

20  
25

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 INTERIM STATE CHILD ADVOCATE

*LaDara Depugh*

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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 2025 Annual Report, which covers July 1, 2024, through June 30, 2025.

*The Department of Children's Advocacy and its divisions continued their hard work and commitment to the children of this state through direct advocacy and through recommendations that will improve the child welfare system overall.*

I was appointed as the interim state child advocate following the departure of Amanda Whittle, South Carolina's first state child advocate and director of the DCA, on April 21, 2025. Since 2019, agency leadership has been committed to standing up an agency that would truly make a difference in the lives of children. What we have been able to accomplish during that time has far exceeded my expectations.

We started on day one with a single point of contact for the agency's newly-launched 800 number to a staff today of more than 20 in our System Improvement Division, which responds to complaints and concerns regarding services for children. In FY25 the System Improvement team conducted almost 1,750 investigations into complaints and critical incidents, and I am grateful for the General Assembly's funding for FTEs for this important work.

I have witnessed how DCA's Guardian ad Litem Program, Foster Care Review Division, and Continuum of Care have worked with intentionality and focus to positively impact children and families. I have been grateful for the staff and volunteers who advocate every day for abused and

neglected children, for youth with behavioral and emotional challenges, and for children with complex needs and multi-agency involvement.

This report highlights numerous examples of staff working creatively and passionately to find new resources, new opportunities, and new community partners that will improve outcomes for children served by state agencies in South Carolina. Their efforts keep DCA moving forward in its mission to champion advocacy, accountability, and service.

Perhaps one of this agency's proudest achievements over the last six years has been the approval of a state-operated psychiatric residential treatment facility for seriously mentally ill justice-involved youth. This multi-year effort, involving intensive coordination among several state agencies, culminated with a groundbreaking ceremony in FY25. It is a concrete example of our vision to increase the array of integrated services and placements that will improve outcomes for children and youth.

Although we have achieved much, there is still much to do. And even as the agency's leadership changes, we eagerly look forward to continuing our work in FY26. The Department of Children's Advocacy is an essential part of South Carolina's efforts to create a sustainable system of care that will provide our youngest citizens with more opportunities, stability, and security that will inevitably lead to a better future for them and for our state.

In addition to the strategic goals and targets contained in the agency's FY25 Annual Accountability Report, this report provides a comprehensive review of the Department of Children's Advocacy's goals and accomplishments and the State Child Advocate's activities, pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2270.



LADARA DEPUGH, MA

*Interim State Child Advocate,  
SC Department of Children's Advocacy*

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## CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY OVERVIEW

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### 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 first 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. 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

DCA administers:

- Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem Program (GAL)
- Continuum of Care (COC)
- Foster Care Review Division (FCRD)
- System Improvement (SI)

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 2024 - 2025

DCA's total FY 2024-2025 budget was **\$22.6M**, of which **\$11.6M** came from general funds:

### FISCAL YEAR 2024 - 2025 BUDGET

Table 1

| State Funded Program Title            | General             | Other               | Federal  | Total               |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------|---------------------|
| Administration and System Improvement | \$389,093           | -                   | -        | \$389,093           |
| Guardian ad Litem Program             | \$4,095,032         | \$6,479,223         | -        | \$10,574,255        |
| Continuum of Care                     | \$1,898,065         | \$1,053,372         | -        | \$2,951,437         |
| Foster Care Review Division           | \$766,894           | \$851,802           | -        | \$1,618,696         |
| Investigations Unit                   | \$1,011,283         | \$2,727             | -        | \$1,014,010         |
| State Employer Contributions          | \$3,221,853         | \$2,659,743         | -        | \$5,881,596         |
| Agency Workstations (non-recurring)   | \$183,465           | -                   | -        | \$183,465           |
| <b>Total</b>                          | <b>\$11,565,685</b> | <b>\$11,046,867</b> | <b>-</b> | <b>\$22,612,552</b> |

## FY 2025 - 2026

DCA's FY26 budget request was submitted in September 2024 and included the nine items listed below, totaling **\$3,204,556 in recurring** and **\$463,150 in non-recurring** funds. All requests align with goals and targets in DCA's Annual Accountability Report and with its mission, vision, and statutory mandates. For FY25, the agency received a combined 13 of 31 requested FTEs for SI and GAL.

### RECURRING:

#### SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT ADVOCACY **\$1,003,498**

To hire nine FTEs to create capacity to respond to complaints and critical incidents and to pilot a direct representation project.

#### BEST-INTEREST ADVOCACY **\$1,123,601**

To hire 14 FTEs for the GAL Program to create capacity to provide best-interest advocacy for abused and neglected children.

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

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

#### IT OPERATIONS & LICENSING **\$115,700**

To pay for IT training and travel and continued agency use of Microsoft and Cisco/Meraki AP SmartNet software.

#### RECRUIT/RETAIN CHILD ADVOCATES **\$440,564**

To realign salaries to be competitive with similar state positions.

#### GAL OPERATIONAL EXPENSES **\$121,193**

To cover increased cost of legal representation, office leases, and moving and related IT expenses.

### NON-RECURRING:

#### WORKSTATION AND EQUIPMENT **\$47,150**

To provide to 23 new FTEs so they can perform their duties.

#### CISCO SWITCH REPLACEMENTS **\$77,000**

To replace switches at the end of their life and ensure alignment with state security requirements.

#### RECRUIT/RETAIN CHILD ADVOCATES **\$339,000**

To provide performance-based bonuses to eligible staff who earn a performance evaluation of 1.50 (Successful) or higher in FY26.

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## CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

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DCA consists of approximately 200 FTE staff positions, 140 local and seven state Foster Care Review Board members appointed by the governor, and 1,000 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 DCA.

Knowing her six-year term was coming to a close, Director Whittle began making organizational changes to ensure continuity and a smooth transition. These changes included converting the deputy child advocate position to a general counsel position, and the creation of senior accountant/fiscal analyst and chief of staff positions. The chief of staff now manages GAL, COC, and FCR, reducing the number of direct reports for the agency head. The general counsel oversees SI.



**LADARA DEPUGH, MA**  
*Interim State Child  
Advocate and Chief of Staff*



**MARY HARDEE, JD**  
*General Counsel*



**JENNIFER BURCH**  
*Guardian ad Litem  
Program Director*



**MELISSA PETTINATO-IRBY**  
*System Improvement  
Division Director*



**LINDSEY TAYLOR**  
*Foster Care Review  
Division Director*

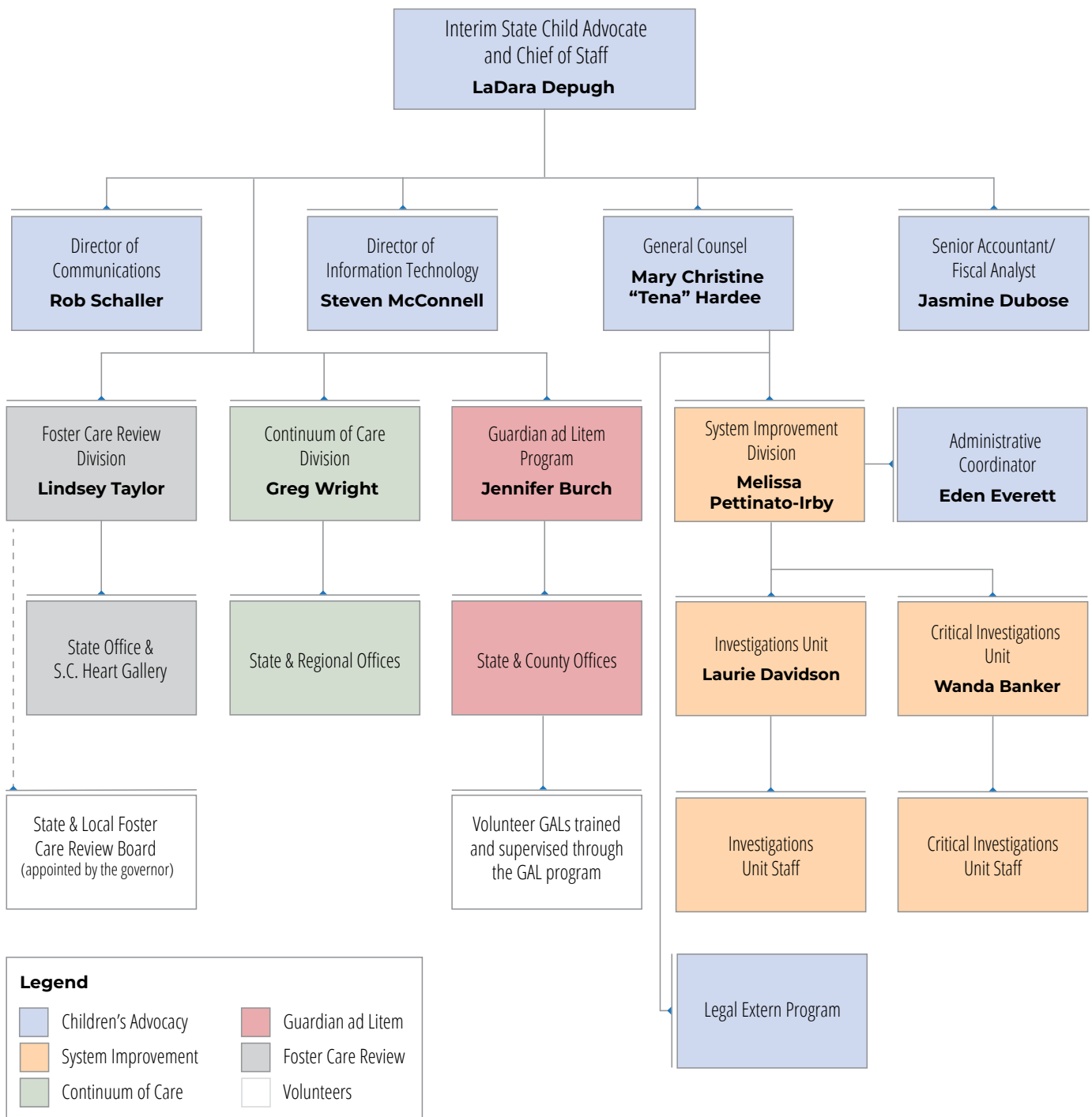


**GREG WRIGHT, LPCS**  
*Continuum of Care  
Division Director*



South Carolina Department of  
**CHILDREN'S  
ADVOCACY**  
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## ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



# 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, and child abuse prevention and reporting; and raising awareness regarding services provided to children and families by state agencies. Forms of outreach include participating in community events, conferences, social media, and media interviews.

