

To: Candice Broce, Commissioner, Department of Human Services and Division Director, Division of Family and Children Services

From: Katie Mulvanity

Re: Improving DFCS Screening for Child Abuse in Georgia

Date: July 2, 2025

Problem Statement:

In 2023, the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law found that 84% of child abuse cases by the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) did not properly investigate claims of abuse of children (U.S. Senate Committee, 2024). Senator John Ossoff declared systemic failures at the DFCS. The DFCS does not provide adequate protection to abused and neglected children in the state (U.S. Senate Committee, 2024). Each year, DFCS receives over 100,000 reports of maltreatment of children. In 2024, DFCS received 122,832 reports (1,567 child endangerment, 6,722 emotional abuse, 98,823 neglect, 18,622 physical abuse, 7,188 sexual abuse) (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2024). Ms. Broce, as the Commissioner of the Department of Human Services, and the Director of the Division of Family and Children services, it is your responsibility to improve DFCS response to reports of child abuse and neglect. If no action is taken, neglected cases of child abuse will persist. Knowing this, what can be done to improve DFCS screening for child abuse in Georgia?

Background Information:

While the Georgia DFCS performs many functions (overseeing the state's SNAP, TANF, and Medicaid programs, managing the foster care system, and providing parental education), the core duty of the organization is investigating reports of child abuse and neglect. This core function is embedded in the guiding principle of the Georgia Division of Family and Children's Services which is to "commit to the safety of our children in the decisions we make and the actions we take" (Georgia DFCS, 2018). Additionally, the vision and mission of the department highlights the centrality of protecting children. The DFCS vision is "Safe children. Strengthened families. Stronger Georgia." The mission of the organization is to "prioritize the safety of Georgia's children in the decisions that we make and the actions we take. They partner with families on their path to independence and to build stronger communities with caring, effective, and responsive service" (Georgia DFCS, 2018).

Unfortunately, the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services has been identified as having systemic issues in the area of safeguarding the welfare of children by the Senate of the United States. As stated previously, the study found that the vast majority of reports of child

abuse were not handled properly. This puts the welfare of tens of thousands of Georgia's youth at risk.

The Child Welfare Services Case Manager is responsible for evaluating children for potential abuse. Unfortunately, In the state of Georgia, the power of case managers is significantly limited. According to GA Code § 15-11-133 (2016), a child can only be removed from a home by a law enforcement officer or officer of the court if the child is in imminent danger of abuse or the victim of trafficking (Mandated Reporter Law, 2016). Otherwise, the case manager must petition the court or seek the intervention of law enforcement officers to place the child into protective custody. This is a time-consuming process and places the child in unnecessary danger.

DFCS case managers are overworked and underpaid. The average caseload of a DFCS caseworker is currently 19.3, but in some counties, the caseload can be over 100. The starting salary of DFCS caseworkers in the state of Georgia is approximately \$47,000 (State of Georgia, 2025) while the average salary is \$58,980. The position requires a bachelor's degree at a minimum. The annual turnover rate of caseworkers at DFCS is 30.3%. The turnover rate at DFCS is more than double that of the state of Georgia (13.2%).

The majority of reports of child abuse/neglect are made by mandated reporters. In the state of Georgia, mandated reporters are enumerated in OCGA 19-7-5(c)(1) (Mandated Reporter Law, 2016) and include teachers, medical professionals, and law enforcement officials. The training for these mandated reporters is inadequate. Currently, training concentrates on the legal ramifications of not submitting a report and not on the provision of information necessary for the DFCS case manager to make informed decisions regarding safeguarding the well-being of the child.

