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# FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE STUDY COMMITTEE ON ADDITIONAL SERVICES AND RESOURCES FOR TRANSITION AGE YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE (SR 310)

## Committee Members

**Senator Kay Kirkpatrick, Chair**
***District 32***

**Senator Bo Hatchett**
***District 50***

**Senator Chuck Payne**
***District 54***

**Senator Derek Mallow**
***District 2***

**Senator Elena Parent**
***District 44***

***Prepared by the Senate Office of Policy and Legislative Analysis, 2025***

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# STUDY COMMITTEE CREATION, FOCUS, AND DUTIES

The Senate Study Committee on Additional Services and Resources for Transition Age Youth in Foster Care was created by Senate Resolution 310 during the 2025 Legislative Session of the Georgia General Assembly.[1] The Study Committee was tasked with undertaking a study to determine what resources and services are currently being provided for transition age youth in this state and what additional services and resources may be or should be available in order to ensure their success in adulthood.

Senator Kay Kirkpatrick of the 32nd served as Chair of the Study Committee. The other Senate members were Senator Bo Hatchett of the 50th, Senator Derek Mallow of the 2nd, Senator Elena Parent of the 44th, and Senator Chuck Payne of the 54th.

The following legislative staff members were assigned to the Study Committee: Daly Kennedy, Office of Senator Kay Kirkpatrick; Caroline Hicks, Senate Budget and Evaluation Office; Emily Leonard, Senate Press Office; Bailey Sailors, Senate Office of Policy and Legislative Analysis; and Kate Alexander, Office of Legislative Counsel.

The Study Committee held five meetings at the State Capitol. The meetings were held on August 20, 2025; September 20, 2025; October 15, 2025; November 17, 2025; and the final meeting to approve this report on November 21, 2025.

[1] S.R. 310, https://www.legis.ga.gov/legislation/71018.

# BACKGROUND

***Senate Study Committee on Additional Services and Resources for Transition Age Youth in Foster Care Purpose***

Senate Resolution 310 establishes the Senate Study Committee on Additional Services and Resources for Transition Age Youth in Foster Care. SR 310 explains that the transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical developmental stage, but the transition can be challenging for youth with foster care experience. According to a 2021 study, 79 percent of 21-year-olds with foster care experience earned a high school diploma or equivalent compared to 92 percent of their peers in the general population. Further, only 24 percent of those foster care youth had enrolled in postsecondary education or training, compared to 50 percent of their peers in the general population. Only 55 percent of those foster care youth were employed full time or part time, compared to 64 percent of their peers in the general population. The Senate Study Committee on Additional Services and Resources for Transition Age Youth in Foster Care is needed to determine what resources and services are currently being provided for transition age youth in this state and what additional services and resources may be or should be available in order to ensure their success in adulthood.

***Extended Youth Support Services Overview***

According to the Department of Human Services (DHS), foster care youths who turn 18 years old may continue receiving foster care assistance by participating in the Extended Youth Support Services Program (EYSS). EYSS is a voluntary agreement between the foster youth and DFCS that allows the youth to continue receiving foster care services between the ages of 18-21. The program helps foster youth be better able to fully support themselves and maintain independence after reaching the age of 21. EYSS participants live in a foster home, group home, independent living housing program, or college housing.

EYSS participants must work with a DFCS Social Services Case Manager (SSCM), placement resource or provider, and/or Independent Living Specialist (ILS) and to update Written Transitional Living Plan (WTLP) goals. Participants also must check in every month with a Social Services Case Manager and/or Independent Living Specialist to monitor progress. The SSCM or ILS provide the support services stated in the youth's Case Plan.[2] Based on current DHS data, there are 642 youth aged 18 to 21 currently receiving voluntary care after turning 18.[3]

*Statutory Framework for Extended Youth Support Services: O.C.G.A. 15-11-340*

To receive EYSS, the foster youth must be between 18 and 21 years of age, sign a voluntary placement agreement with DFCS, and meet objective eligibility criteria established by DFCS. The eligibility criteria must include one or more of the following requirements:

(1) Be completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential;
(2) Be enrolled in an institution which provides postsecondary or vocational education;
(3) Be a participant in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment;
(4) Be employed for at least 120 hours per month;
(5) Be employed for 80 hours per month, provided that he or she is also engaged in one of the activities described in paragraphs (1) through (3) of this subsection or can only work 80 hours per month due to a medical condition; **or**
(6) Be incapable of doing any of the activities described in paragraphs (1) through (5) of this subsection due to a medical condition.

When a foster youth is receiving EYSS, a DFCS case manager and the youth, or a representative of the youth, must develop a personalized transition plan. The plan must include options for housing, health care,

[2] https://www.gascore.com/documents/Extended_Youth_Support_Services_(EYSS)_Information_&_Overview.pdf.
[3] https://dhs.georgia.gov/division-family-children-services-child-welfare.

education, mentorship, workforce and employment services and may be as detailed as the foster youth chooses. The plan must also be completed within 30 days of the youth agreeing to EYSS services.

Every 12 months, a DFCS case manager must determine if the foster youth is still eligible for EYSS. So long as the youth remains eligible for EYSS and is receiving services, the court must conduct periodic review hearings. A hearing must be held no later than 12 months following the previous hearing. If DFCS determines that a youth is no longer eligible for EYSS, DFCS may stop providing services. DFCS must provide notice to the youth and to the court that approved the services. Within the 90-day period prior to a youth no longer receiving EYSS, a DFCS case manager and other representatives of the youth must develop a final, personalized transition plan at the direction of the youth. The plan must include the options discussed above.

***Current Extended Youth Support Services in Georgia***

*Georgia Resilient, Youth-Centered, Stable, and Empowered (GA RYSE)*[4]

GA RYSE is DFCS's Independent Living Program (ILP). To be eligible for the program, the youth: (1) has been adjudicated as dependent or as a child in need of services; (2) is or was in foster care for at least six months prior to turning 18; and (3) if the youth is 18 to 21, they must be a citizen and/or permanent resident of Georgia. DCFS utilizes Case Life Skills Assessments to assess the life skills, strengths, and vulnerabilities of foster youth, and the results are incorporated in the youth's WTLP and supportive life skills workshops. These monthly workshops allow youth to learn life skills designed to assist them in being self-sufficient when they leave or age out.

RYSE also utilizes Transitional Living Placements (TLP) and Independent Living Programs (ILP) to assist youth transitioning to adulthood. TLP support youth who are ready for some independence but are not yet ready to live on their own. For a TLP placement, youth must be at least 16 years of age with any permanency plan and have been assessed to be invested in and able to benefit from the TLP. Youth in TLP programs must have a life coach who helps them set and reach goals using a variety of tools and techniques. Life Coaches model life skills and provide activities for youth to practice life skills. ILP allow the youth to experience decreased care and supervision as they become responsible for their own care. To transition to an ILP, a youth must: (1) be at least 18; (2) elect to participate in EYSS; and (3) be deemed invested in and able to benefit from ILP. Youth in EYSS must be employed at least part time or be attending school full-time.

RYSE also provides postsecondary financial support through the Federal Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) Program and ILP college funding. Services that may be funded through these programs include: application fees, registration fees, tuition assistance, room and board, textbooks and supplies, tutoring, testing, and stipends. To be eligible for the ETV Program, participating youth are generally: up to age 21, have completed high school or its equivalent, presently in foster care, aged out of the foster care system after the age of 18, entered kinship guardianship after age 16, adopted after age 14, met six-month criteria after age 14.[5]

*More Information on Independent Living Programs*[6]

ILP provide eligible youth currently or formerly in foster care with services to successfully prepare and transition to adulthood. ILP services provide youth with the life skills and education necessary to become self-sufficient, live independently, and maintain stable employment. Services include life skills training, financial assistance, and educational and social support. ILP also provides post-foster care resources, including:

[4] https://www.gacasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Candis-Jones-GARYSE-Chafee-Program-Supports-for-Older-Youth-in-Foster-Care.pdf.
[5] https://www.garyse-ilp.org/programs/education#:~:text=Primary%20eligibility%3A,contact%20your%20Independent%20Living%20Specialist.
[6] https://pamms.dhs.ga.gov/dfcs/cws/13-00/.