Communications Director Rob Schaller continued working to improve the agency's websites and collateral materials. He collaborated with the state's web vendor, Tyler Technologies, and division leadership to add interactive forms to the Continuum of Care and Guardian ad Litem websites, making it easier, faster, and safer to submit a referral for services or apply to become a volunteer, respectively. In addition to new divisional brochures and branded promotional items, Schaller also created the Foster Care Review Board's first logo, which is distinct from, but still complements, the agency's official mark. He has also assumed responsibility for the annual accountability report and disseminating announcements on behalf of agency leadership regarding various updates, such as upcoming trainings, health screenings, and other HR-related matters.

## AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

In FY25, Communications partnered with the GAL division and Cumulus Media on a multi-pronged effort to increase the number of volunteer guardians ad litem. The project, which included video ads on streaming platforms and social media, as well as a targeted email campaign, focused on five counties. The campaign began at the end of FY25 and concluded in FY26. Results of the campaign will be measured at its conclusion.

## WEBSITES

Agency websites continue to be improved to increase their usefulness, such as the addition of interactive forms that streamline processes for citizens. Other features include regularly announcing open positions within each division.

## NEWSLETTER

Twelve issues of the 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.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

DCA, GAL, and SCHG each maintain and operate their own social media accounts. Through these channels, the agency is able to promote programs, raise awareness about services, and increase engagement and civic involvement. All but X (formerly Twitter) have seen significant year-over-year increases [Table 2](#).

During FY25, the agency discontinued posting to X. The account's consistently low engagement helped DCA realize the platform is not used by its primary audience and is an ineffective tool for its messages.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS

Table 2

| Division          | Platform             | End of FY24 | End of FY25 | Growth |
|-------------------|----------------------|-------------|-------------|--------|
| DCA               | Facebook             | 1,646       | 1,898       | 15%    |
|                   | X (formerly Twitter) | 498         | 490         | -1.6%  |
|                   | LinkedIn             | 227         | 711         | 213%   |
| Guardian ad Litem | Facebook             | 1,011       | 1,144       | 13%    |
| SC Heart Gallery  | Facebook             | 1,400       | 1,790       | 28%    |



## CASS ELIAS McCARTER GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM

### BY THE NUMBERS

**10,637**

Total number of children served by both volunteer and staff GALs

**1,001**

Average number of active volunteer GALs serving across 45 counties in South Carolina

**5,383**

Average number of children served each month by both volunteer and staff GALs

**53**

Percent of children assigned a volunteer GAL. The remaining 47 percent were assigned to staff

### MEETING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN

The Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem Program is statutorily<sup>1</sup> responsible for assigning a guardian ad litem (GAL) to serve as a court-appointed special advocate for each child who is involved in a Department of Social Services (DSS) abuse and neglect case in family court in all counties except Richland.<sup>2</sup>

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.

In FY25, GAL provided best-interest advocacy for **10,637 children**, serving an average of **5,383 children** each month. The program meets this need through a small army of **1,001 active volunteers** and approximately **150 full-time staff**. Volunteers, who typically carry an average of two cases at a time, were assigned to **53 percent**<sup>3</sup> of these children in FY25 [Table 3](#), while staff attended to the remaining **47 percent**.

DCA'S GUARDIANS AD LITEM  
**ARE NOT "PRIVATE" GALs.**



GALs contribute to advocacy through direct involvement with children and by presenting feedback regarding systemic improvements.

The program was named after Cass Elias McCarter, a volunteer who started the first GAL program in Marlboro County in 1984.

Since its inception, it has operated with a volunteer business model.<sup>1</sup>

All volunteers receive support, supervision, coaching, and training that align with the standards and protocols provided by the National GAL/CASA Association for Children.

Volunteer GALs are sometimes confused with “private guardians ad litem,” who are appointed in private cases, such as divorces and involve issues such as child custody and visitation.<sup>4</sup>

All DCA GALs must:

- Pass criminal background and DSS database checks
- Complete 30 hours of initial training plus ongoing yearly training
- Verify to the court they have met the eligibility requirements
- Be represented by contract attorneys in court proceedings

## NEW LEADERSHIP

In September 2024, LaDara Depugh was promoted from statewide director of the GAL Program to serve as the first chief of staff for the DCA. Former Pee Dee Regional Director Jennifer Burch was named the new GAL director in October. Burch has worked with GAL since June 2014 and served as regional director since 2022.

## NEW CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The GAL Program launched CasaManager, its new case management solution in March 2024, near the end of FY24. With training taking place in April and May, the system wasn't actively being used until FY25, and even then much of this fiscal year was spent with data migration and clean up.

We look forward to the many benefits CasaManager can bring in FY26. As all the kinks get worked out, we anticipate increased efficiencies, improved quality assurance, and enhanced advocacy for children.

## VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

The Guardian ad Litem Program's operational model anticipates that all court-appointed GALs will eventually be volunteers. For the fiscal year, GAL's training and recruitment team attended almost 1,100 events, garnering 508 applications that led to 282 active volunteers who were able to serve as child advocates.

Communications Director Rob Schaller helped GAL launch an online application that makes it significantly easier to apply to the program on the front end and to process applications on the backend. Previously, applicants were required to download, print and mail, fax, or scan applications so they could be returned to the GAL office for processing.

In FY24, GAL converted its training to an all-virtual model and added more class time options to increase the number of applicants able to complete pre-service training and be assigned cases. Training was also revamped by the Recruitment and Training Team, led by Christina Vinson, based on feedback from volunteers, county staff, and judges. The updated training includes new case studies and statistics to better prepare volunteers. These efforts paid off, and the program improved its completion percentage from 56 percent in FY24 to 59 percent in FY25.

Unfortunately, the total number of active volunteers remained flat. Multiple factors contributed to this, the first of which was the data migration and clean up in CasaManager that removed inactive volunteers from the system that had previously been counted.

Secondly, the number of potential volunteers able to complete training in FY25 was also impacted by the suspension of training

classes by National CASA in April 2025. Those who had signed up for April were split between classes in May and June, with some never coming back for the rescheduled training for a variety of reasons. What's more, trainees who began in June finished in July and were not included in the FY25 figures.

Finally, gains were also offset by a 17 percent volunteer attrition rate, causing GAL to add this as a new strategic performance measure for FY26.

A new strategy aimed at keeping trained volunteers actively engaged is the mileage reimbursement initiative implemented in April 2025. Previously, all travel related costs to visit children and attend court were borne solely by the volunteer. This new incentive will ease the financial burden for volunteers, which might otherwise have prevented them from taking a case, or staying involved at all. To ensure the program is meeting volunteers' needs, a survey will be sent out in October 2025 to gather feedback on the reimbursement process and make adjustments as necessary.

## STAFF RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Under Depugh's leadership, GAL was able to reduce its vacancy rate from almost 40 percent in FY20 to six percent in FY24. Having achieved this goal, in FY25 GAL focused on staff retention efforts, including a Leadership 360 assessment.

One question in particular asked staff to rate their satisfaction with their direct supervisor. Eighty-five percent of respondents answered "pleased" or "very pleased" to this question, surpassing the 83 percent target. The division will be using these results to identify training needs to strengthen and support the work of managers and supervisors.

## QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality assurance audits began in FY24 at every local county office to ensure quality standards are met. Audits determine how well both staff and volunteers are completing all of their duties by measuring specific criteria such as the content and quality of their case notes and reports, completion of child visits, attendance at hearings, as well as the completeness of both physical and electronic case files and volunteer application files. In the first year of audits, 86 percent of all county offices achieved a passing score. During FY25, GAL again conducted audits of each county office, with 88 percent achieving a passing score. These audits provide opportunities to discuss barriers, develop solutions, and identify accomplishments that can be built upon to improve child advocacy.

## VOCA/SAVS GRANT AWARDS

Since the agency's launch in FY20, GAL has been fortunate to receive either a Victim of Crimes Act (VOCA) or a Supplemental



Allocation for Victim Services (SAVS) grant that has allowed the program to strengthen its staffing capacity. However, the grants have steadily decreased over the past five years, reducing the number of staff that can be hired through this funding source. In FY25, only 3 positions were filled compared to 10 in FY20 [Table 4](#).

