The harm caused by such insecurity and lack of permanency is further exacerbated when a child bonds with a potential family and is later removed from the care of those parental figures; such a child's “emotional attachments become increasingly shallow and indiscriminate.”¹⁴ Georgia's data shows children are left in unstable placements due both to delays in preparation of the record and to delays once the appeal has been docketed. From 2003 to 2005, about a fifth of the children whose TPR cases were appealed, were left in limbo for more than a year.¹⁵

J4C has spent the last year gathering information on this situation and investigating possible solutions. We are currently in the midst of discussions with appellate court judges and working to reach a consensus on the best way to tackle this problem. A final solution has not been determined but some of the strategies Georgia may consider for addressing this problem include:

Track the current time for appeals and report back to the courts.

Only when we take the time to measure performance, can we truly know how we are doing and if our efforts to change are being successful. Furthermore, we need to delve deeper into the data to determine the specific points in the appellate process that slow it down or bring it to a halt. Before we can implement effective reforms, we have to establish the causes of the delays such as transcript preparation, extensions, filing problems, docketing or conflicts.

Evaluate the processes implemented in other states and determine if any are appropriate for Georgia.

Court systems across the nation have been addressing this issue and we can benefit from their work by examining the different procedures used by other states' courts and the effectiveness of those procedures. We know the judiciary in Ohio, Alaska and Kentucky amended their court rules to shorten time frames. In Tennessee and Texas, procedures for

expediting TPR cases have been enhanced to ensure they have the speediest turnaround of all appellate cases. In Massachusetts a one-justice initial review system has been implemented decreasing appeal times by an average of 2.1 months and in Iowa the entire appellate process for TPR cases was revised and simplified resulting in a reduction in average time from TPR to final appellate order from 397 days to 90 days.

Raise awareness of the issue and build support throughout the judicial system.

Simply informing judicial system participants of the crucial role they can play in improving outcomes for children can bring about change. Presentations to, or communications with, groups such as court reporters, court clerks, attorneys and judges may result in increased attention to and voluntary expedition of these cases.

4. INCREASING PLACEMENT STABILITY

Frequent moves can have a negative impact on a child's educational, health and social development. The strategies the Commission may investigate for increasing placement stability include:

Exploring the judiciary's role in ensuring placement stability for children in state custody.

Judges are charged by federal and state law to make sure that reasonable efforts are being made to ensure permanency of children in state custody, but how far this authority goes in directing placement is still a source of debate. Recent Georgia appellate decisions have clarified that Georgia's existing statute does not allow for any judicial role in placement. The J4C believes a system of checks and balances between the executive and judicial branch is crucial and thus J4C will seek legislative change to bring Georgia more inline with other states regarding placement oversight.

Protocols need to be developed and studied for effectiveness in preventing placement moves.

A DFCS sponsored study revealed that 92% of children who received the preferred placement according to their assessment remained stable at year one.¹⁶ In comparison, 68% of those that did not receive the preferred placement were stable at year one. The conclusion drawn at the

end of the study was that following the recommended placement equals great placement stability. Georgia judges need to make sure that the DFCS assessment is presented in court in a timely manner and that the recommended placement is followed and if not, explain why on the record.

5. PREVENTING UNNECESSARY REMOVALS

This is the newest area of work for J4C and thus it will be a year of exploration and learning. As we strive to prevent unnecessary removals, J4C will:

Study existing research on successful prevention programs.

Existing public health research supports the efficacy of nurse home visit programs. We need to educate ourselves about this work and support its expansion across Georgia.

Exploring the judiciary's role in preventing unnecessary removals.

Removal rates vary widely from county to county. This data needs to be examined and courts that are successfully avoiding unnecessary removals need to be studied. The most promising tactics should be shared across the state.

KEY STRATEGIES

J4C SUMMITS

As part of the strategic plan for the new training grant monies, the Committee on Justice for Children (J4C) is planning a series of training summits designed to improve performance and introduce resources at the local juvenile court level. The first summit is scheduled for February 23, 2007 in the Appalachian Judicial Circuit. J4C intends to conduct a Justice for Children summit in each judicial circuit across the state during the five year grant period.

Each summit will be a day-long training at which J4C staff present substantive trainings, review court and agency data and performance trends, and facilitate the development of local multidisciplinary action plans. The curriculum of the summits is modeled after similar training initiatives being conducted in other states and at the national level. Within the framework of a uniform curriculum, the specific training content of each summit will be tailored to meet the needs of each judicial circuit. Summits will include opening remarks from Supreme Court of Georgia Chief Justice Leah Ward Sears as well as Justice Harris Hines. Participants will be shown a motivational video and will be presented with a substantive training on issues related to permanency for children. AFCARS data will also be reviewed with each court and followed by a facilitated discussion of the site's positive performance trends and areas of challenge.

Summits are structured so that they will be interactive. This is accomplished through various group exercises in which participants come together to discuss what practices and policies within their court need improvement. From that discussion, the groups will develop action plans that will guide their improvement efforts. J4C staff will conduct periodic follow-up with the counties based on the action plan and assist the workgroups to overcome barriers to implementing the reforms.