- Transitional Living Supportive Services: This support is for youth currently or previously in foster care. This is funded by the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) to assist with rental assistance (e.g., startup costs such as utility or rental deposits), life coaching, short-term counseling and support group related expenses.
- Emergency Financial Assistance: This financial resource is also supported by the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program and is designed to prevent homelessness. Youth applying for emergency assistance will be offered time limited support services along with life coaching to assist them in maintaining self sufficiency. Emergency Financial Assistance must be a qualified expense such as food, clothing, rent, medical costs or transportation.
- Education and Training Vouchers: In 2022, 283 students in care utilized ETV (Education and Training Voucher Program) services. The Division disbursed a total of $1,738,724.80 for post-secondary educational expenses. At the end of the 2022 school year, nine young adults graduated with a bachelor's degree. In 2023, 190 students in care graduated with a high school diploma or a GED (172 confirmed high school graduates and 18 confirmed GED recipients). From the group of students who graduated high school or received a GED, 42 percent had a desire to attend college or join the armed forces.
- Graduated Independence: This allows youth in foster care (ages 14-17) or participating in EYSS to participate in age and developmentally appropriate activities to facilitate normalcy for youth receiving foster care services.

*Connected by 21 (CB21)*[7]

The Connected by 21 program bridges the gap between adolescence and adulthood and provide youth who are aging out of foster care with the social, educational, medical, and financial foundation they need to live independently as adults. Participants must meet additional requirements such as being employed or attending secondary or post-secondary school. Through the Connections Program, the division hopes to inspire youth to: prepare for their future through educational and employment training opportunities; find and secure consistent and safe housing; build permanent connections with caring adults, including relatives, mentors and community members; and acquire vital life skills through training and leadership opportunities to live independently. Since 2014, on average, 75 percent of the youth who turn 18 in the Georgia foster care system elect to remain in extended foster care. In 2019, 517 of the 700 youth who turned 18 decided that remaining in foster care was in their best interest. In FFY 2022, 406 (78 percent) youth 18 or older elected to remain in, or return to, foster care in Georgia.

*Georgia CREW*[8]

For over 13 years, the Cultivating the Rising Experienced Worker (CREW) program, formerly known as the Georgia TeenWork Internship Program, has provided valuable work readiness training and youth employment experiences for older youth in care for over 13 years. The CREW Program serves as the youth employment hub within DFCS. The program provides a youth-friendly environment where participants can engage in a series of employment preparation services such as workshops, trainings, resource connections, hands-on work experiences and more. The goals of the CREW Program are to: encourage the self-sufficiency of Georgia's foster and opportunity youth through the development of employability and work readiness skills; provide employability training and hands-on work experience for foster care and TANF-eligible youth who are 16 and 17 years old; and provide employment resource connections for Georgia's foster and opportunity youth.

[7] https://dhs.georgia.gov/book/export/html/19171.
[8] https://dhs.georgia.gov/book/export/html/19171.

The Youth Employment Services Summer Program allows young people 16-17 years old currently in foster care to gain career experiences, attend weekly workshops on career education and training, and engage in career mentorship, and one-on-one coaching. Participants can receive a paid incentive for their participation and completion of the weekly sessions. The goal is to help transition participants into successful, independent young adults by arming them with marketable skills and supportive mentoring experience. To participate, a youth must: (1) be between the ages of 16-17 years old; (2) currently in GA foster care; (3) be a US citizen, permanent resident, or have an employment authorization card; (4) possess a valid State of Georgia photo ID; (5) have official proof of Social Security Number; (6) commit to the program requirements and protocol; and (7) possess supporting documents for USCIS Form I-9 Employment Verification Form.[9]

***Challenges Faced by Youth Aging Out of Care***

Transition age foster youth face unique challenges compared to non-foster care youth. These youth are more likely to experience behavioral, mental and physical health issues, housing problems and homelessness, employment and academic difficulties, early parenthood, incarceration and other potentially lifelong adversities. Data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation shows that youth aging out of foster care face issues with housing instability, academic difficulties, early parenthood, legal system involvement, substance use, and unemployment.[10] Georgia specific data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation mirrors the national data. Out of all young people who have experienced foster care: 23 percent are uninsured; 41 percent are incarcerated; 37 percent are unemployed; and 35 percent lack stable housing.[11] This data shows that more can be done to provide support to youth aging out of foster care.

[9] https://dfcs.georgia.gov/services/georgia-crew-cultivating-rising-experienced-worker.
[10] https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-happens-to-youth-aging-out-of-foster-care.
[11] https://www.georgiatrend.com/2024/07/09/stabilizing-the-transition-to-adulthood-for-georgias-youth-that-have-aged-out-of-foster-care/.

# SUMMARY OF TESTIMONY AND DISCUSSION

## MEETING ONE

**Date**: August 20, 2025
**Location**: Georgia State Capitol – Atlanta, GA
**Topic**: Introducing the Problem

**Committee Members Present**

**Chair**: K. Kirkpatrick
**Senators**: E. Parent; B. Hatchett; C. Payne
**Speakers:** C. Calpin (Casey Family Foundation); B. Sailors (Senate Office of Policy and Legislative Analysis): D. Calhoun (DHS); D. Rudy (Multi-Agency Alliance for Children)

**Summary of Testimony**

1. Christine Calpin (Casey Family Foundation)

Ms. Calpin stated that the Casey Foundation is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care. She said the Foundation partners with jurisdictions in all 50 states to provide resources to agencies supporting foster youth. She shared some data demonstrating that outcomes for children who grow up in foster care are poor. For example, 48.4 percent of these youth have a high school diploma and 46.9 percent are currently unemployed. Ms. Calpin explained federal legislation and investment in supports for transition age foster youth. These programs include the Title IV-E Independent Living Program, Chafee Foster Care for Successful Transition to Adulthood Program, and Chafee Education and Training Vouchers. She shared that Georgia has a lower rate of children entering care than the national rate, and both of these rates are declining. However, the number of youths aging out of care is not declining at the same rate. She continued by sharing that, in 2023, 43 percent of youth aging out of care entered care at ages 16 to 18.

Ms. Calpin shared data breaking down the reasons youth who age out enter care. She also shared data regarding the placement at exit of youth who age out of care. She said the goal is to replicate family settings for the youths at exit because youths need stability to thrive. However, it can be difficult for these youths to achieve stability. She shared that, in 2023, the median number of placements for an aging out youth was five placements which means the youth was moved five times prior to leaving care. She said that 29 percent of aging out youth had 10+ placements in 2023. Ms. Calpin explained the purposes and goals of the Chafee Foster Care Program. These purposes include, but are not limited to, supporting all youth who have experienced foster care at age 14 or older in their transition to adulthood through transitional services and ensuring children who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age have regular, on-going opportunities to engage in age or developmentally-appropriate activities. She shared how Georgia is utilizing transition age youth services.