## BUDGET REQUEST

DCA requested 21 and received eight FTEs for the GAL program for FY25. GAL continues to recruit and train volunteers, but until there are a sufficient number of volunteers to serve all of the children in DSS abuse and neglect court proceedings, additional staff are needed to ensure children are receiving best-interest advocacy as required by law and best practice. The agency requested and received 14 FTEs for FY26. These new positions will help phase out and replace the time-limited positions, which are not supported by recurring state funding.

## LEGAL REPRESENTATION FOR GUARDIANS AD LITEM

Guardians ad litem must be represented by attorneys in court,<sup>5</sup> and the GAL program works with **approximately 33 attorneys** to provide this representation. Because these attorneys are on contract, there is a significant savings to the state that would otherwise be spent on salaries, fringe, and recurring operational costs.

### GAL VOLUNTEERS APPOINTED TO CASES

[Table 3](#)

| Year | Baseline | Goal | Actual |
|------|----------|------|--------|
| FY20 | 51%      | 60%  | 59%    |
| FY21 | 59%      | 70%  | 61%    |
| FY22 | 61%      | 80%  | 56%    |
| FY23 | 56%      | 65%  | 52%    |
| FY24 | 52%      | 55%  | 56%    |
| FY25 | 56%      | 60%  | 53%    |

### VOCA/SAVS GRANT AWARDS

[Table 4](#)

| Year | Source | Award Amount | Costs Covered                             |
|------|--------|--------------|-------------------------------------------|
| FY20 | VOCA   | \$429,984    | 10 positions and a rental car             |
| FY21 | VOCA   | \$352,585    | 7 positions, cellphones, service, laptops |
| FY22 | VOCA   | \$317,327    | 6 positions with mileage, cellphone       |
| FY23 | VOCA   | \$317,298    | 6 positions with mileage                  |
| FY24 | SAVS   | \$317,098    | 6 positions with mileage                  |
| FY25 | SAVS   | \$180,198    | 3 positions with mileage                  |

<sup>1</sup> S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-500. | <sup>2</sup> Richland County operates its own program. | <sup>3</sup> The FY25 Annual Accountability Report recorded that GAL ended the fiscal year with 47 percent of children assigned a volunteer GAL. However, the average percent over the course of the year was 53 percent. | <sup>4</sup> S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-3-810, et. seq. pertains to the appointment of GALs for private cases where DSS is not a party to the case. | <sup>5</sup> S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-7-1620.

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## CONTINUUM OF CARE

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Continuum of Care (COC), led by Division Director Greg Wright, was created by legislation in 1983 to develop and enhance the delivery of services to severely emotionally disturbed children and youth and to ensure that the special needs of this population are met appropriately to the extent possible within the state. By state statute,<sup>6</sup> COC serves children:

- who have been diagnosed as severely emotionally disturbed
- who have exhausted existing available treatment resources or services
- whose severity of emotional, mental, or behavioral disturbance requires a comprehensive and organized system of care

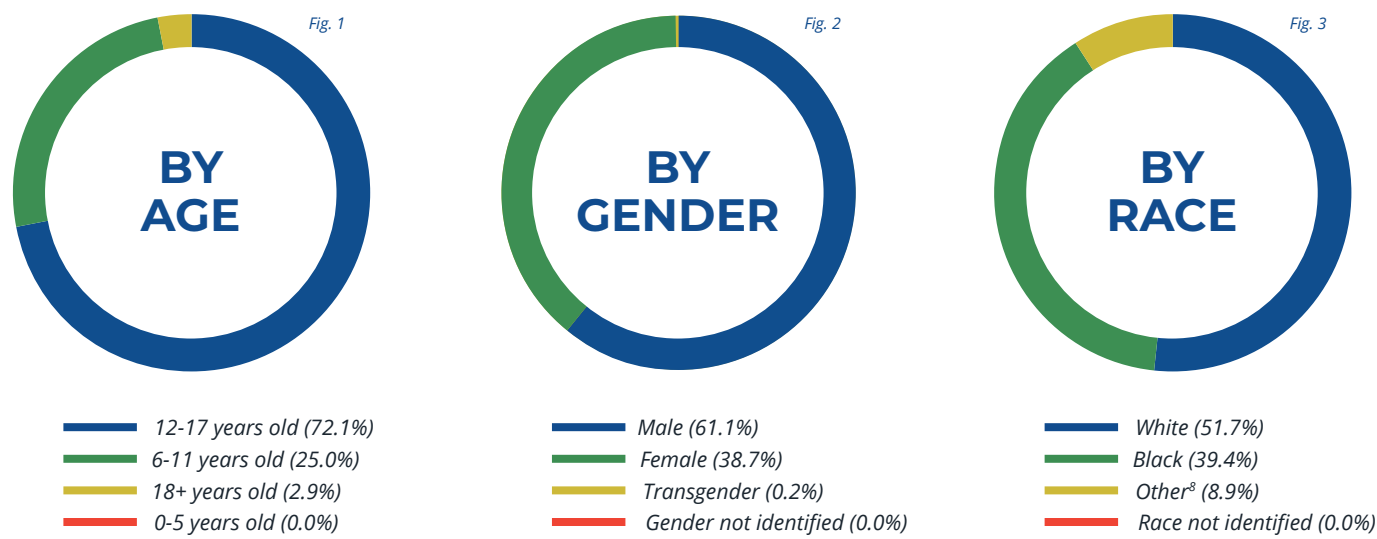
COC believes that children heal faster in their homes, schools, and communities than they would if separated from their family and placed in a costly and more restrictive environment. Because youth are not removed from their homes, they and their families experience less trauma, and the state sees fewer children under its care, either through foster care or the juvenile justice system.

### CHILDREN SERVED

During FY25, a total of **200** youth were enrolled and received wraparound care coordination services from COC, with an average of **100** children served per month [Table 5](#).

Of those, **172 (86 percent)** were eligible for services through a Palmetto Coordinated System of Care (PCSC) waiver, allowing COC to receive reimbursement for services from Medicaid.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR FY25



This is a 33 percent increase from the 129 waiver-eligible youth served in FY24 but still well short of COC’s FY25 goal of 400 youth.

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 care coordination services are no longer needed.

Between July 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025, CAFAS scores dropped an average of 25 points across the state’s four regions<sup>7</sup> [Table 6](#), falling short of the 30-point goal set forth in DCA’s FY24 Annual Accountability Report. The deficit could be attributed to a considerable workforce shortage and/or the dynamics associated with implementing High Fidelity Wraparound.

PCSC WAIVER ENDS

In FY21, Continuum of Care entered into a five-year contract with the South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to create the Palmetto Coordinated System of Care 1915(C) waiver that allowed COC to receive Medicaid reimbursement for its intensive care coordination services to children experiencing severe emotional and behavioral disturbances.

AVERAGE YOUTHS SERVED PER MONTH Table 5

| Region                         | Average Number of Youth |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Region A - Midlands            | 23                      |
| Region B - Upstate             | 23                      |
| Region C - Pee Dee             | 30                      |
| Region D - Lowcountry          | 24                      |
| TOTAL AVERAGE SERVED PER MONTH | 100                     |

AVERAGE YOUTH CAFAS SCORE IN FY25 Table 6

| Region                | Base Score | Most Recent | Change | Percent Change |
|-----------------------|------------|-------------|--------|----------------|
| Region A - Midlands   | 143        | 117         | -26    | -18%           |
| Region B - Upstate    | 125        | 101         | -24    | -19%           |
| Region C - Pee Dee    | 143        | 112         | -31    | -22%           |
| Region D - Lowcountry | 150        | 130         | -20    | -13%           |
| AVERAGE DIFFERENCE    |            |             | -25    | -18%           |

<sup>6</sup> S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-1310 et. seq. | <sup>7</sup> For both active and inactive youth | <sup>8</sup> Other races included: Mixed Race (3.3%); Hispanic (4.6%); and Other (1.0%)

The reimbursement was tied directly to the number of youth served, and this initially helped COC’s budget climb into the black. However, as the number of children served declined, so did the reimbursement amount, falling from \$1.45M in FY22 to \$699K in FY25 [Table 7](#).

COC tried various initiatives to reverse this trend during FY25, including:

- Continuing efforts to recruit highly-qualified staff during the first half of the fiscal year to fill vacancies
- Launching a fully electronic application that made it easier to initiate a referral and streamline internal processes
- Hiring its first community liaison to create, build, and sustain relationships with referral sources and provide outreach and information to agencies and the public about its services
- Lowering the eligibility threshold to help more children qualify for assistance

While these strategies helped increase the overall number of children served, COC still did not meet its goal of 400. This, coupled with the FY25 restructuring of state government agencies (including those involved with children’s mental and developmental health issues), caused DHHS to not renew its PCSC contract. In May 2025, enrollment in the waiver ceased, and COC began wrapping up its services and transferring cases to various Managed Care Organizations who would take over the youths’ care.

Anticipating the end of the PCSC wavier contract, Director Whittle in FY24 engaged the Office of Inspector General to conduct a confidential study to improve the efficacy of COC. Among the recommendations were cost-saving strategies implemented in FY25, including the closure of 11 underutilized satellite offices around the state.

**HIGH FIDELITY WRAPAROUND ENDS**

Expenses were reduced even further as COC ended its 11-year partnership with the National Wraparound Implementation Center.

NWIC provided training for, and certified COC as, the only state provider of High Fidelity Wraparound (HFW),<sup>9</sup> an evidence-based approach to providing individualized, team-based, and intensive care coordination for youth with complex and challenging mental and behavioral health needs.