CONFERENCES AND TRAINING

J4C recognizes that education and training are critical strategies to increase awareness of the issues we are tackling and promote improvement in practices of juvenile courts across the state. Thus, promoting cross-training and multidisciplinary learning is a key strategy that intersects with all of the projects, goals and plans of the office.

In an effort to develop a pool of experts in Georgia, we promote state and national conferences and provide financial support for attendance by juvenile court judges and members of the J4C Committee. J4C staff and Committee members regularly respond to requests to present at local and statewide conferences and trainings to share knowledge and expertise in a number of areas. Additionally, J4C resources are available to support targeted improvement efforts of local courts. We reimburse the cost of meals to promote attendance at regularly held stakeholder meetings or trainings hosted by local courts and are available to present substantive trainings on topics selected by the local juvenile court judge.

Additionally, J4C hosts two child welfare attorney trainings annually at the State Bar and partners with other agencies to host trainings, such as GPDSC's parent attorney trainings, OCA's annual Child Advocate Conference, GAHSC's annual Child Placement Conference, and Georgia CASA's annual conference. At the state and local level, we assist in identifying national and state experts on various topics to involve in educational opportunities. J4C funds also support videotaping or offering live webcasts of various training opportunities.

Also, J4C resources are leveraged to launch projects initiating with the Court Improvement Initiative and to support projects originating with CJCJ's Permanency Planning Committee. For example, the Visitation Protocol developed as a CII project was the focus of a full-day seminar in January 2007, and our Georgia State University partner has expressed interest in replicating the seminar at other locations statewide. In March 2007, J4C will staff and support a judicial workshop convened to revise the citizen panel review process in the state. Similarly, J4C resources are dedicated to successful implementation of our Justice for Children Summit program, which will be launched February 23, 2007 in the Appalachian Judicial Circuit. J4C intends to deliver this program, which offers substantive training on permanency issues, a report on the host site's data trends, and facilitated action planning, in each of the state's judicial circuits over the course of the next five years.

COURT IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE (CII)

CII-Deprivation

The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) administers the Georgia Court Improvement Initiative, a joint project of the Council of Juvenile Court Judges of Georgia (CJCJ) and J4C. It is a part of a nationwide effort to improve how courts handle child abuse and neglect cases. CII courts come together to share practices, documents and ideas with their peers who are all devoting time and energy to doing the best job possible in the always challenging field of child welfare. Judges are often isolated in their individual courts and the CII provides a forum for safe dialogue and shared learning. Participating courts gather together twice each year to report on their improvement efforts and to discuss important practice issues. For 2006, there were ten sites participating in the project. They were:

Focus Sites:

Appalachian Judicial Circuit
Bartow County
Clayton County
Cobb County
DeKalb County
Fulton County
Hall/Dawson Counties
Houston County
Paulding County
Troup County

Lead Judge:

John Worcester-Holland
Velma Tilley
K. Van Banke
Gregory Poole
Desiree Peagler
Belinda Edwards
Cliff Jolliff
Deborah Edwards
Sandra Miller
R. Michael Key

Judge Velma Tilley served as Chair of the GCII - Deprivation project for 2006. For 2007, Judge Cliff Jolliff will assume the responsibilities of Chair. Lori Bramlett is the Coordinator of the CII - Deprivation project.

The CII -Deprivation group has written several publications that are available online at www.GAJusticeforChildren.org.

Recently, the participating courts decided to merge the work of the CII into the Measures for Courts (M4C) project, the goal being to use regular measurement and outcome data to direct their work and to ensure practice change actually leads to positive outcomes for children

and families. Beth Locker, who is the Director of the Measures for Courts project, will supervise the CII project beginning in 2007. Also, in 2007, the CII-Deprivation project will bring on board two new counties: Chatham County (led by Judge John Beam) and Douglas County (led by Judge Peggy Walker).

CII-Delinquency

In addition to the CII work focused on child abuse and neglect matters, the J4C has recently lent support to a CJCJ Delinquency subcommittee to help them launch a delinquency focused CII project. Work is currently underway to create Guidelines for Georgia Courts in Delinquency Cases. This work is being spearheaded by Judges Patricia Stone (Chatham County) and Steve Teske (Clayton County).

Judge R. Michael Key serves as the overall Chair of the Court Improvement Initiative for both the deprivation and delinquency projects.

COURT OBSERVATIONS & FILE REVIEWS

Over the past five summers, interns and J4C staff have reviewed child deprivation case files and observed hearings in selected counties to assess the effect of court improvement efforts. The instruments used for assessing the files were developed by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the American Bar Association and modified for Georgia law. In 2006, five counties agreed to participate in our assessment efforts: Cherokee, Clayton, Floyd, Thomas and Walker.

CASE PLAN REPORTING SYSTEM

The Case Plan Reporting System (CPRS) was launched in 2002 as an on-line database collaboration between the courts and DFCS. Both DFCS and court personnel enter case tracking and case planning information directly into CPRS. The on-line database allowed case managers and supervisors to do away with handwritten case plans and move to consistent documentation across all 159 counties. J4C supports CPRS through user training around the state, technical assistance and incorporating user feedback into system updates.