Policy Option Analysis:

Option 1: Improve the Retention of Child protective Services (CPS) Caseworkers By Raising starting and Career Salaries

By improving the retention of CPS workers, it would avoid loss of human capital. Loss of human capital or knowledge creates additional stress on the remaining employees. This causes their caseloads to increase until a new caseworker can be hired and trained. For starting employees, compensation is low and this reduces the number of candidates for the job. Additionally, salary increases throughout the career are not significant. Even considering an increase in salary, DFCS caseworkers report significant mental stress as a major reason for leaving the job. Increasing salaries will have no impact on the amount of stress experienced due to the nature of the job. The cost for this solution on the state of Georgia's spending would be significant. There are approximately 1,000 caseworkers in the state, given a \$1,000 pay increase per caseworker would result in a \$1,000,000 impact to the budget. The state of Georgia must

have a balanced budget. If significant increases in the salaries of caseworkers are called for, the funds would need to be withheld from another program. This could become a complicated political issue for the delegation of the state budget.

Option 2: Expand the Authority of CPS Caseworkers

Per current state policy, in order to remove a child from an unsafe situation, the caseworker must convince a law enforcement official or an officer of the court that the removal is warranted. This places responsibility for removal on the court and/or law enforcement officials and can delay the removal of a child in danger. Expanding the authority of CPS caseworkers to allow them to immediately remove a child from a household would place the child into protective custody until a full and accurate review of the child's safety could be conducted. In terms of effectiveness, this solution would allow DFCS caseworkers to directly remove children from dangerous situations. This would put financial responsibility of the child onto the state. The state will need to bear the cost of housing and providing basic needs for the child. Current guidelines for authority of DFCS caseworkers if codified into Georgia law, the Georgia General Assembly would need to take action. If the lawmakers approve the change, DFCS case managers would require additional training of the removal process. Training the DFCS workers to properly enforce the removal of a child will cost time and money for the state.

Option 3: Increase Training for Mandated Reporters

A mandated reporter is a person who is legally obligated to report suspected child abuse or neglect to the appropriate authorities. Currently, mandated reporters are the main pipeline of referrals for investigation of child abuse or neglect. They are responsible for identifying potential signs of abuse and usual work with or around children. Mandated reporters typically receive one hour training per year. The main focus of this training is the legal requirements of mandated reports. Additional training focused on providing mandated reporters with quality information of the incident of neglect and abuse could be provided. This would give the mandated reporter the tools they need to better identify signs of abuse, as well as give the DFCS caseworker more information to make an appropriate recommendation more efficiently. While this solution would facilitate more quality information from the mandated reporters, the DFCS caseworker will still be the key figure in the process. This leaves a barrier remaining between the original report, and the removal of a child from the situation. The state would need to create additional training curriculum for the mandated reporters. The current trainers would be required to dedicate a significant amount of time to this activity. The development of the curriculum and the provision of training would not be a major hurdle when implementing this solution.

Recommendation:

Of the three options presented, the best option for Candice Broce to implement for improving screening for child abuse in Georgia would be *Option 3: Increase Training for*

Mandated Reporters. Option 3 is the most effective option because of the timeliness, effectiveness, cost, and impact on the workforce. This method would take a considerable amount of time. The training would have to be designed to increase the effectiveness and details of child abuse reports. This would take a significant amount of time for the trainers as well as the mandated reporters to accomplish. There is also potential stress added onto the workforce due to the time dedicated to the training. In terms of effectiveness, this method would increase the number of child abuse reports and the effectiveness of the mandated reporters. This would provide the DFCS workers with vital details and information needed to make decisions regarding a child's welfare. Costwise, developing the training would cost the state money and resources but not a significant amount. Considering these factors, this method best provides DFCS the information they need to make educated decisions on a child's welfare. In terms of ranking the effectiveness of the other options, *Option 2 : Expand the Authority of CPS Caseworkers* would be the best alternative option. This method would be effective in that CPS caseworkers would be able to remove children, however this would not be effective if used incorrectly and would not increase the cases reported. The last option to be recommended would be *Option 3 : Improve the Retention of Child Protective Services (CPS) Caseworkers By Raising Starting and Career Salaries*. This option would be the least effective as there is no proof that increasing salaries of case workers would be effective in retaining them. This option would also be extremely expensive for the state of Georgia's budget.

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