**INCREASING THE WORKFORCE**

Efforts to improve recruitment and retention that began in FY24 paid off in FY25, as COC's vacancy rate dropped from 32 percent to 21 percent.

Some of those efforts included:

- A salary analysis that factored in job duties, position classifications, education, and experience
- A new salary structure that provided raises to current staff and allowed the division to increase hiring salaries
- Performance and equity increases for the first time in the division's history

Another mitigating factor was the repurposing of eight positions from COC to other divisions in FY25, lowering the number of COC's FTEs from 60 to 52.

The need for mental health services remains incredibly high for South Carolina's youth, and having highly qualified staff is essential to COC's ability to deliver these services so they can help children with complex and challenging mental and behavioral health needs for years to come.

**FINDING FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Amidst these changes, COC moves into FY26 with a continued and determined focus to serve children with serious emotional or behavioral health diagnoses, as well as their families who need help keeping them in their home, school, or community.

The division will continue providing intensive care coordination services for children across the state who receive Medicaid Fee for Service and those not receiving Medicaid at all.

At the same time, COC is actively exploring new and better ways to expand its services and seeking opportunities to ultimately increase its ability to make a lasting and positive impact on children with severe mental health conditions.

**COC BUDGET ANALYSIS** Table 7

| Fiscal Year | Year End Balance | PCSC Waiver Reimbursement     | Youth Served Through Waiver |
|-------------|------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| FY19        | -\$893K          | N/A (No PCSC Waiver in place) | N/A (COC not part of DCA)   |
| FY20        | -\$757K          | N/A (No PCSC Waiver in place) | N/A                         |
| FY21        | -\$7.5K          | \$1.19M                       | 189                         |
| FY22        | \$487K           | \$1.45M                       | 235                         |
| FY23        | -\$12.5K         | \$1.09M                       | 162                         |
| FY24        | -\$369K          | \$612K                        | 129                         |
| FY25        | -\$517K          | \$699K                        | 172                         |

<sup>9</sup> <https://preventionservices.acf.hhs.gov/programs/830/show>



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## FOSTER CARE REVIEW DIVISION

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The Division for Review of the Foster Care of Children (herein called Foster Care Review Division or FCRD) was created in 1974 and is responsible for administering the Foster Care Review Boards (FCRB), which review the cases of children in foster care to advocate for permanency.<sup>10</sup> Administered by the Department of Children's Advocacy, FCRD is under the direction of Lindsey Taylor.

FCRB was created to provide external accountability for the foster care system and to advocate on behalf of children in foster care. South Carolina was the first state to enact a system of citizen review responsible for assessing the permanency of children in foster care. FCRB consists of a state board of directors and 43 local boards. The State Board of Directors reviews and coordinates the activities of the local review boards and promulgates regulations regarding the review of information and the scheduling and conducting of reviews.<sup>10</sup>

### A HALF-CENTURY OF SERVICE

The Foster Care Review Division and the Foster Care Review Board began FY25 by celebrating their 50th anniversary with a press conference and proclamation reading by Governor McMaster on July 11, 2024.

"The length of time a child spends in foster care, even more than their age, affects how long they will continue to remain in foster care without permanency; and extended time without permanency increases trauma and adverse childhood experiences," said DCA Director Whittle during the ceremony. "South Carolina laws pertaining to timely hearings are grounded in data and research regarding the points in time when a child's permanency trajectory changes significantly. Advocating for permanency is essential to improving outcomes for children in foster care."

"Fifty years of service is remarkable, but, to me, just as exciting, is the prospect of the next 50 years," said FCRD Director Taylor. "Due to a number of factors... we are faced with an opportunity to continue the great work that has been ongoing for five decades while also growing our impact through enhancing our knowledge

and understanding of how to get the best outcomes for children and families; increased accessibility thanks to technology avenues that weren't previously available; and a robust partnership with DSS to support changes that they have very thoughtfully and intentionally made to strengthen the families that they serve. All of this adds up to an improved foster care system and better outcomes for children, which is why we're all here."

### REVIEWS OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

Statutorily, FCRB is tasked with reviewing case progress and steps being taken to expedite permanency for children in foster care. Local review boards begin reviewing the cases of each child who has been in foster care for four months and then again every six months thereafter while the child is in the custody of DSS.

FCRD schedules each review, during which DSS provides case records and details, and parents, caregivers, and other involved parties share updates and their knowledge of the case.

In FY25, FCRD scheduled **5,309** reviews for **3,558** individual children as compared with 5,706 reviews for 3,156 children in FY24.



*Left to right: Governor McMaster, State Child Advocate Amanda Whittle, State Board Chair Andrea McCoy, Foster Care Review Director Lindsey Taylor, Program Manager Stephanie Spink, and state board members Mary Long, John Seignious III, and George Jones pose for a photo at the 50th anniversary press conference. Photo credit: Kinard Lisbon*

FCRD achieved its goal of having 99 percent of children in care be scheduled for a timely review throughout the fiscal year. Additionally, the continuance rate dropped significantly from 20.3 percent to 13.3 percent from FY24 to FY25. This is in large part due to increased communication with DSS leadership and their intentional efforts to work with their staff to ensure FCRD received the necessary information to conduct the reviews.

## REVIEW FORMAT

The division and board members continued to embrace the enhanced accessibility provided by virtual reviews via Microsoft Teams. This format allowed invited parties greater opportunities to participate as they could attend from anywhere, and children and youth could also attend without missing whole school days. The Teams platform presented performance and connectivity issues at times, so work began to transition back to WebEx. This switch is expected to occur during the first quarter of FY26.

## ANNUAL AND QUARTERLY REPORTING

FCRD monitors and reports on an annual and quarterly basis the progress in achieving permanent plans for children in foster care.

All reports were issued to DSS timely, and the full FY25 Annual Report was published to the DCA and FCRD websites in May 2026. Distribution of abbreviated hard copies began shortly thereafter.

## TRAINING AND TEAM BUILDING

FCRD hosted eight in-person regional professional development training sessions serving 225 participants. The accessibility of virtual meetings also made it possible to continue to host the Lunch & Learn training series, which provides updates on child welfare best practices, available services and resources, and collaboration opportunities.

Training sessions were designed to ensure that board members have ongoing access to relevant and updated information concerning our state's foster care system. Hazardous weather during hurricane season in fall 2024 created disruptions to the in-person training schedule. To avoid future disruptions due to hazardous weather, in-person regional professional development (RPD) sessions were scheduled in spring 2025 and the virtual Annual Professional Development (APD) was moved from the spring to the fall. The APD session will occur after FY25 ends.

<sup>10</sup> Pursuant to S.C. Code of Laws Ann. 63-11-700, et. seq. | <sup>11</sup> FCRD's FY25 Annual Report can be found at <https://fcrd.sc.gov/resources/publications>.

In addition to ongoing trainings, FCRD held monthly employee team meetings to work towards building team unity and strengthening practice consistency. A new position for the Heart Gallery was added in FY25, and FCRD remained fully staffed through the end of the fiscal year.

## CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

As reported in DCA's FY22 Annual Report, Director Amanda Whittle asked the Office of Inspector General to conduct an efficiency study of both FCRD and FCRB to assist with improving processes, workflows, workloads, and outcomes. Foundational work to address these concerns continued through FY25. Key recommendations—followed by their progress—included:

### *Replace the outdated and unsupported CASPER database system and move to a paperless process*

FCRD retired its outdated database, CASPER, and launched its new case management system, CAMS (Child Advocacy Management System) in FY24. CAMS has improved the division's ability to track, analyze, and use data to advocate for children. It has also improved employee morale and efficiency.

Database enhancements continued throughout FY25, including new functionality, better documentation, and more efficient processes. The transition to paperless recording keeping is nearly completed, and the process to integrate CAMS with DSS's case management system has begun. When completed, this integration will automate the exchange of case information, providing even greater efficiencies for both FCRD and DSS staff.

### *Create a system of accountability for areas of concern*

FY25 marks the first full year that FCRD has reported on "Barriers to Permanency" (BPs) versus the old "Areas of Concern." The new reporting method does a better job of identifying factors that negatively impact permanency outcomes for children in foster care in South Carolina. FCRD's FY25 Annual Report breaks these barriers down into various categories, with each category identifying causes that lay at the heart of permanency delays.<sup>11</sup>

This new framework will help define specific approaches and actions that can be taken to overcome those barriers and help children in foster care achieve permanency more quickly and easily.

While the switch to BPs occurred in FY24, technical issues prevented FCRD from accurately recording them in CAMS until after FY24 ended. The issue was resolved in early FY25 and BPs are now fully implemented, tracked, and reported.

### *Review and update internal policies as well as inconsistent statutes among partners*

FCRD continued to review division policies and procedures. The policy committee, comprised of FCRD leadership and staff, continued to meet throughout FY25 to review and submit

suggestions for policy updates. The policy committee submitted drafts of needed policies to Director Taylor for review prior to the end of the fiscal year, and the series of new policies is expected to roll out during the first quarter of FY26.

Statutory changes remain a long-range goal, and efforts that began in FY23 to effect these changes continued in FY25. Progress included minor statutory changes to reflect the division director's employment process and the diligent work of division leadership to clearly articulate and train volunteer board 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 continued to increase and improve communication and collaboration with several key partners, especially DSS. Efforts included:

- Joint collaborative sessions with DSS and board members
- Participation in the delivery of Child Welfare Academy certification training required for new child welfare staff at DSS
- Quarterly meetings with DSS leadership

These initiatives continued to strengthen FCRD staff's understanding of updated DSS policies and practices, improve communication with DSS, and afford FCRD the opportunity to educate new DSS staff on FCRD's mission, values, and statutory requirements. FCRD's training and volunteer coordinator continued to work directly with board members to improve communication and provide ongoing learning opportunities.