As the state begins the process of migrating the 159 counties to a central, child welfare Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information

System (SACWIS), CPRS is evolving as a court tool with regular information transfers to and from the new SACWIS system. The plan is for the post-SACWIS CPRS will allow juvenile court judges to review, approve or reject the latest case plan, access placement and hearing information and access reports addressing court processes such as due process requirements and timeliness.

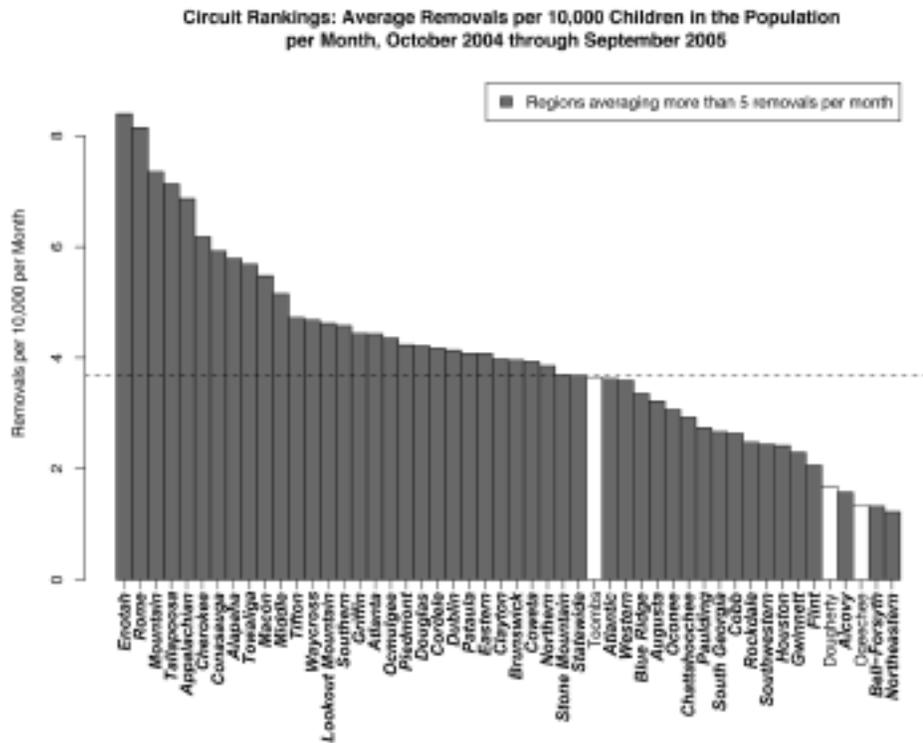
GEORGIA JUVENILE COURTS PROFILE

MEASURES FOR COURTS DATA

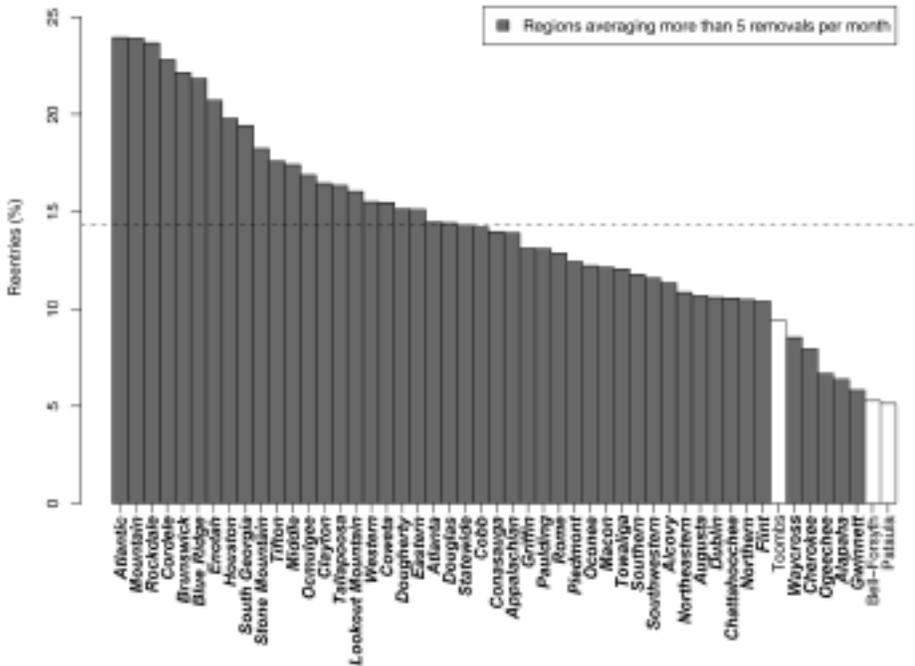
In collaboration with the Division of Family and Children Services and with the Office of the Child Advocate, J4C is able to access data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) for the benefit of the juvenile courts. With this data, the courts can see information of removals, in care population and discharges. The basic statewide data is presented below, broken down by judicial circuit with the inclusion of some individual county or circuit data to illustrate the available data and its potential utility.