Percent of Youth Receiving Each Service (of total youth served)

Color legend
6% 77%

| Independent living service | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Independent Living Needs Assessment | 47% | 48% | 50% | 43% | 45% |
| Academic Support | 71% | 72% | 71% | 65% | 66% |
| Post-Secondary Educational Support | 13% | 15% | 18% | 15% | 16% |
| Career Preparation | 36% | 30% | 33% | 30% | 29% |
| Employment Program or Vocational Training | 30% | 26% | 30% | 27% | 26% |
| Budget & Financial Management | 45% | 42% | 47% | 43% | 40% |
| Housing Education & Home Management | 62% | 64% | 64% | 62% | 64% |
| Health Education & Risk Prevention | 74% | 75% | 75% | 77% | 73% |
| Family Support and Healthy Marriage Education | 44% | 43% | 42% | 40% | 37% |
| Mentoring | 37% | 36% | 38% | 37% | 38% |
| Supervised Independent Living | 13% | 13% | 12% | 10% | 9% |
| Room & Board Financial Assistance | 18% | 18% | 15% | 13% | 12% |
| Education Financial Assistance | 8% | 8% | 8% | 7% | 7% |
| Other Financial Assistance | 8% | 6% | 7% | 8% | 7% |
| Total Served | 4,113 | 4,096 | 3,886 | 3,808 | 3,790 |

Ms. Calpin shared some findings from a 2022 Think of Us report. This report questioned aging out youth and detailed the needs and struggles faced by this population. She said the report explained that aging out youth struggle with: (1) healing and dealing with trauma; (2) preparing for adulthood; and (3) building a supportive network. She concluded by emphasizing that we need to center a youth's needs while they are in foster care while promoting permanency and stability.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick said that a focus of the Children and Families Committee has been prevention. She asked what steps are being taken to prevent children from entering the system in the first place. Ms. Calpin said that implementing more specialized mental and behavioral health interventions can increase prevention. She explained that custody would not have to be relinquished into care to deal with behavioral health issues if other options for care were in place and supporting families can also reduce the number of children entering care, and there are options for helping children who are just in need that don't require the child to enter care.

Senator Payne shared his experience dealing with youth in the foster care system and with parents who are struggling to or do not want to care for their children. He continued by stating that working on increasing accountability for parents and support for families could reduce children in care. Ms. Calpin said early intervention into the family is key for preventing the need for youth to enter care. Senator Parent asked for more information on interventions for youth dealing with trauma, Ms. Calpin said that mental health programs have been implemented in Georgia, and youth who age out of care are eligible for Medicaid until they are 26.

2. Bailey Sailors (Senate Office of Policy and Legislative Analysis)

OPLA provided an overview of recent foster care legislation in Georgia. The presentation summarized 11 bills passed from 2023 to 2025. Streamlining the processes for child placement was a common theme among the bills. Certain bills were of particular interest to the committee because they have an impact on foster youth receiving extended foster care services. These bills include: Senate Bill 401 which implemented recommendations from the Senate Foster Care and Adoption Study Committee; Senate Bill 85 which established the Georgia Foster Care Scholarship program; and House Bill 136 which increased the annual aggregate amount of the tax credit to $30 million and expands the number of qualified foster child support organizations.

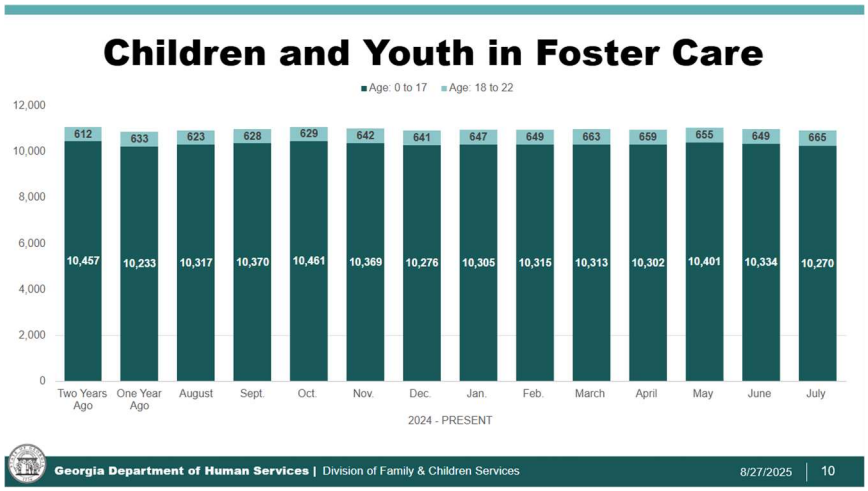
3. Donjai Calhoun (Department of Human Services)

Mr. Calhoun explained the Georgia Resilient, Youth-Centered, Stable, and Empowered Program (GA/RYSE which is Georgia's implementation of the Chafee program. He further explained that foster youth may receive extended youth services from DFCS if they are between 18 and 21 years of age, sign a voluntary placement agreement, and meet one or more of the following requirements:

(1) Be completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential (e.g., high school or GED);
(2) Be enrolled in an institution which provides postsecondary or vocational education;
(3) Be a participant in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment;
(4) Be employed for at least 120 hours per month;
(5) Be employed for 80 hours per month, providing that they are also engaged in one of the activities described in bullets 1-3; or
(6) Be incapable of doing any of the activities described in bullets 1-5 due to a medical condition.

Youth who leave foster care can voluntarily return up until age 20.

Mr. Calhoun shared that, as of August 1, 2025, 11,024 youth were in foster care in Georgia. 3,092 are between the ages of 14 and 20, and 673 young adults ages 18 to 20 are in extended foster care. He shared the following data:




Mr. Calhoun explained that GA/RYSE provides several post-foster care services to Independent Living Program-eligible youth, as funding permits. These services include: transitional support services like start up housing costs; emergency financial assistance for up to 90 days to stabilize living conditions and/or personal circumstances; and post-secondary education financial support. He also explained the Education and Training Voucher Program (federally funded initiative that provides up to $5,000 per year toward the cost of post-secondary education or training), the Georgia Post-Secondary Tuition Waiver Program (exempts or waives tuition and fees for students attending a TCSG college), and the Fostering Success Act (uses tax credits for donations made to qualified foster child support organizations to fund wrap-around services for foster youth who have aged out of care).

Mr. Calhoun also explained the process for youth transitioning from foster care. Key stakeholders must meet no later than 90 days prior to the youth's 18th or 21st birthday to create a transition plan. The transition plan must contain: housing options; education; workforce supports and employment services; money management and finances; credit report; transportation; essential documents; health; and health insurance. He explained that the youth sets their own goals and identifies resources for the plan, and an assigned case manager follows up to ensure the plan steps are in progress and assists in making updates as needed before the exit date. He concluded by explaining the Georgia Peers Advocating for Change (GPAC). GPAC is the youth advisory board for Georgia's foster care system and is comprised of youth ages 16 to 26 currently and formerly in foster care. The members offer recommendations to DFCS leadership and partners on youth-related policies, programs, and services

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked if Georgia was utilizing all available federal dollars. Mr. Calhoun said the funding is being utilized, but there is not enough interest among youth to fully utilize all available ETV funding. Chairwoman asked if DFCS had a contact with TCSG to help increase participation. Mr. Calhoun said there is not an ETV contact, but they do work with TCSG on tuition waivers for youth in need. Chairwoman asked if he felt like Georgia was moving in the right direction and what steps he would take. Mr. Calhoun said we are making progress, and DFCS is taking steps to increase the array of services.

4. <u>Deven Rudy (Multi-Agency Alliance for Children)</u>

Ms. Rudy said that she is the youth engagement coordinator with the Georgia EmpowerMEnt program through MAAC and explained that the EmpowerMEnt program is dedicated to training and empowering young people who are currently in or have experienced foster care. She said the program's mission is to influence and improve the way policies are written and administered, ensuring that decisions affecting youth experiencing foster care are made with their direct input and lived experience expertise. She introduced Regginald Holloway and Kyra Stoute and explained that they will share their lived experience in foster care.