### *Identify more efficient ways to fill board and staff vacancies*

FCRD ended FY25 with 82 local board vacancies (a 38 percent vacancy rate), a slight increase over the 76 vacancies (35 percent vacancy rate) in FY24. While some board members volunteer to fill in on other boards for reviews, this is not a sustainable solution.

FCRD continued to track and review vacancies and raise awareness in the community and among legislative delegations to get them filled.

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

Agency and division leadership and staff have continued to clearly define and consistently communicate the differences between FCRB and FCRD and their distinct roles and functions. Adherence to the statutory names for each entity has been fully adopted.

Communications Director Rob Schaller also worked with the State Board to develop a new logo for FCRB that, while distinct from the DCA family of logos, still complements them well.



BY THE NUMBERS

**5,309**

*reviews held  
in FY25*

**3,558**

*children reviewed  
in FY25*

**38%**

*board member  
vacancy rate*

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## SOUTH CAROLINA HEART GALLERY

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The South Carolina Heart Gallery (SCHG) works to find forever families for children in foster care who are legally free and awaiting adoption. A part of the Foster Care Review Division (FCRD) since 2005, SCHG has been funded through a contract with the Department of Social Services since 2008. To fulfill its mission, SCHG recruits photographers who volunteer to take photos of children at scenic locations around the state.

In addition to posting the photos and videos to SCHG's website, they were shared on the program's Facebook page and featured on various television newscasts. Framed portraits were also displayed at special exhibits across the state. One such exhibit is SCHG's continued partnership with Columbiana Centre that began in FY24. The semi-permanent exhibit moved out of its storefront and onto the walls near the food court entrance, allowing even more people to have a chance to interact with the display and learn about the Heart Gallery and the children searching for their forever home. These efforts helped increase the number of prospective family inquiries by 13 percent, from 851 in FY24 to 961 in FY25.

SCHG conducted 25 photo shoots of 109 children, which included group photoshoots, photos taken at DSS adoption and recruitment events, or at "front porch sessions" for children who are medically fragile or needed an individual photoshoot for other reasons. Fifty-eight of these children also had videos produced to accompany their profile, through Heart Gallery's continued partnership with Grant Me Hope.

SCHG expanded its community outreach, participating in seven major events (vs. four in FY24) to raise awareness and foster community connections while also reinforcing SCHG's presence as a trusted and compassionate advocate for children awaiting adoption. SCHG also signed a five-year deal with Grant Me Hope to continue producing high-quality videos that deepen the connection with children in the gallery.





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## SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

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As part of its enabling legislation,<sup>12</sup> DCA is responsible for ensuring children receive adequate protection and care from services and programs offered by the nine child-serving state agencies listed at right.

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) is key to fulfilling that mission and oversees the teams that are primarily responsible for ensuring children receive adequate protection and care from child-serving agencies:

- The Critical Investigations Unit (CIU) handles critical incidents that are self-reported by these agencies. The CIU report can be found on page 32.
- The Investigations Unit (IU) handles complaints from the public concerning these agencies. The IU report is located on page 36.

### **BACKGROUND**

When DCA was first created, Whittle, and soon after, former Deputy Child Advocate Kayla Capps, were initially responsible for receiving, reviewing, referring, monitoring, and investigating all complaints and critical incident notifications that came into the agency. In effect, they constituted the Investigations Unit. While Capps eventually took the lead of a small team of investigators, both remained actively engaged, carrying their own caseloads through FY24. Realizing this was unsustainable, Whittle began working in FY23 to create what has become the System Improvement Division.



### ***AGENCIES OVER WHICH DCA HAS STATUTORY OVERSIGHT***

- The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
- The Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ)
- The Department of Public Health (DPH)
- The Department of Social Services (DSS)
- The Governor's School of Agriculture at John de la Howe (JDLH)
- The Office of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (OIDD)
- The Office of Mental Health (OMH)
- The South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind (SCSDB)
- The Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School (WLG)



The division, which now houses both the Investigations and Critical Investigations units, has grown to encompass 20 staff members. In FY25, it received 2,918 complaints from the public and 3,022 critical incidents, with investigations being conducted for 530 and 1,218 cases, respectively.

## STAFFING

Upon the departure of Capps in March 2025, the Deputy Child Advocate position was converted to a general counsel position and filled by Mary Hardee. Similar to Capps, Hardee oversees the SI division in addition to her other duties.

Melissa Pettinato-Irby was named the first SI director in September 2024 and has direct responsibility for the division's day-to-day operations. She worked closely with Whittle, Capps, and Hardee to ensure there were no interruptions during leadership changes, especially as SI became more independent, and the state child advocate and deputy state child advocate, who had carried their own caseloads, transitioned away from the agency.

Two new staff outside of the investigative units have also been hired to focus on improving services for children, including a system coordinator who sits in on interagency staffings and helps coordinate services among the different agencies to ensure children's needs are met. A Handle with Care Coordinator was also hired to help implement the Handle with Care program in the Upstate. Through this program, schools are notified about children who have experienced a traumatic event involving law enforcement and can apply various trauma-sensitive strategies to help the child in their classroom.

The SI division closed FY25 with 20 full-time employees, up from 10 at the end of FY24.

## DIRECT REPRESENTATION PILOT PROJECT

A third unit under the SI division is in development, with plans to go live in FY26. While South Carolina requires children in juvenile justice cases to have attorney representation, the Palmetto State is one of only four in the US that does not guarantee some form of right to counsel for children in abuse and neglect proceedings. This new unit hopes to address that through a pilot project that will provide direct representation to these children. While working closely with the GAL program, it will be housed within SI.

## INCREASED COLLABORATION

New staffing procedures have also been implemented so that all members of CIU gather weekly to discuss all open cases. This holistic approach has allowed for the exchange of

recommendations and insights that keep a child's case moving forward, as well as the ability to recognize trends, barriers, and gaps at a higher level. In some instances, it has even helped investigators discover situations where multiple open cases involving different agencies were actually about the same child.

## SITE VISITS

Pettinato-Irby has also made significant procedural changes, including the implementation of a new site visit schedule. Starting in April 2025, pairs of CIU investigators began making one stop each week at one of the various facilities around the state operated by the agencies over which DCA has oversight. Locations are chosen on a rotating basis, visits are both announced and unannounced, and different pairs of investigators visit at different times.

While the DCA has committed to making contact with each agency at least once a year, this new procedure greatly enhances that effort and provides multiple benefits, including:

- Building better relationships with on-site staff
- Observing the conditions of the facility
- Getting to know and talk with the youth currently at the facility

The ultimate goal is to identify and correct potential issues before they rise to the level of a critical incident, as well as regularly following-up on existing problems to ensure they are resolved.

## CUSTOMER SATISFACTION & RESPONSE TIMES

SI seeks to respond to complaints with urgency and empathy. IU responded to 99 percent of complainants within one business day, surpassing the 98 percent goal set in the FY24 Annual Accountability Report.

## LEGAL EXTERN PROGRAM

For FY25, SI's Legal Extern Program included one paid extern from the University of South Carolina Joseph F. Rice School of Law, as well as one extern from the Charleston School of Law who earned class credit. Both law students observed court hearings, attended interagency staffings, tracked data of children in DJJ detention, and conducted legal research.

The externship program allows DCA to ensure new lawyers have an awareness and understanding of not only DCA, but the overall system of care provided by child-serving agencies.

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<sup>12</sup> S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2270.

## CRITICAL INVESTIGATIONS UNIT

While the Critical Investigations Unit was only officially established in FY23, the agency has been handling "critical incidents" since its inception in FY20. Critical incidents are reported directly to DCA by the same nine child-serving agencies and involve fatal, near-fatal, or serious bodily or emotional injuries to a child in the care of, or receiving services from, the state.

Critical incident notifications (CINs) represent the largest growing segment of SI, but for the first time ever, the FY24 to FY25 percent increase was only 4.4 percent, significantly lower than previous years [Fig. 4](#). While one year does not make a trend, this small increase may be an early sign that SI's effort to ensure reporting agencies are aware of the statutory requirement to report these incidents has reached a saturation point and fewer reminders are needed to ensure compliance.

In February 2025, Wanda Banker was named director of the Critical Investigations Unit. Initially hired in May 2023 as one of the first full-time CIU employees, she now leads a team of seven investigators and intake specialists that are dedicated to reviewing and investigating critical incident notifications.

In FY25, there were **3,022** critical incident notifications received. An additional **155** cases (154 in FY24 alone) were carried over from previous fiscal years, bringing the total number of complaints in the system during FY25 to **3,177**. Of those:

- **1,959** were reviewed, and it was determined that no investigation was necessary, as the agency followed proper policies and protocols
- **1,218** were reviewed and investigated

Of the **1,218** investigated incidents:

- **962** identified that adequate services were provided
- **56** identified inadequate services that were remedied
- **35** identified inadequate services that were not remedied
- **165** were still open and carried over into FY26



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.***<sup>13</sup>

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 DCA, and to do so within the statutory 24-hour time frame.<sup>14</sup> Thereafter, the state child advocate may perform an independent investigation or review a completed investigation.