NOTE: AFCARS data is reported to the federal government in six-month increments, with data being sent each March and September. As a result, data is not able to be examined by calendar year. Rather, a year runs from October 1st to the following September 30th. Thus for this report, whenever “this year” is referenced, it is for the time period October 1, 2005 to September 30, 2006.

REMOVALS

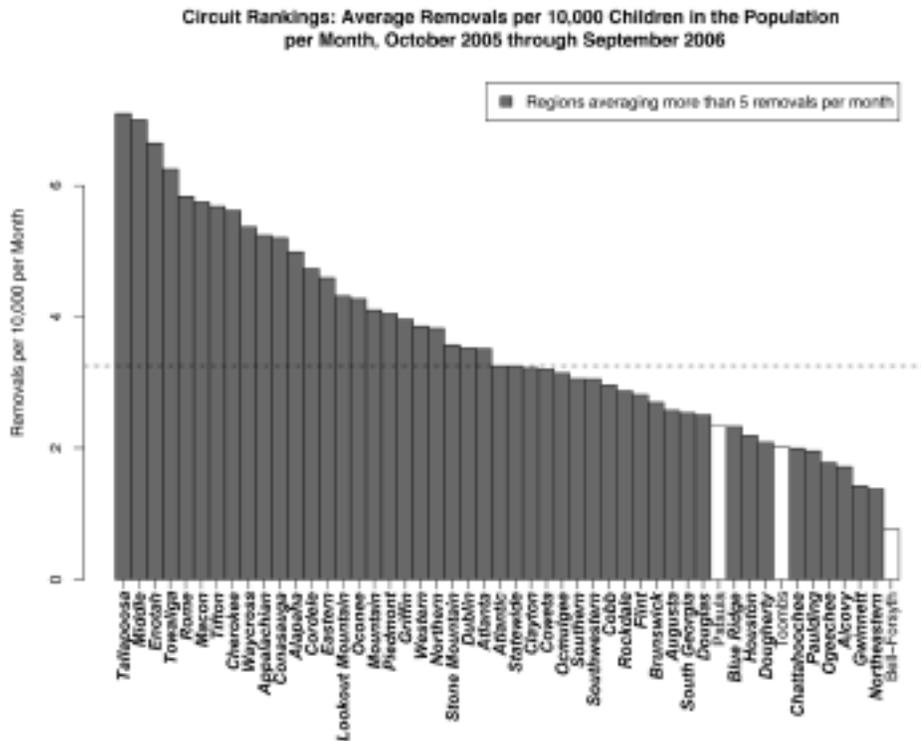


Circuit Rankings: Reentries to Foster Care as Percentage of Removals, October 2005 through September 2006



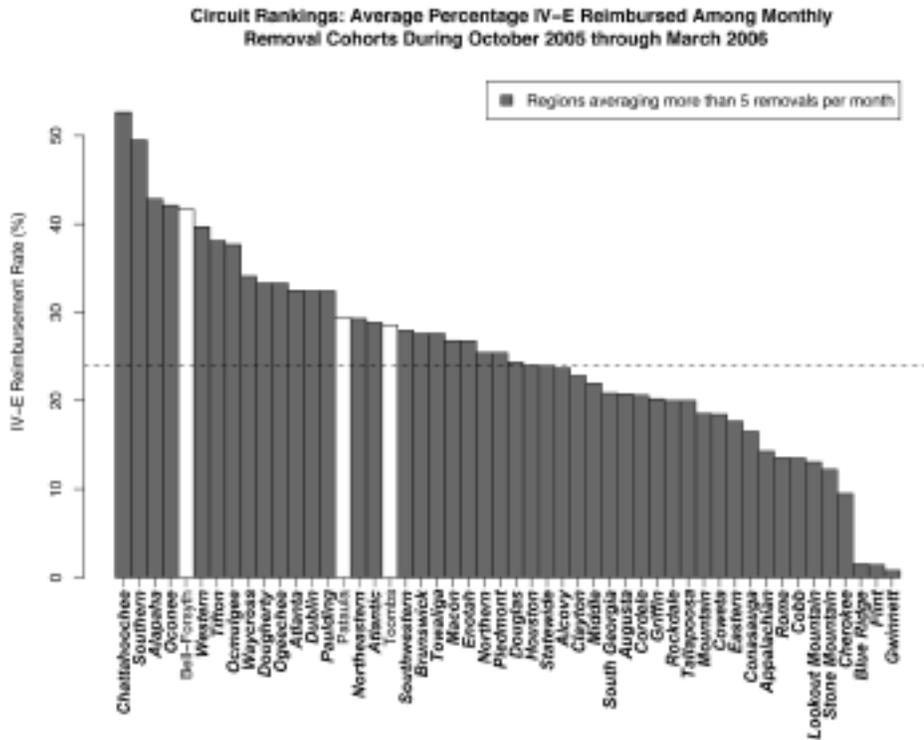
The charts above represent average monthly removals per capita broken down by judicial circuit for the past two years. The judicial impact on a county's rate of removing children from their homes is complex with many factors or decisions in play. Through discussions with various courts, J4C has discovered that courts vary in terms of how high they set the evidentiary bar for removals and we hypothesize that such differences in practice are one of the causes of the differences in removal rate. The issue of removals is one we have discussed across the state this past year and we find it interesting to note how the data has change in that time. The overall rate of removal has dropped from 3.9 to 3.2 per 10,000 in the population. The three circuits with the highest removal rates last year have all decreased their standing.