Mr. Holloway said that he has over 17 years of experience in the Georgia foster care system. He shared that housing instability was one of the biggest struggles he faced, and he said many other youths in foster care face this struggle. He explained that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Foster Youth to Independence program offers up to three years of rental assistance to young adults who have moved on from foster care, but in order to receive assistance, the state must apply for the voucher. He said that Georgia has only received eight vouchers in total since the program began, but Florida has received 75 vouchers each year. He also shared that improving access to mental health care is critical for foster youth because youth who experience foster care experience PTSD at rates double that of war veterans. He concluded by naming some community-based resources that helped him succeed and by emphasizing the importance of building a strong community support network.

Ms. Stoute highlighted two issues that shaped her foster care journey: education setbacks and housing struggles. She explained that many transition-age youth in high school face academic challenges that delay graduation, prevent them from qualifying for the HOPE Scholarship, and shorten the time they can access programs like Education and Training Voucher. She said these setbacks are often caused by placement instability. She explained that moving placements caused her to move schools, and not all of her credits transferred when she moved schools. She shared that many youths do not feel supported when they try to get back on track. She explained that housing instability compounded academic issues because it is almost impossible to focus on school when you don't know where you're going to sleep. She shared some of the organizations that have helped her succeed and explained that these organizations have formed a dedicated continuum of care to provide holistic supports to youth and relieves pressure off of the overloaded hardworking division employees; which makes their jobs easier.

Senator Hatchett asked if the credit transfer issue was consistent throughout K – 12. Ms. Stout said it is an issue in all grades, but it has a more significant impact in high school. She shared counselors are often not fully informed on ways for students to catch up. Ms. Rudy explained that delays in enrollment also set students back.

## MEETING TWO

**Date**: September 10, 2025
**Location**: Georgia State Capitol – Atlanta, GA
**Topic**: Housing Issues and Perspectives from Service Providers

**Committee Members Present**

**Chair**: K. Kirkpatrick
**Senators**: E. Parent; B. Hatchett; C. Payne (Zoom)
**Speakers:** D. Lynch (Georgia Appleseed); R. Evans and L. Holland (Department of Community Affairs); E. Appley (Housing Trust Fund); C. Cantrell (Together Georgia); A. Ashe (Wellroot Family Services); J. Wheeler and C. Hannah (Youth Villages); E. Harris (Youth Empowerment Success Services); C. Stone (Chris180); R. Castillo (Advocates for Children)

**Summary of Testimony**

1. Lieutenant Governor Burt Jones

Lieutenant Governor Jones welcomed the study committee via video, shared his support for the committee, and emphasized the importance of the committee's work.

2. Darlene Lynch (Georgia Appleseed) and Elton Dixon (Enay Coaching)

Ms. Lynch explained the work of Georgia Appleseed and introduced the *See Me* art exhibit. Mr. Dixon explained that the art exhibit was created by Valdosta youth in care. He said the art offers the youth a chance to tell their story and express their feelings about life in care. He stated that having hope, healing from pain, and yearning for family are common themes expressed in the artwork.

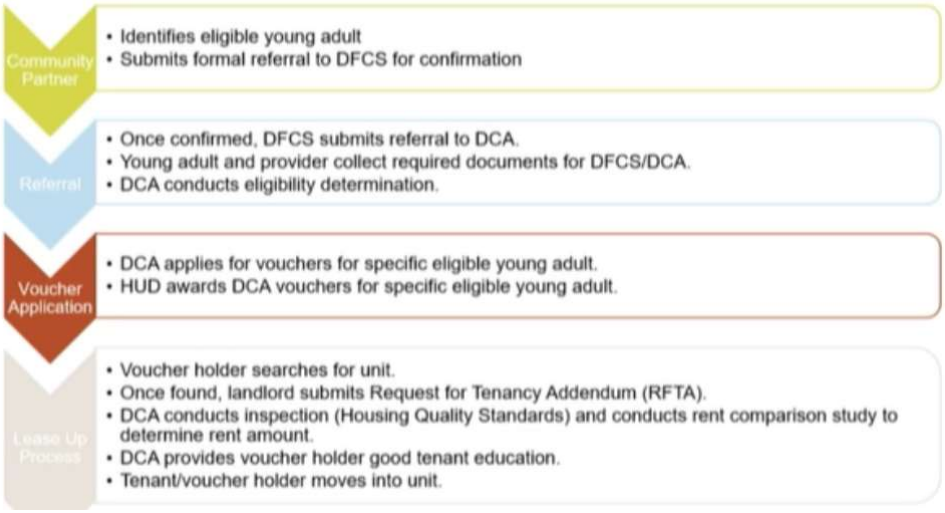
He continued by explaining how the art project was turned into a workforce development project. He works with the youth to set up a savings plan with a goal of saving $10,000 and connecting the youth with work-based learning programs and youth apprenticeship programs. The youth also earned commissions from the artwork they created. Mr. Dixon said transition age youth often hear conflicting opinions, and these sources of information are not always well-informed. He works on professional development with the foster parents to allow for more informed conversations and future planning between the parents and the youth.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked what happens to the artwork. Ms. Lynch said it remains with Georgia Appleseed and the organization displays it across the state. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked if Mr. Dixon had a lot of local partners. He said yes, and the partnerships have allowed them to be very successful in their community.

3. Ryan Evans and Laura Ann Holland (Department of Community Affairs)

Ms. Evans said DCA is one of 20 public housing authorities (PHAs) in the state that administers federal special purpose and housing choice vouchers. Ms. Holland began by emphasizing the complexities of administering these programs. She explained that DCA administers the housing choice voucher program on the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) behalf in a specific geography. She explained that DCA collaborates and shares information with other voucher administrators, but does not provide oversight or have any convening authority over other voucher administrators. Ms. Holland explained that the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Initiative provides housing choice vouchers to PHAs to provide housing assistance to youth who: are between 18 and 25 years of age; left foster care or will leave foster care within 90 days; and are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. FYI vouchers are available to youth for up to three years. She continued by explaining that the number of vouchers that each voucher administrator receives is dependent upon the number of referrals that they have received from DFCS for eligible youth.

Ms. Holland also explained that the Family Unification Program (FUP) provides housing choice vouchers to PHAs to provide housing assistance to youth who meet the FYI requirements listed above. FUP can also serve families for whom the lack of adequate housing is a primary factor in either the risk of placement of the family's child(ren) in out-of-home care or creating a delay in the reunification of the child(ren) to return to the home. There is no time limit as a recipient for families who receive FUP vouchers. Ms. Holland stated that there are more than 500 FUP active in Georgia, but each housing authority has a different amount and DCA has no FUP vouchers available. Ms. Holland said each voucher administrator must apply through HUD for the both the FYI and FUP vouchers, but these application processes are different. She explained that HUD recently created a non-competitive process for applying for FYI vouchers. Each voucher administrator can apply for up to 25 vouchers per year with a maximum of 50 vouchers total.




Ms. Holland emphasized the importance of the referral relationship between DFCS and the PHA. She explained the steps DCA has taken to collaborate with DFCS and other PHAs to educate them on the importance of this relationship and on how to take advantage of these federal resources. She also explained the challenges that prevent the effective utilization of federal resources. For example, recipients are limited to living in the geography where they receive their voucher and moving geographies is costly and places an administrative burden on the recipient and the voucher administrator. Another challenge is that the amount of funding awarded for the vouchers is significantly less than the amounts typically needed to live in the area where the recipient is interested in living.

Ms. Holland concluded by explaining that DCA hosts another federally funded housing assistance program called a continuum of care which covers 152 counties. As part of this program, DCA has been working on a project, along with the state housing trust fund, to provide wrap around services to youth experiencing homelessness. The program works with providers to directly provide a housing option for the youth in need or help the youth navigate systems in the state according to the youth's individualized need. Over 1100 young people have been served by the program. The program is funded by a federal grant, so the funding would have to be renewed in future years.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick explained that individual PHAs either accept referrals from DFCS or they don't, which is the first limitation of the program. She said landlords and other housing providers not accepting the vouchers is another limitation to the program. She shared that she has been speaking with HUD, and the agency is willing to work closely with the state to simplify the process.