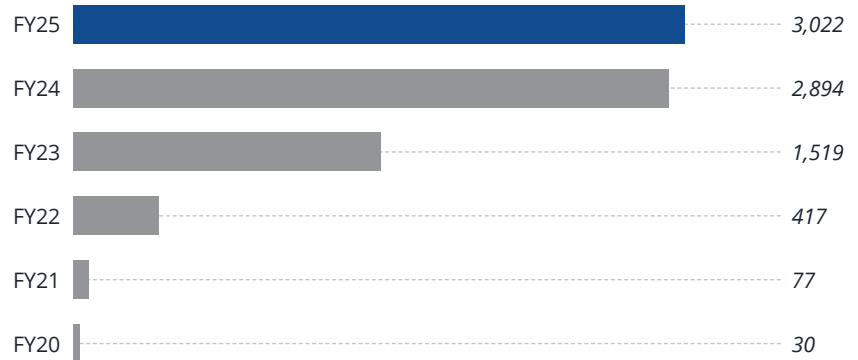
## FY25 CRITICAL INCIDENT NOTIFICATIONS

In FY25, Critical Investigations received 3,022 CINs, compared to 2,894 in FY24. This represents a 4.4 percent increase year-over-year, and the smallest increase since the DCA was formed [Fig. 4](#).



### TOTAL CINS BY FISCAL YEAR

Fig. 4



## 24-HOUR CRITICAL INCIDENT NOTIFICATION RESPONSE TIMES

FY25 saw six of the nine child-serving agencies report critical incidents, two less than FY24. Unfortunately, the percentage of CINs received within the statutorily defined notification period dropped significantly to 34 percent in FY25 from 56 percent in FY24 [Fig. 5](#).

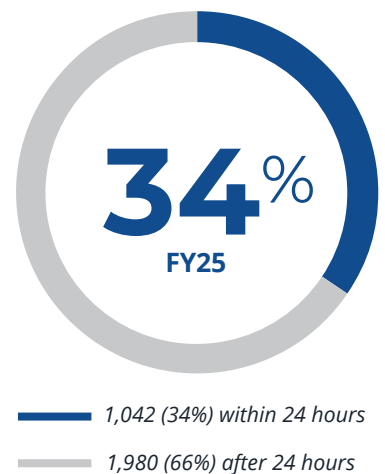
### 24-HOUR CIN RESPONSE TIMES<sup>15</sup>

Table 8

| Agency       | Total Notifications | Within 24 Hours | After 24 Hours | Timeliness not Reported | Compliance Rate |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| DHHS         | 74                  | 9               | 65             | -                       | 12%             |
| DJJ          | 2,175               | 833             | 1,342          | -                       | 38%             |
| DPH          | 49                  | 2               | 47             | -                       | 4%              |
| DSS          | 353                 | 94              | 259            | -                       | 27%             |
| OIDD         | 2                   | 0               | 2              | -                       | 0%              |
| OMH          | 369                 | 104             | 265            | -                       | 28%             |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>3,022</b>        | <b>1,042</b>    | <b>1,980</b>   | <b>-</b>                | <b>34%</b>      |

### CIN RESPONSE TIME COMPLIANCE

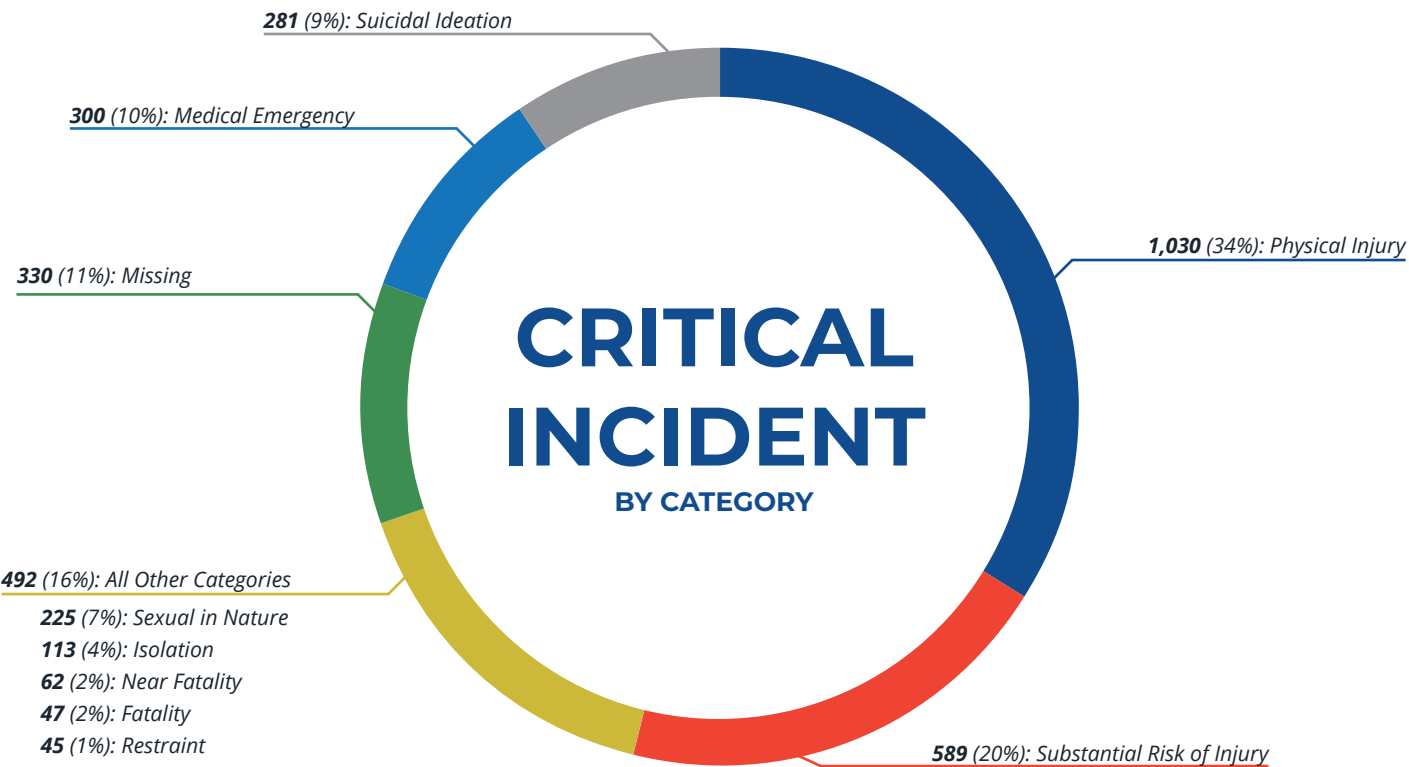
Fig. 5



<sup>13</sup> SC Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2230. | <sup>14</sup> SC Code of Laws Ann. Section 63-11-2280. | <sup>15</sup> Child-serving agencies that have not in FY25 or have never reported a notification are not represented. A dash "-" indicates that no cases were reported.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS BY CATEGORY

Fig. 6



CRITICAL INCIDENT BY AGENCY<sup>15</sup>

Table 9

| Agency       | FY20      | FY21      | FY22       | FY23         | FY24         | FY25         |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| DHHS         | -         | -         | 22         | 87           | 83           | 74           |
| DJJ          | 15        | 15        | 299        | 1,021        | 1,957        | 2,175        |
| DPH          | -         | -         | 17         | -            | 50           | 49           |
| DSS          | 15        | 62        | 60         | 162          | 426          | 353          |
| OIDD         | -         | -         | -          | 4            | 1            | 2            |
| OMH          | -         | -         | 19         | 242          | 373          | 369          |
| SCSDB        | -         | -         | -          | 3            | 1            | -            |
| WLG          | -         | -         | -          | -            | 2            | -            |
| Not Recorded | -         | -         | -          | -            | 1            | -            |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>30</b> | <b>77</b> | <b>417</b> | <b>1,519</b> | <b>2,894</b> | <b>3,022</b> |

AGENCIES REPORTING



Six agencies reported critical incidents in FY25, down from eight in FY24 [Table 9](#). SCSDB and WIL reported three total incidents last year but zero incidents this year. JDLH has yet to report an incident.