REENTRIES



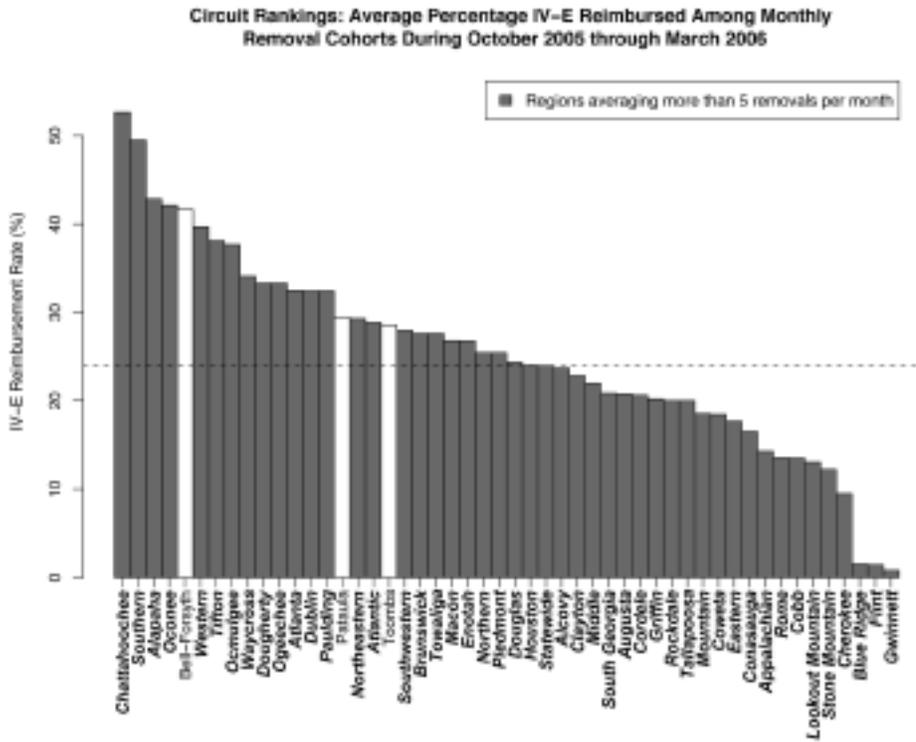
Even as we work to prevent unnecessary removals, we are always mindful that the failure to remove a child from a dangerous situation can have disastrous consequences. While the executive branch's role is more extensive in preventing harm to children, by taking referrals properly, doing investigations timely with experienced staff and risk assessment tools, the judicial branch is equally responsible for safety once a child's case has been presented before a judge for an evidentiary ruling. Current federal and state law states that safety of a child is the number one consideration in all child welfare actions. Thus it is crucial that the judicial branch is able to understand safety at the county level in order to know if a child in that county is safe from re-abuse or re-entry. We are currently working with DFCS and the Georgia State University School of Social Work to gain access to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCAANDS) which contains the relevant safety measures data but until that process is complete, we must settle for lesser measures of safety. One of those is reentry rate. By comparing the reentry rate chart to the removal rate chart you can see that they do not correspond, i.e. the circuit that is removing the most children does not have the lowest reentry rate so while they are perhaps being extra cautious on the decision to leave a child in their home, they do not appear to be equally cautious about returning children to their homes. Information like this has spawned many important discussions and we look forward to a much fuller debate once we have access to the safety data.

IV-E REIMBURSEMENT



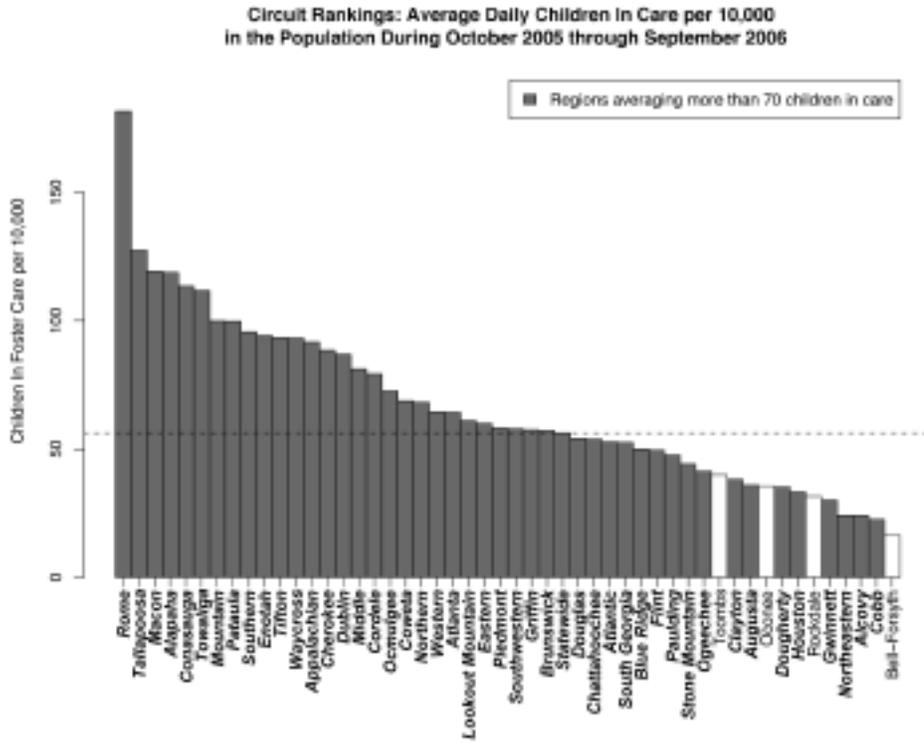
Title IV-E reimbursement is very important for the state foster care system as well as for the individual children. Courts play a role in making sure that court orders in deprived cases have the necessary legal findings and children's hearing are completed in a timely manner. There are other factors that go into determining a child's eligibility for title IV-E reimbursement that can only be addressed by the executive branch. In 2005-2006, Georgia's reimbursement rate was 24%, down from 38% the previous year.