4. Elizabeth Appley (Housing Trust Fund)

Ms. Appley shared that Georgia is lagging behind other states in utilizing federal funds to assist transition age youth with obtaining stable housing. She also shared data demonstrating that youth leaving foster care face an extremely high risk of homelessness. Further data showed that too many children in Georgia are entering foster care because of homelessness or inadequate housing conditions. 19 percent of children placed into foster care in 2023 were removed due to inadequate housing conditions which is higher than the national average of 11 percent. She continued by saying that investing in adequate housing could prevent youth from entering foster care in the first place.

Ms. Appley explained that FYI and FUP vouchers are critical programs for preventing and addressing youth homelessness, but Georgia is failing to adequately utilize these programs. She emphasized that FYI vouchers are available on demand to help youth obtain stable housing which supports education, employment, and healthcare. She explained the eligibility requirements for the FYI voucher and how the vouchers are obtained (which were discussed in the previous section). She also explained that, under the voucher, the youth's obligation for rent and utilities is set at 30 percent of their adjusted monthly income, and the rest of the rent is paid by the PHA directly to the landlord.

Ms. Appley stated that Georgia ranked 45th nationally in FYI implementation in 2024, and of 110 foster youth referred by DFCS, only 55 have successfully received FYI assistance. She shared some potential steps to improve the administration of FYI vouchers:

- Secure MOUs between DFCS and all PHAs;
- Train DFCS caseworkers on eligibility and the referral process to ensure youth in need are connected to FYI vouchers;
- Maintain a publicly available dashboard to track referrals, submissions, voucher utilizations and outcomes for FYI vouchers for each Public Housing Authority;
- Create a publicly accessible website for assist former foster youth across the state to access housing assistance, including housing vouchers, as KY, NC, IL and CA have done; and
- Increase education to strengthen awareness about the availability of FYI vouchers among transitioning foster youth, former foster youth, Continuums of Care, organizations serving former foster youth, educational institutions, and other organizations serving people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, etc.

Ms. Appley briefly discussed the FUP and explained that the FUP is intended to help prevent youth from entering foster care based on housing instability or homelessness. She said FUP vouchers can also aid in family reunification and be awarded to transition age youth in foster care to prevent homelessness. She explained eligibility requirements, how it's administered, and what it provides. She also shared some barriers for successful administration of the FUP:

- Few youth referrals are being made by DFCS to PHAs for FUP vouchers;
- Failure to adequately use FUP vouchers leads to unnecessary foster care placement and reduces access to FYI vouchers;
- No funding is being dedicated to support provision of services; and
- Challenges exist with a competitive housing market, rising rents, and challenges in securing willing landlords, particularly for youth.

Ms. Appley continued by sharing some FUP best practices which include increasing utilization of FUP vouchers to prevent children being removed from their home due to housing inadequacy or homelessness, to support reunification of families, and to support transitioning and former foster youth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and cross training housing and child welfare staff on who is eligible, how to refer, and what the process is for securing vouchers. She also explained that Georgia has access to resources available to invest in housing stability to prevent and reduce foster care placements that cost a fraction of foster care and could save the state many millions of dollars while reducing childhood trauma associated

with foster care. She stated that, in 2022, Georgia had accumulated over $200 million in unspent federal TANF funds that had been rolled over from prior years that could contribute to housing stability for vulnerable families. She said that Georgia focused its TANF spending on crisis intervention rather than prevention which increased child welfare spending.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick explained that the state does not have any authority over the PHAs. She asked what role the state can play in increasing participation among the PHAs and if the county DFCS entities should be focused on building better relationships with the PHAs. Ms. Appley said that while the state cannot legally require participation, the state may be able to incentivize it. She also said that there is currently significant media attention on this issue, and this increased awareness can lead to more participation.

Senator Hatchett asked if the issue is a lack of resources or lack of awareness. Ms. Appley said that there are problems with awareness, but there is also a lack of accountability for groups not taking appropriate steps to fully utilize the available resources. She also said that there is nothing requiring any group to take advantage of these resources. He also asked for clarification about how we are spending the TANF funds. Ms. Appley said other states are using TANF to prevent children from entering foster care in the first place rather than utilizing TANF on the welfare services for children in foster care.

Ms. Appley discussed the State Housing Trust Fund which was recently renamed the Housing Trust Fund for the Homeless. She explained that the Trust Fund serves the homeless population and low-income persons, via funds appropriated by the General Assembly, to fund "residential housing projects…designed to enhance residential housing opportunities for low-income persons. Such projects include, but are not limited to, financing in whole or in part the acquisition, rehabilitation, improvement or construction of residential rental housing and interest rate or down payment assistance programs designed to enhance home ownership opportunities." She explained the Trust Fund's budget and the results of a state audit on homeless spending. She said only $158 million was spent on homelessness between 2018 and 2023.

She concluded by sharing recommendations for the Trust Fund. These included: increase funding to the State Housing Trust Fund for flexible local grants for emergency rental assistance to support housing stability and prevent evictions; allocate $1 Billion in unobligated state surplus funds to the State Housing Trust Fund to prevent and ameliorate homelessness by increasing access to safe, decent, affordable housing; and enact SB 170 creating a Statewide Interagency Council on Homelessness as recommended by the State Auditor.

5. Claire Cantrell (Together Georgia)

Ms. Cantrell explained that Together Georgia convened a transition age youth cohort under the guidance of the Casey Family Programs to develop the capacity of providers to improve outcomes for transition age youth in care. She said this multi-disciplinary working group met over 2023 and 2024 to identify gaps, share best practices, and propose solutions. She explained that the cohort has transitioned to a chapter that meets bi-monthly to continue studying housing, workforce development and education, and building connections. She shared that safe and affordable housing remains out of reach for many transition age youth, and many providers do not have an example of how to best utilize available resources. She continued by explaining that many other challenges faced by transition age youth, like unstable employment or lack of higher education, are compounded by unstable housing situations. She explained that it is difficult for a youth to focus on these other areas when they do not know where they are going to sleep at night.

6. Allison Ashe (Wellroot Family Services)

Ms. Ashe began by emphasizing that a significant portion of homeless youth in Georgia have experience with or have aged out of the foster care system. She continued by explaining that Wellroot provides a continuum of care to children, aging out youth, and families and emphasized that youth in the foster care

system have complex trauma. She said foster youth need more time to heal and learn life skills compared non-foster youth because of their trauma. She shared that Wellroot operates transitional and independent living programs which provide housing, college and career planning, life skills education, and mental health services for foster youth.

Ms. Ashe explained that the transitional living program serves youth needing higher supervision. She said these youth typically have not yet competed high school or obtained their GED and need extra support with work readiness and daily living skills. She explained that transitional living programs are more expensive to operate than independent living programs, but in Georgia, the reimbursement rate for transitional living programs is lower than the rate for independent living programs. She shared that Wellroot is able to operate its transitional living program because of their endowment, but many other organizations do not have that funding source which prevents these other organizations from providing transitional living services. She explained that the organization is working to advocate to HUD and the federal government to better utilize voucher programs and increase funding.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked how old the youth living in Wellroot facilities are. Ms. Ashe answered that the youth are ages 17 and a half to 21. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked if more kids are entering care at a later age. She continued by explaining that the overall numbers of youth in foster care are decreasing, but the amount of youth aging out of care is not decreasing. Ms. Ashe said that, anecdotally, she sees more older youth entering care based on behavioral health challenges. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick expressed that the legislature has been focused on expanding access to mental and behavioral health. Ms. Ashe shared that we need more providers to identify and address the needs of young people who are struggling.