## CRITICAL INCIDENTS BY AGENCY AND CATEGORY<sup>15</sup>

Table 10

| CRITICAL INCIDENT                   | DHHS      | DJJ          | DPH       | DSS        | OIDD     | OMH        |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|------------|----------|------------|
| <b>Fatality</b>                     | -         | -            | -         | 42         | 1        | 4          |
| Accident                            | -         | -            | -         | 19         | -        | 1          |
| Homicide                            | -         | -            | -         | 8          | 1        | 1          |
| Natural                             | -         | -            | -         | 8          | -        | 1          |
| Suicide                             | -         | -            | -         | 4          | -        | 1          |
| Undetermined                        | -         | -            | -         | 3          | -        | 0          |
| <b>Isolation</b>                    | -         | 36           | -         | -          | -        | 9          |
| <b>Medical Emergency</b>            | 17        | 199          | 8         | 43         | -        | 33         |
| <b>Missing</b>                      | 17        | 106          | 14        | 154        | -        | 39         |
| Benign Reason/Misunderstanding      | 1         | 9            | -         | -          | -        | 1          |
| Confirmed or At-Risk of Trafficking | -         | -            | 1         | 3          | -        | 1          |
| Eloped/Ran Away                     | 16        | 97           | 13        | 149        | -        | 36         |
| Missing/Taken                       | -         | -            | -         | 2          | -        | 1          |
| <b>Near Fatality</b>                | 2         | 27           | -         | 11         | -        | 22         |
| Accident                            | -         | -            | -         | 4          | -        | 1          |
| Attempted Homicide                  | -         | 1            | -         | 3          | -        | 1          |
| Attempted Suicide                   | 2         | 26           | -         | 4          | -        | 20         |
| <b>Physical Injury</b>              | 22        | 848          | 17        | 38         | -        | 105        |
| Accidental Bodily Injury            | 2         | 24           | 2         | -          | -        | 5          |
| Assault                             | 9         | 596          | 9         | 20         | -        | 55         |
| Self-Harm                           | 11        | 228          | 6         | 18         | -        | 45         |
| <b>Restraint</b>                    | 3         | 62           | 5         | 3          | 1        | 39         |
| <b>Sexual in Nature</b>             | 3         | 169          | 2         | 14         | -        | 37         |
| Attempted Sexual Assault            | -         | 21           | -         | 1          | -        | 1          |
| Explicit Images                     | -         | 3            | -         | 1          | -        | 6          |
| Indecent Exposure                   | -         | 57           | -         | -          | -        | 5          |
| Sexual Assault                      | 3         | 88           | 2         | 12         | -        | 25         |
| <b>Substantial Risk of Injury</b>   | 4         | 512          | 2         | 23         | -        | 48         |
| <b>Suicidal Ideation</b>            | 6         | 216          | 1         | 25         | -        | 33         |
| Active Ideation                     | -         | 113          | -         | 13         | -        | 19         |
| Passive Ideation                    | 6         | 103          | 1         | 12         | -        | 14         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                        | <b>74</b> | <b>2,175</b> | <b>49</b> | <b>353</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>369</b> |

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## INVESTIGATIONS UNIT

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**2,918**

*complaints  
received*

**16%**

*year-over-year  
decrease*

**530**

*complaints  
investigated*

Since DCA's founding, the Investigations Unit (IU) has been integral to child wellbeing 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 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 **2,918** complaints received in FY25 that were determined to involve services provided to children by one of the nine child-serving state agencies under DCA's purview. This

represents a **16% decrease** over the 3,484 complaints received in FY24. An additional **134** cases (including 93 from FY24) were carried over from previous fiscal years, bringing the total number of complaints in the system during FY25 to **3,052**.

Of those:

- **2,352** were resolved by referral instead of an investigation, with complainants being directed to the appropriate state agency or community organization for assistance
- **530** were deemed within IU's scope and investigated
- **54** were duplicate submissions
- **110** lacked enough information to allow for review
- **6** were found to be non-agency referrals

Of the **530** investigated complaints against state agencies:

- **238** identified that adequate services were provided
- **98** identified inadequate services that were remedied
- **23** identified inadequate services that were not remedied
- **171** were still open and carried into FY26



## CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY INTERAGENCY SUMMARIES

DCA works diligently to create and strengthen relationships with other state agencies, evaluate the services they provide, and look 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 HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES (DHHS)

In FY23, DCA participated in a DHHS-initiated interagency summit aimed at improving coordination for the placement of children in residential or behavioral health settings. Through the summit, a streamlined approach to resolving issues and escalation protocols was developed, and that approach was piloted in emergency departments in FY24.

#### *Master Plan Advisory Committee (MPAC)*

In FY25, Director Whittle continued to serve as a member of MPAC, which is organized by DHHS and engages in intentional and focused analysis and problem-solving efforts to create a continuum of behavioral health services for South Carolinians.

MPAC was integral to two DHHS initiatives, both of which were unveiled in FY23 and continued undergoing implementation efforts in FY25:

- A behavioral health crisis stabilization grant that provided funding to 13 hospitals to build specialized hospital-based emergency department units dedicated to handling behavioral health crises
- The creation of the Florence Behavioral Health Hub, which will include a combination of triage, crisis stabilization, telehealth, outpatient, and inpatient services to expand much needed behavioral health resources in the Pee Dee region

During FY25, DCA worked with MPAC to brainstorm ways DCA's Continuum of Care division could be a stronger partner in South Carolina's behavioral health system

### UPDATES TO AGENCY NAMES

On July 1, 2024, the Department of Health & Environmental Control (DHEC) was split into two agencies, the Department of Environmental Services and the Department of Public Health. DCA's enacting legislation only covers DPH.

Similarly, in April 2025, a new cabinet agency, the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (BHDD), was created, combining three formerly separate agencies including:

- The Department of Disabilities and Special Needs, which became the Office of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (OIDD)
- The Department of Mental Health, which became the Office of Mental Health (OMH)
- The Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services, which became the Office of Substance Use Services (OSUS)

These new acronyms will be used in this report when referring to all interactions with those entities, including any that happened prior to the new law.

<sup>16</sup> S.C. Code of Laws Ann. Section 20-7-7815(A).

### **Medicaid Advisory Committee (MAC)**

Director Whittle continued to serve during FY25 as a member of the MAC, also facilitated by DHHS. Through this committee, the public is informed of rate increases, beneficiary rolls, and State Plan changes. The MAC was formerly called the Medical Care Advisory Committee (MCAC).

DHHS should be commended for its work to reimagine the behavioral health care system in South Carolina through the MPAC, to responsibly add services and increase rates to the State Plan, and to end the moratorium on Rehabilitative Behavioral Health Services, among other initiatives and developments.

DCA regularly communicates with DHHS leadership as follows:

- 1915(C) Medicaid Waiver discussions
- Director-to-director meetings when requested by either director
- Interagency staffings concerning specific children
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children public hearings
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings
- Master Plan Advisory Committee (MPAC)
- Medicaid Advisory Committee (MAC)
- Regularly scheduled meetings among DCA, DHHS, DJJ, DSS, OIDD, OMH, and OSUS

## **DEPT. OF JUVENILE JUSTICE (DJJ)**

### **MEC Renovations**

DCA is glad to see that DJJ has acted on Deputy Child Advocate Kayla Capps' FY24 suggestion that the Midlands Evaluation Center (MEC) be converted to a second juvenile detention center. This increases its detention capacity, which has frequently exceeded its 72-person limit and has held up to 140 youth in the past. While DJJ initially indicated this was not feasible, as of the writing of this report, DJJ has completed the transformation.

DCA regularly communicates with DJJ leadership as follows:

- Director-to-director meetings as requested by either director
- DJJ site visits by Agency Director, Deputy Capps, Investigations and Critical Investigations units
- Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Council meetings
- Interagency staffings concerning specific children and youth
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children public hearings
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings attended by COC Director Greg Wright
- PRTF meetings among DCA, DHHS, DJJ, and OMH
- Parole hearings attended by Deputy Capps and System Improvement Director Melissa Pettinato-Irby

- Regularly-scheduled monthly meetings with DJJ and OMH regarding seriously mentally ill, justice-involved youth. Director Whittle and Deputy Capps transitioned Pettinato-Irby into these meetings to ensure continued communication regarding these youth
- Regularly scheduled meetings among DCA, DHHS, DJJ, DSS, OIDD, OMH, and OSUS

## **DEPT. OF PUBLIC HEALTH (DPH)**

Since its inception in 2019, DCA has not consistently received critical incident notifications (CINs) from DPH. In FY23, Director Whittle contacted DPH to express concern regarding its non-compliance with the critical incident reporting statutes, and meetings were held to discuss this. DPH committed to submit notifications moving forward.

In FY25, 49 CINs were submitted, reflecting continued reporting activity, however, timely compliance remains a significant concern, with only two of those 49 notifications received within the statutorily required 24-hour timeframe.

SI Director Melissa Pettinato-Irby has communicated with DPH leadership regarding ongoing delays. Despite these efforts, DCA continues to experience untimely reporting and, in some instances, has had to request notifications after learning of incidents through other means.

Timely notification is essential to DCA's ability to review incidents, assess agency performance, identify systemic concerns, and ensure accountability. Ongoing delays limit meaningful oversight.

DCA recommends that DPH take immediate steps to ensure it has the staffing, internal processes, and oversight mechanisms necessary to consistently meet the 24-hour reporting requirement and comply fully with state law.

DCA regularly communicates with DPH leadership as follows:

- Director-to-director meetings as requested by either director
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children public hearings
- Safe Sleep Awareness month
- State Child Fatality Advisory Committee

## **DEPT. OF SOCIAL SERVICES (DSS)**

Regular and emergent agency head meetings among DCA, DHHS, DJJ, DSS, OIDD, OMH, and OSUS were held to create an escalation process that can be shared statewide for youth with complex needs, particularly youth with intellectually disabilities, mental

illness, DJJ and/or DSS involvement, and/or substance use, who require the coordination of all child-serving agencies to assist with intensive in-home services, out-of-home respite, and/or residential treatment.

It will be important for the new state child advocate to be involved in ensuring this work stays at the forefront of system priorities.

DCA regularly communicates with DSS leadership as follows:

- Bench-Bar meetings, including subcommittee/workgroup meetings
- Children’s Justice Act Task Force meetings
- Director-to-director weekly meetings with Director Leach and then Interim Director Catone. Whittle transitioned Chief of Staff LaDara Depugh into these meetings, providing continuity going forward
- Interagency staffings concerning specific children
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children public hearings
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings
- Regularly scheduled meetings among DCA, DHHS, DJJ, DSS, OIDD, OMH, and OSUS
- Safe Babies Court Leadership Team

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

The System Improvement team visited the John de la Howe campus in September 2024 and met with President Timothy Keown and his leadership team for a tour, which included listening to student presentations about their experiences attending the school and meeting some of the livestock. Students also shared information about their student-led podcast, “Carolina’s Field, Forest, and Water.” SI was also able to meet South Carolina Representative Patrick Haddon and his wife who joined our tour.