IN-CARE POPULATION



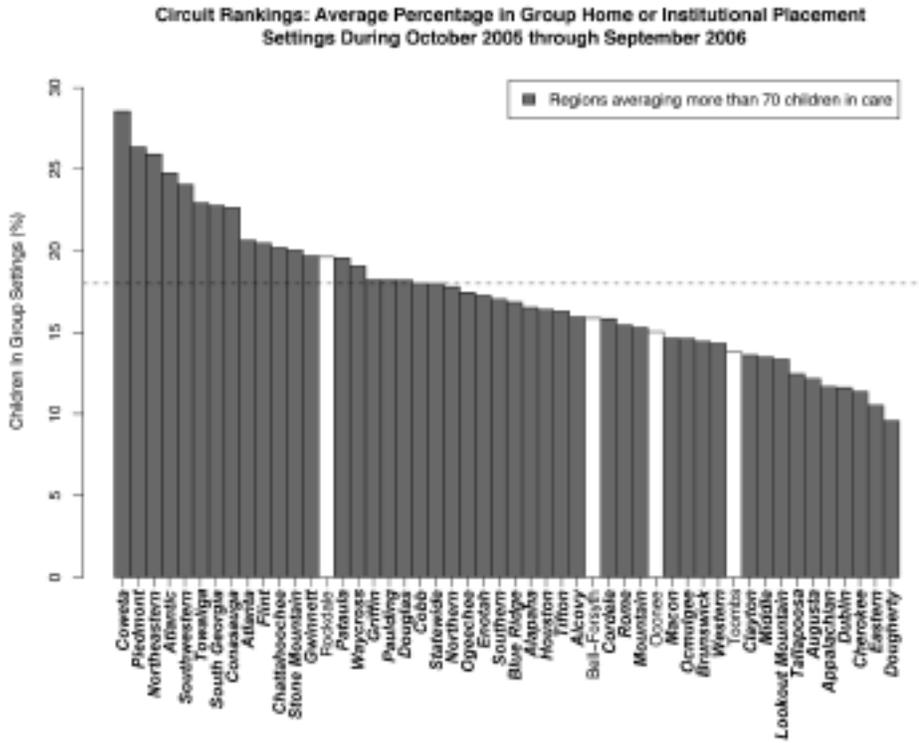
The above chart shows the average daily children in care. This number is influenced by two key factors, the number of children taken into care (removed) and the length of stay in care.

OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT DAYS



The chart above represents time in foster care broken down by judicial circuit from high to low. This is a crude measurement of timeliness but can be used to get an idea of where areas in the state are having children spend longer periods in foster care than others.