7. Jameta Wheeler and Caroline Hannah (Youth Villages)

Ms. Wheeler explained that Youth Villages operates the LifeSet program which is designed specifically to promote stability and well-being of transition age youth. She said LifeSet focuses on education, employment, housing, building support systems, mental and physical health, and life skills. She shared that a study was conducted on LifeSet and found that they had positive outcomes including reduced homelessness and economic hardships. Ms. Wheeler explained that while LifeSet is making a difference for youth in Georgia, there is still a need and an unserved population in the state. She also explained LifeSet's public-private partnerships facilitated through matching grant funds and assistance from LifeSet to partner organizations.

Ms. Wheeler shared that Youth Villages, FosterClub, and American Public Human Services Association formed the National Collaborative for Transition-Age Youth. She explained that the Collaborative is made up of young people with lived experience in foster care, public state and county level child welfare leaders, and national advocates and partners. She said that the Collaborative recently developed a guidebook of best practices for child welfare agencies, providers, and advocates and provided recommendations to address issues faced by youth in care. She shared some examples of these recommendations which included removing barriers to young people accessing housing voucher assistance. She also emphasized the importance of centering and elevating the voices of youth with lived experiences in the system and shared that Youth Villages has an advocacy team comprised of youth who have aged out of care.

8. Ebony Harris (Youth Empowerment Success Services)

Ms. Harris explained that YESS is focused specifically on young adults aging out of foster care and experiencing homelessness. The YESS mission is to help youth obtain stable housing, practical life skills, and an identifiable support system to propel them toward future goals. She explained that YESS operates an independent living program for DFCS youth aged 18 to 21 and a transitional and rapid rehousing program for HUD youth (through the Youth Homeless Demonstration Project) aged 18 to 24. She explained these programs operate on a scattered-site housing model which means that YESS obtains master leases and then supports the youth in obtaining housing on their own.

Ms. Harris shared that a life coach team is available 24/7, but the time the youth are in the program is often not enough time to fully prepare the youth for success outside of a support program. She explained that aging out youth are often told exactly what they need to do until they turn 18, and once they turn 18, they are expected to start figuring things out on their own and start doing things they have never done before all while trying to obtain housing, education, or employment. YESS employs youth who were previously in the system, and this has led to better outcomes for the youth currently in the system. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick shared that mentorship programs in veteran communities have been very successful, so it may be beneficial to implement similar mentorship/support programs for transition age youth.

9. Cati Stone and Rick Aranson (Chris180)

Ms. Stone explained that Chris180's core impact areas are mental health services, foster care and adoption services, and support for youth experiencing homelessness. Chris180 provides wraparound services in all three impact areas, provides services in five counselling centers and is embedded in 80 schools across the metro area, and operates a drop-in center for homeless youth, a 41-unit apartment complex, and training center. Ms. Stone highlighted that Chris180 is a mental health organization and shared that the organization provided over 64,000 behavioral health sessions to over 8,000 individuals and families in 2024 alone. She said that Chris180 works within a trauma-informed model to address the individual needs of each foster care youth. She again emphasized the mental health needs of foster youth and shared that 80 percent of youth in the foster care system experience mental illness or have serious mental health needs compared to 20 percent of youth in the general population. She shared that a Partners for Home survey found that when people with mental illness were placed in supportive housing, over 85 percent remained in stable housing for a 12-month period. Ms. Stone concluded by sharing some other challenges faced by aging out foster youth and some potential solutions.

| Challenges | Potential Solutions |
|---|---|
| Lack of education and workforce development opportunities | Increase opportunities for foster care youth to access post-secondary education and employment training, including vocational training and apprenticeships. |
| Complexity and inefficiency of navigating and securing the rates and benefits needed to meet unique needs of youth | Streamline approval process to avoid delays and minimize funding complexities |
| Lack of ongoing involvement by DFCS after assignment | Active partnership with DFCS Case Managers and service providers, especially during the transition period |
| Lack of system navigation educational resources for youth and foster families | Develop tools and resources to explain processes, timelines, preventative measures and other available resources |

Senator Parent asked what mental health issues the organization was seeing and if they were typically more severe than an average youth. Mr. Aranson said the organization sees the same common mental health issues, but the mental health conditions are made more severe by the trauma faced by these youth. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick said that it seems like many resources are focused on the metro Atlanta area and asked if Chris180 has thought about expanding. Mr. Aranson said that while the organization can't physically cover the whole state, they do provide trauma-informed training to other providers across the state.

10. Rachel Castillo (Advocates for Children)

Ms. Castillo shared that Advocates for Children serves over 20,000 children, youth, and families across 11 counties in Northwest Georgia. She explained that the organization's pillars of focus include advocacy and justice, housing and stability, and child and family well-being. She shared that: (1) youth are coming into foster care who should not be there in the first place; (2) youth are not prepared to live independently as they transition out of care; (3) length of time services are available during transition are not adequate, and (4) funding sources are not integrated to help with housing stability.

Ms. Castillo explained that the organization uses the Family Resource Center (FRC) Prevention Model which helps families in crisis avoid foster care entry. She shared that the FRC served 416 families and 1,031 children that were about to enter the foster care system in 2024. She explained that 58 of the families served were "Navigation Families" who required more intensive support and supervision from a Navigator for 12 months, but at the end of the 12 months, all 58 families were able to keep their children out of the foster care system. She shared that, despite the success of this model, FRC funding, which comes from DHS, has been cut, limiting scale.

Ms. Castillo continued by sharing some of the organization's housing supports. She explained that the organization operates Newman House, a 14-suite facility that allows youth to learn independent living skills. She said the House has common areas and a full commercial kitchen in addition to private bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens, and this allows the youth to work on their skills alone while also providing spaces for community building and support. The House also employs a full-time teacher to provide education support to youth in the House.

Ms. Castillo also shared that the organization applies the federal rapid rehousing model to youth aged 18 to 24 by providing rental assistance and wraparound services. She said the goal is to layer federal transitional living programs, vouchers, and rapid rehousing models to create sustainable housing. She shared that the organization's programs have served 186 individuals in 2025 and of the total served, 121 are youth who were experiencing homelessness before the program and 65 are their dependent children. In 2025, 96 percent of clients are permanently housed within 60 days, and 84 percent of clients have maintained permanency for at least 90 days after exiting the program.

Ms. Castillo concluded by highlighting three key takeaways: (1) Prevention saves money and trauma. (2) Housing and consistent support help youth thrive. (3) Georgia has models that work – we need resources to scale them.

## MEETING THREE

**Date**: October 15, 2025
**Location**: Georgia State Capitol – Atlanta, GA
**Topic**: Fostering Success Tax Credit; Workforce and Education Issues

**Committee Members Present**

**Chair**: K. Kirkpatrick
**Senators**: E. Parent; C. Payne
**Speakers:** K. Finn and J. Snowden (Department of Revenue); A. Murphy (Cobb Fostering Futures); A. Evans (Methodist Home); D. Meyers (UGA Embark Program); K. Ellis (Technical College System of Georgia); S. Walker (Department of Education); D. Cobb (Broken Shackles); B. Bruder-Madson (FaithBridge); B. Ball (Former foster youth)

**Summary of Testimony**

1. Kelsey Finn and Joseph Snowden (Department of Revenue)

Mr. Snowden explained the establishment of the foster child donation tax credit and explained the eligibility requirements and credit limits. He shared that $11.59 million of the credit was utilized in 2023, $13.47 million of the credit was utilized in 2024, and $4.12 million has been utilized in 2025. He explained that pre-approval is required for individuals to utilize the tax credit, and pre-approvals are processed first-come, first-served until the cap is met. He also shared that contributions cannot be designated for specific individuals. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked if multiple tax credits can be used at the same time. Mr. Snowden answered yes.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick also asked if individuals can choose which organization they donate to. Mr. Snowden answered yes. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked what the department is doing to get the word out about the tax credit. Ms. Finn said the department works with the organizations to market the credit, but they do not market for specific organizations as the administrator of the credit. Mr. Snowden said the department does more general marketing about tax credits as a whole instead of focusing on specific organizations. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick shared that advertising for the tax credit needs to improve since utilization is so low this year. Senator Parent asked for clarification about what happens when a person is preapproved for multiple credits but the pledges exceed the individual's tax liability. Ms. Finn said that the organizations will still receive their pledge, but the total amount may be lower than the original pledge because the donation cannot exceed the individual's liability.