The tour provided an overview of what services are currently being offered by the school, as well as the qualifications and documentation needed for admission. This information allows SI employees to provide accurate information about JDLH to constituents through the DCA hotline.

No complaints about nor critical incident notifications from JDLH were received by DCA in FY25. In fact, JDLH has maintained zero complaints and critical incidents since DCA’s creation in 2019. For this reason, coupled with the fact that the two other governor’s schools in South Carolina are not under the purview of DCA, Director Whittle again recommends JDLH be statutorily removed from the list of child-serving agencies DCA tracks.

## OFFICE OF INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES (OIDD)

DCA’s primary interactions with OIDD over the years has regarded seriously intellectually disabled youth. State law prohibits the commitment of seriously intellectually impaired youth to an institution under the control of DJJ.<sup>16</sup>

DCA has continuously advocated for residential habilitation for youth and has recommended that OIDD either contract with providers to create more residential options for youth (particularly youth who are detained or committed to DJJ and therefore cannot be served in their communities), or create its own facilities and programs to serve as a backstop for residential treatment needs for children and youth with intellectual disabilities, related disabilities, and autism.

In addition to residential options for youth detained and/or committed to DJJ, DCA has recognized a need for residential skills-based learning and residential treatment for youth with complex needs, which often include intellectual disabilities, mental illness, and aggressive or other behavioral challenges. If children can be assessed quicker and provided with services sooner rather than being on lengthy waitlists, then families may be able to have their needs met in the community rather than having unmet needs escalate, resulting in higher acuity or placement in more restrictive environments like emergency departments, DSS, or DJJ.

OIDD has worked with providers to create more residential options for youth and has requested funding to respond to the waitlists. During FY25, OIDD solicited for high management beds, and approximately 12 new beds became available. Further, in 2024, OIDD began incentivizing individuals to become Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) providers.

In February 2025, Director Whittle also facilitated a meeting between OIDD and MUSC Health’s Mental Health Integrated Centers of Clinical Excellence to discuss inpatient beds for children and adolescents with co-occurring intellectual disabilities and mental health concerns.

DCA regularly communicates with OIDD leadership as follows:

- Director-to-director meetings were held, but not on a consistent monthly basis during FY25
- Interagency staffings concerning specific children
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children public hearings
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings
- Regularly scheduled meetings among DCA, DHHS, DJJ, DSS, OIDD, OMH, and OSUS
- State Child Fatality Advisory Committee

## OFFICE OF MENTAL HEALTH (OMH)

### ***State-Operated Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF):***

A ground-breaking ceremony was held on September 16, 2024 for the William R. Byars, Jr. Treatment Center at OMH's Crafts Farrow Road Campus in Columbia, South Carolina. The new facility will prioritize seriously mentally ill, justice-involved youth.

Recovery Solutions was awarded the bid for this project, and they were responsible for the design, build, operation, and maintenance of the facility, including responsibility for hiring appropriate staff to provide residential treatment to the youth who are placed there.

During the ceremony, Recovery Solutions President Jeremy Barr described the multi-agency collaboration in support of the PRTF as "nothing short of miraculous" and said it was unusual for so many forms of state government to work together to bring about a facility of this type. This embodies the communication, collaboration, and coordination DCA has always promoted.

DCA has been instrumental in realizing this state-operated PRTF. For years, Whittle advocated for the PRTF as part of her broad vision of reform that would increase the array of services available to these youth. She has been actively engaged in the Design-Build-Operate-Maintain process, regularly meeting with OMH, DJJ, and DHHS to keep the project moving forward.

### ***Interim Placement Planning:***

DCA also met with OMH, DHHS, and DJJ to discuss short-term and interim placement planning until the opening of the PRTF. Hardening of the William S. Hall Psychiatric Institute was completed in FY24, and justice-involved, seriously mentally ill youth have been placed here as appropriate during FY25.

### ***Seriously Mentally Ill Meetings***

Monthly Seriously Mentally Ill (SMI) meetings were held among DCA, DJJ, and OMH. Director Whittle and Deputy Child Advocate Kayla Capps participated during the first part of FY25, then transitioned Systems Improvement Director Melissa Pettinato-Irby into these meetings in anticipation of a change in executive leadership in the Spring of 2025.

DCA regularly communicates with OIDD leadership as follows:

- 988 State Advisory meetings
- Director-to-director regularly scheduled monthly meetings
- Interagency staffings concerning specific children and youth
- PRTF meetings among DCA, DJJ, DMH, and DHHS
- Joint Council on Children and Adolescents quarterly meetings
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children public hearings

- Master Plan Advisory Committee meetings
- Regularly scheduled meetings among DCA, DHHS, DJJ, DSS, OIDD, OMH, and OSUS
- Suicide Prevention Coalition meetings

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## SC SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF & THE BLIND (SCSDB)

In March 2025, CIU Director Wanda Banker and IU Director Laurie Davidson visited the main campus of the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind and met with a member of the leadership team for this tour. SCSDB is the state's specialized school for students who are deaf or blind and are between the ages of 3 and 21. The main campus offers parents a unique school environment that is suited to meet the individual needs of their child and offers both day and residential programs.

Banker and Davidson took a full tour of the school and its 160-acre campus, which included viewing classrooms, the media center, cafeteria, bowling alley, and the student-run greenhouse. Each year, students conduct an annual spring plant sale at the Casey-Dalton Pavilion near the school.

This tour provided an overview of what services are currently being offered by the school, as well as the qualifications and documentation needed for admission. This information is helpful to have and allows SI employees to provide accurate information about SCSDB to constituents through the DCA hotline.

No complaints about nor critical incident notifications from SCSDB were received by DCA in FY25.

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## WIL LOU GRAY OPPORTUNITY SCHOOL (WLG)

The System Improvement team visited the Wil Lou Gray campus in November 2024 and met with President Pat Smith and his leadership team. During the tour, SI learned about the admission requirements and curriculum, designed to help students earn their GED diploma. Staff also learned about numerous activities that are available and certifications, like ServSafe, that can be obtained from the school.

This tour provided an overview of what services are currently being offered by the school, as well as the qualifications and documentation needed for admission. This information is helpful to have and allows SI employees to provide accurate information about WLG to constituents through the DCA hotline.

No complaints about nor critical incident notifications from WLG were received by DCA in FY25.



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## STATE CHILD ADVOCATE

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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 McMaster on June 3, 2019. She served until April 21, 2025. During FY25, Whittle regularly engaged with leaders and community advocates to create opportunities for ongoing learning, information-sharing, and coordination through meetings, hearings, conferences, and other communication efforts. Below is just a sample of activities she participated in:

### SERVING ON THE:

- 988 State Advisory Board
- Attorney General's Human Trafficking Task Force
- Bench Bar Committee (ex officio member)
- Bench Bar Direct Representation Subcommittee (Chair 2024-2025)
- Children's Justice Act Task Force
- Children's Trust of South Carolina Policy Committee
- Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Council
- Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children
- Joint Council for Children and Adolescents (Chair, 2020; Member, 2019-2025)
- KinCarolina Advisory Committee
- Master Plan Advisory Committee
- Medicaid Advisory Committee (formerly the Medical Care Advisory Committee)
- Safe Babies Court State Advisory Board
- S.C. Bar Children's Law Committee
- State Child Fatality Advisory Committee (Chair, 2022-2024; Member 2019-2025)
- State Crisis Intervention Advisory Board
- Suicide Prevention Coalition
- United States Ombudsman Association, Child and Family Chapter; Healthcare Chapter

### PRESENTING/SPEAKING AT THE:

- Child Abuse Prevention Month Kick-Off meeting hosted by Children's Trust SC
- Child Abuse Prevention Month press conference
- Children's Advocacy Centers Day press conference
- DCA Agency-Wide Motivational Interviewing Training
- DCA leadership trainings and meetings
- DCA Foster Care Review Board Regional Professional Development sessions
- DCA Foster Care Review Board 50th Anniversary Celebration
- DCA Guardian ad Litem Program state-wide conference
- Disability Pride Day at the S.C. State Museum
- Family Court Judicial Conference
- General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) Winter Board Meeting
- Legislative oversight hearings, budget hearings, and additional subcommittee hearings
- South Carolina Bar Convention 2025
- University of South Carolina School of Medicine Community Learning Saturday
- University of South Carolina School of Law

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### ADDITIONAL COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS:

- DCA's The Advocate newsletter
- DCA's social media channels
- Media interviews, articles, and press conferences
- Conversations with other agencies and organizations in South Carolina and throughout the country

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**Left:** State Child Advocate Amanda Whittle at the groundbreaking ceremony for the William R. Byars, Jr. Treatment Center, the state-run psychiatric residential treatment facility, on September 16, 2024.



## CONTACT US

1205 Pendleton Street, Suite 471  
Columbia, SC 29201  
(803) 734-3176

**[childadvocate.sc.gov](http://childadvocate.sc.gov)**

This report was prepared by the South Carolina Department of Children's Advocacy. For additional information, please email [communications@childadvocate.sc.gov](mailto:communications@childadvocate.sc.gov) or call (803) 734-3176. The cost of printing 75 copies was \$14.85 per copy, totaling \$1,113.76.