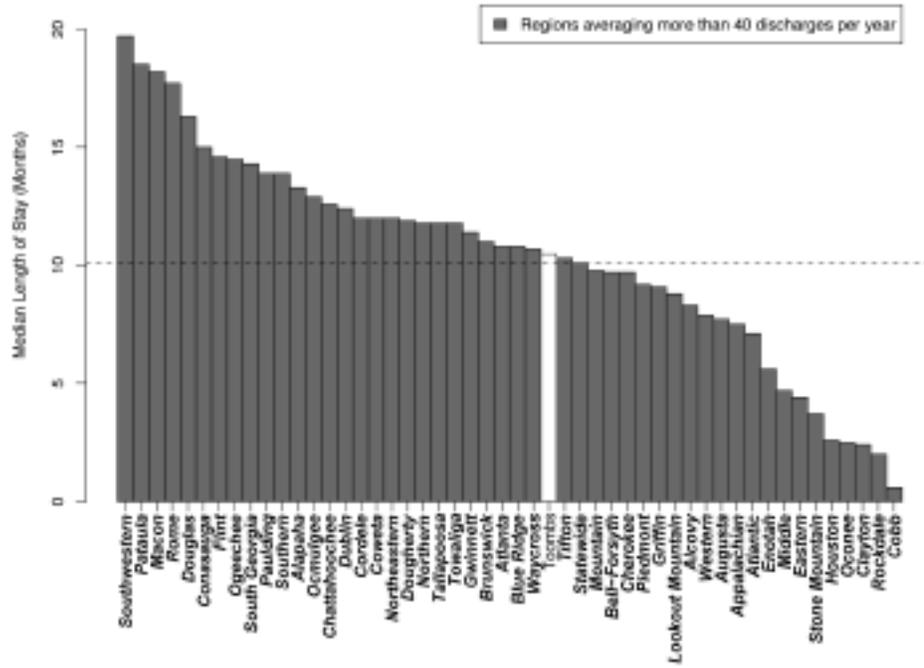
LENGTH OF STAY



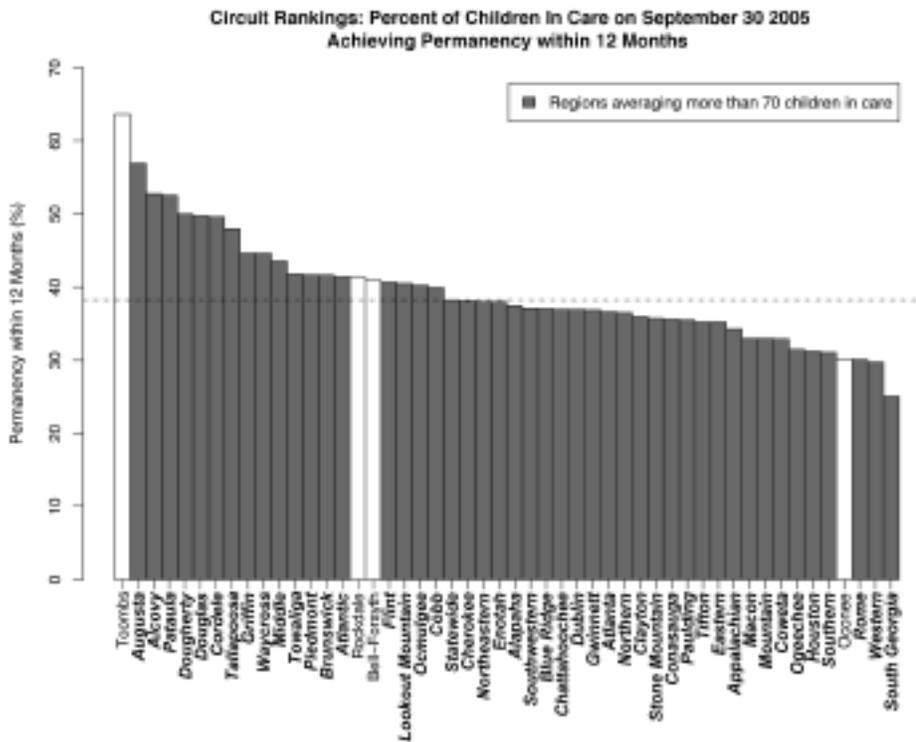
Georgia's data for median length of stay shows vast differences in timeliness from times as low as one or two months to times in excess of two years. Such vast differences make this an area of great interest for future study.