2. Ana Murphy (Cobb Fostering Futures)

Ms. Murphy explained that every school district has a foster care point of contact to ensure that students in foster care are not slipping through the cracks as they move schools and placements. She explained that they work to take proactive measures to coordinate with the students, placements, and school to provide support. She shared that foster students need more support than an average student because they are navigating multiple systems as well as carrying trauma. Ms. Murphy said that the goal is to encourage belonging in the school for foster students, and when a student feels like they belong, the student's mental health, grades, and behavior improve. She said that setting a solid foundation of support improves the student's outcomes after school as well.

Ms. Murphy explained that the success of Fostering Futures depends on strong partnerships with local DFCS, community agencies, and the Georgia Department of Education, but not all school districts have the same access and systems. She said this is why there is a need to share best practices and expand training and communication all across the state. She stated that more investment in connection and consistency lead to students thriving not just surviving.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked for clarification on how the Cobb Schools Foundation works with the school district. Ms. Murphy and Felicia Wagner (Cobb Schools Foundation) explained that the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization with a grant process for families and school social workers from all of the programs they support to apply for aid, and a review committee decides where the grants are applied. Senator Payne asked if counseling resources are provided. Ms. Murphy said the office receives an alert whenever a foster student is enrolled, and then a trauma informed support plan meeting is scheduled. The team at this meeting determines if the student needs extra resources. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked how the foundation fundraises. Ms. Wagner said they reach out to the local community in Cobb, they utilize the tax credit, and they partner with the Georgia Public Education Foundation. She said that any funds donated through the tax credit are specifically designated to the Fostering Futures program which supports K-12 students. She explained that they wanted to invest in these students earlier, so opportunities are not lost before graduation.

3. Alison Evans (Methodist Home)

Ms. Evans explained that funds from the Fostering Success Tax Credit have allowed the Methodist Home to expand their programs for transition age youth. She said the programs work to prepare the youth for their futures. She expressed support for the tax credit, but said there was a gap in support for youth who do not choose to pursue postsecondary education and instead directly enter the workforce. Ms. Evans explained that the goal of the organization is to connect with the kids like a parent would be connected and build relationships with the youth. She shared that the youth are comfortable reaching out to staff about a myriad of issues they face like being a nervous for an exam or dealing with car trouble. She said the organization provides a safe place to stay, a listening ear, and works to provide support across all areas of life, not just financial support. She emphasized the need for staff to work out in the community. She said this leads to stronger relationships with the youth as well as the institutions the youth interact with. She also said that the organization applies wraparound services on an individual basis to ensure the youth are receiving the supports they actually need. She again shared a need for more support for students who choose to directly enter the workforce instead of choosing an academic path.

4. David Meyers (UGA Embark)

Mr. Meyers began by sharing some of the challenges faced by youth in foster care and aging out of foster care. He shared that 1 in 20 transition age foster youth in Georgia complete college compared to 1 in 3 Georgians. He stated that the mission of Embark Georgia Center is to increase college access and retention for youth who have experienced foster care or homelessness. He explained that the Embark Center has youth and adult programs, gathers data, and conducts research. He said that Embark works with DFCS to streamline access to and ensure students maintain eligibility for the Education and Training Voucher program. Mr. Meyers said 250 to 350 youth are served through this program annually.

Mr. Meyers also shared that Embark provides Campus Capacity Building Mini-Grants to 10 USG and seven TCSG recipients to increase campus capacity to provide services and resources for students in need. He shared that Embark's research and data collection helps determine where increased programming and support is needed and works to develop a multidisciplinary understanding of transition age foster youth. The data illustrates that investing in postsecondary success for transition age foster youth leads to better outcomes for those individuals as well as improving the economics of the state.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked if there is a similar position or office at all USG schools. Mr. Meyers said there is not, but there is a designated point of contact on each campus that can connect students who have experienced foster care or homelessness. He said that these duties are often tacked on to an existing role in housing, counseling, etc. Senator Payne asked how the office addresses the self-discipline of students. Mr. Meyers said the office does its best to connect with students going through difficulties on a case-by-case basis, and he emphasized the importance of developing supportive relationships with the students.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked for clarification about the adults served by the office. Mr. Meyers said the adult programs work the adults supporting the students.

5. Kimberly Ellis (Technical College System of Georgia)

Ms. Ellis explained that every TCSG institution has staff on campus to support students in need, including foster youth. She said the goal of the system is to provide training for high-wage high-demand careers. These institutions offer two-year degrees and other diplomas and certificates which allow students to advance their careers in a shorter time frame. She shared that tuition waivers are a great support, but there are many other aspects of life, like housing instability, transportation issues, or lack of child care, that can impact a student's decision to attend or succeed at a TCSG institution.

Ms. Ellis said that on-campus support staff provide support for these other areas and utilize systems to identify students in need and intervene with at-risk students. TCSG institutions also make resources available for students to find on their own if they aren't ready to share their needs with a staff member. She shared some recommendations which include: improving training for teachers, faculty, and staff to allow them to better recognize trauma; expanding mental health and counseling resources on campus; and improving collaboration and coordination between state agencies to ensure high quality wrap around services are administered to students in need. She concluded by emphasizing the importance of meeting students where they are and providing support that they actually need, not just what we think they need.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked how the alert systems for at-risk students work. Ms. Ellis said that it is a statewide system that allows instructors to input an early alert for a student that fails a test or misses class. The alert goes directly to the student support center, and the student support staff reaches out to the student to determine what support the student needs. She said faculty and staff are all trained to use the system in order to try and provide student support before a student fails a class.

6. Susan Walker (Department of Education)

Ms. Walker explained that Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires every local education agency to have a designated foster care point of contact. She said one of the responsibilities of the point of contact is to implement procedures to ensure foster care youth receive appropriate credit for full or partial coursework satisfactorily completed. ESSA also says children placed in foster care should remain in their school of origin unless it has been determined that transferring schools is not in the child's best interest. She continued by explaining that if the student does transfer, enrollment must be immediate, records must be immediately transferred, and a transportation plan must be developed.

Ms. Walker explained that rules are in place to ensure that enrollment is consistent in school districts across the state, and foster youth must be immediately enrolled. She also explained that if a student transfers from one accredited school to another, the student's credits transfer between those schools. She said that school districts must have plans in place for accepting credits when a student transfers from a non-accredited school or a home-school. She shared that under HB 268, the comprehensive school safety bill, foster care students must be immediately enrolled even if records required for enrollment cannot be produced. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked what happens if a district is not following HB 268. Ms. Walker explained that the department cannot compel a district to follow the law, but there are staff members in the district and at the department that can work together to solve any enrollment issues. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked if the department needed additional authority. Ms. Walker said the district currently does not have the authority to enforce the laws, but the department does work with other agencies and elected officials to find solutions when a law is not being followed.

7. David Cobb (Broken Shackles)

Mr. Cobb explained that Broken Shackles is a vocational school that works with youth involved with DFCS and the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). He explained that the school teaches the youth skills to help

them earn self-confidence, and he shared that learning these skills improves mental health outcomes and employment outcomes. He works with the youth to create and maintain savings accounts to help them form a safety net when they transition out of their support programs. Mr. Cobb said the school also works with students to develop employability skills. He shared that he has been working with DJJ and DBHDD to improve partnerships and expand programming to these populations. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick expressed support for expanding education to DJJ youth and emphasized the importance of developing the workforce.