CONGREGATE CARE

**Circuit Rankings: Median Length of Stay in Foster Care
Among All Children Discharged During Latest 12 Months**

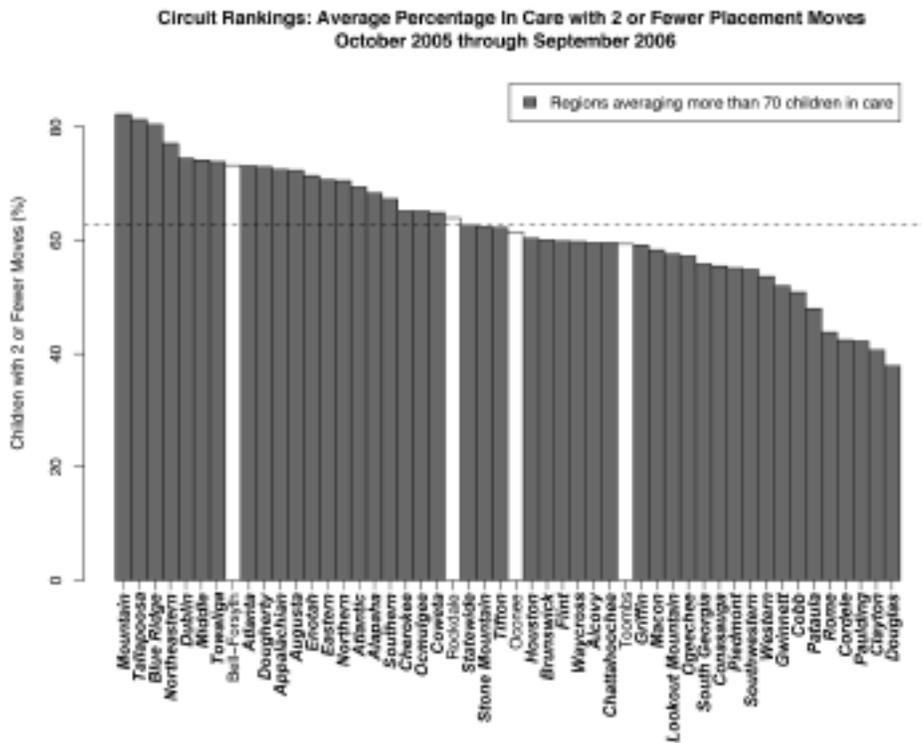


PLACEMENT STABILITY



Placement stability is very important for children in foster care. The Y axis on the chart below represents the percentage of children who have experienced 2 or fewer placement moves while in care. The state average for this year was 63%. One note of caution however, Georgia was found to be over reporting on this placement stability measure during the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) in 2001. A review of the paper DFCS files showed more frequent moves than what was being recorded in the AFCARS data. With Georgia undergoing round two of the CFSR in 2007, we should soon know if Georgia continues to under report placement moves or if the data quality has improved.

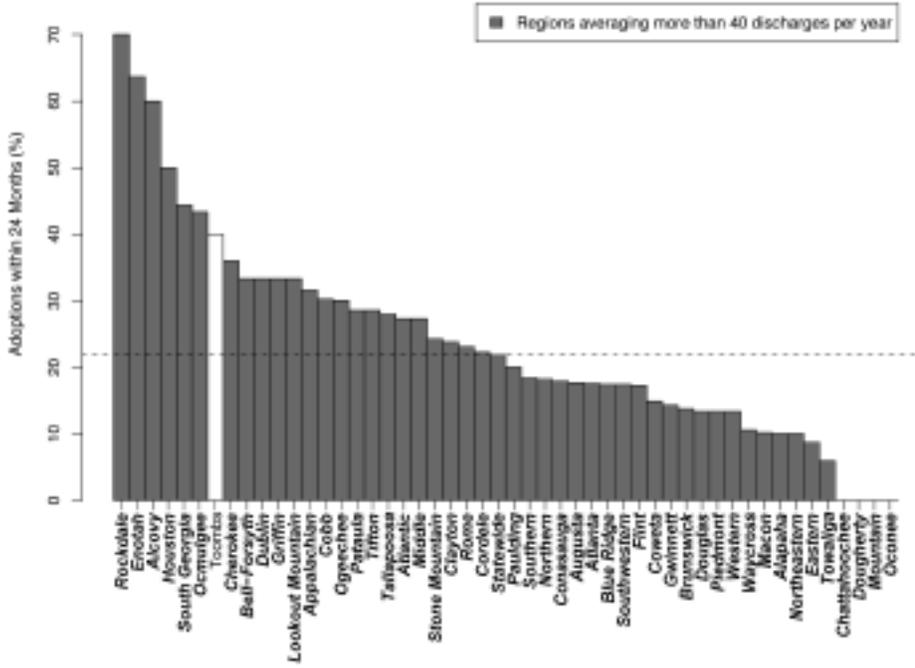
PERMANENCY



Achieving permanency for the children who come into state custody is a crucial goal of the entire child welfare system. One measure of permanency to be considered is how many children achieve permanency within a twelve month period. The above chart represents a snapshot in time. If we look at every child who was in foster care on September 30, 2005 and follow those same children for the next 12 months, we can measure what percentage of them achieve permanency in that time frame. The chart above shows a range from a low of 25% achieving permanency to well over 50%.

ADOPTION TIMELINESS

Circuit Rankings: Percentage Adopted within 24 Months
Among Adoptions Finalized During Latest 12 Months



Summary

During the past decade, major shifts in law and policy have ushered in positive changes for court-involved children, but with increasing numbers of children coming into foster care, there is still much work to be done. Judicial leadership is crucial to provide children with appropriate protection, permanency plans, due process for parents and children as well as timely resolution of their cases. Much of the work done by J4C is part of an effort to be accountable to the children and families served by the juvenile courts and the child welfare system as well as to provide quality assurance monitoring to the juvenile courts toward their improvement efforts.

As much as this document reports on the past, it also reflects our direction for the future. It is the clear intent of the federal government that juvenile courts embrace data measures and hold themselves accountable for the work they do. The Committee on Justice for Children welcomes such a charge and will use future annual reports to share Georgia's progress in improving its juvenile court system.

Endnotes

¹On September 30, 2006 there were 13,348 children in care in the state of Georgia. See Georgia's statewide data submission from the DFCS Evaluation and Reporting Section to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), Federal DHHS ACF. Available at: http://www.fosteringcourtimprovement.org/ga/County/incare_summary.html.

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⁷*Juvenile Delinquency Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Juvenile Delinquency Cases*. (2005) at 14. National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

⁸*Id.*

⁹*Representation for Children and Parents in Dependency Proceedings*, (2005), at 4. Pew Commission, Available at: <http://pewfostercare.org/research/docs/Representation.pdf>.

¹⁰See <http://www.nita.org/>.

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¹⁴Calculations are based on data provided by the Georgia Appellate Courts for all cases reported between 01/01/2003 and 12/19/2005. The time measured is from Notice of Appeal to Final Judgment.

¹⁵First Placement/Best Placement Evaluation, Final Conclusions From Initial Demonstration Counties (January 1 1998 - October 31, 2001) February 01, 2003 at 16. Georgia Division of Family and Children Services.