8. Bob Bruder-Madson (FaithBridge)

Mr. Bruder-Madson shared that the tax credit is working and doing what it is intended to do, and this is allowing more transition age youth to pursue postsecondary education and obtaining skills to become self-sufficient. Transition age youth often lack caring and committed adults in their lives, so FaithBridge pairs every youth with a dedicated life coach. He explained that life coaches work with the youth to assess their capabilities and interests and develop a plan to achieve educational and financial goals. He also explained that most of the youth FaithBridge serves have basic needs that must be met to enable achievement of their educational goals, so once a youth in the program is enrolled in postsecondary education, FaithBridge resolves their housing, transportation, and food insecurities. He said that life coaches fill a parental-like role to set students up for success before they begin their postsecondary education journey, and the tax credit has allowed the life coaches to provide wraparound services that address the holistic needs of the youth.

9. Bernard Ball (Former foster youth)

Mr. Ball shared his lived experience with foster care and explained some of the struggles he faced. He said he experienced many school moves and shared that many foster care students may attend three to five different schools. He said that many counselors are not informed about all of the resources available to students in foster care which leads to students having to try and find resources and assistance on their own. Mr. Ball said that teachers often don't learn about a student being in foster care until behavior problems emerge which leads to the child being labeled as a problem student. Students in foster care have difficulty developing and maintaining supportive relationships because of frequent moves or being placed in online programs because of behavior issues. He said that the data showing low postsecondary educational attainment is a signal of systematic failure. Mr. Ball shared that he is currently pursuing a master's degree, but he faced challenges at every step. He emphasized the importance of education and said that developing more streamlined, standardized systems is critical for ensuring the success of transition age foster youth.

## MEETING FOUR

**Date**: November 17, 2025
**Location**: Georgia State Capitol – Atlanta, GA
**Topic**: Complex-Needs Population

**Committee Members Present**

**Chair**: K. Kirkpatrick
**Senators**: E. Parent; C. Payne; B. Hatchett (Zoom)
**Speakers:** M. Zeanah (Autism Center); N. Call (Marcus Autism Center); D. Carroll (DHS) and A. Morgan (DBHDD); P. McKinney (Voices for Georgia's Children); J. Bruce (Office of Child Advocate); J. DeGarmo (The Foster Care Institute); Z. Blend (Goshen Valley); J. Justice (Wendy's Wonderful Kids); L. Padget (KSU)

**Summary of Testimony**

1. Dr. Michelle Zaneah (Autism Center)

Dr. Zaneah began by providing an overview of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). She explained common features of ASD and how those features impact how those with ASD pursue their education and careers. She said that access to a diagnosis improve outcomes for those with ASD. She said a diagnosis creates access to more specialized treatment services which leads to improved quality of life, educational outcomes, and employability. She explained that the DFCS Autism Pilot was established to determine the prevalence of autism in foster youth. She said that pilot found: (1) autism is six times more common among foster youth; (2) diagnosis and treatment improved placement stability; and (3) the rate of reunification and adoption increased with access to appropriate services. She explained that 609 foster children were in the original study population, and 51.6 percent of youth who were screened for autism screened positive. She said that of those that screened positively, 17.4 percent were diagnosed with autism.

Dr. Zaneah explained that the pilot program's findings indicate that we need to do more to determine the prevalence of autism in foster youth and identify those youth so they can receive appropriate services. She reiterated that receiving appropriate services improves outcomes. She also explained that providing early intervention could save the state over $1 million per child. She explained that stakeholders are determining the feasibility of screening all foster youth for autism to ensure that youth who need support services receive them. Senator Payne asked if we are headed in the right direction in terms of needs-based evaluations. Dr.Zaneah said we are moving in the right direction, and evaluators must be properly trained to ensure that youth receive the appropriate diagnoses and treatments.

2. Dr. Nathan Call (Marcus Autism Center)

Dr. Call explained that challenging behavior is behavior that puts the child and/or family members at some risk of harm. He explained that aggression, unsafe behavior (elopement, pica, self-injury), and property destruction are common types of challenging behavior in youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). He shared estimates of the prevalence of challenging behavior in ASD youth are as high as 64 percent. He said that challenging behavior can be difficult for families, and the emotional and physical toll on the family can even reach the level of PTSD. He said that these families lack support and may turn to foster care because they don't know what else to do. He explained that these kids don't receive necessary care once they enter the foster care system because the system is often not equipped to provide support.

Dr. Call said that treating these kids through medication is an option, but it does not treat the underlying issues. He said this option can also be expensive, and access is limited. He explained that inpatient care is a critical measure to prevent the worst outcomes for these youth, but these admissions do not change the underlying cause that led to the crisis. He also explained that respite services are available for families on the NOW/COMP waiver, but there are very few respite providers who will work with youth with challenging

behavior. He stated that applied behavior analysis (ABA) treatments are the best approach for youth with challenging behavior, and ABA treatments often lead to the best outcomes for these youth. Dr. Call explained that board certified behavior analysts are trained in ABA, but few have experience with serious challenging behavior or transition age youth. He said that 72 percent of these analysts work at centers that do not serve youth with significant challenging behavior, and of those who do, 61 percent had significant waitlists. He explained that the Marcus Autism Center is working to expand access by developing manualized interventions for challenging behaviors. He said these manuals will be given to providers to provide better training and help provide better outcomes.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked how ABA therapy is done. Dr. Call said it is an approach to intervention based on effective means of learning, and it is helpful for youth working to establish new skills. He said improving skill acquisition, like toilet training and feeding, improves behavior. He said administration can be difficult because there is one set of reimbursement codes that only pays for the most commonly administered form of ABA therapy. He said this makes it difficult to scale services because more intense therapy for a youth with challenging behavior is being reimbursed at the same rate as the base level of therapy. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick explained that services can be provided in a clinic, at home, and via telehealth. Dr. Call said level of care in each setting varies because registered behavior technicians are supervised differently depending on the setting of intervention. He explained that in a clinic setting, the technician's supervisor is often in the same room as the technician and the patient. However, with at home or telehealth therapy, the supervisor may never see the child or see what is happening in the moment. Dr. Call clarified that there is a higher reimbursement for home-based therapy than clinic-based therapy.

3. Dana Carroll (DHS) and Allen Morgan (DBHDD)

Ms. Carroll and Mr. Morgan explained that DFCS and DBHDD collaborated to establish a smooth transition for youth with complex needs who age out of foster care and cannot live independently. Ms. Carroll explained that DFCS identified their needs for a smoother transition process, and these needs include: processes to identify and track youth who likely require intensive services after aging out, ensure that applications for benefits and waivers are filed, and provide support to county staff to help them navigate the process. Ms. Carroll explained how DFCS addressed these issues. She said DFCS created the Complex Needs Adult Transition (CNAT) Unit to maintain a list of DFCS youth who will be transitioning to NOW/COMP waivers, provide ongoing consultation to counties for youth with complex need, and ensure youth have all benefits in place for a smooth transition to NOW/COMP waivers. She emphasized the importance of CNAT's collaboration with DBHDD, the Social Security Administration, and DHS's Adult Guardianship Program.

Mr. Morgan said that DBHDD also identified their needs which included identifying and tracking youth entering waiver services from DFCS care, connecting with DFCS to assist with assessments and forms, and ensuring residential resources are in place. Mr. Morgan explained how DBHDD addressed these issues. He said DBHDD regional field offices were directed to not close DFCS applications for waiver without approval, and field office and state level leadership work more closely and communicate more often with DFCS. He explained that the goal is to ensure applications for waiver are complete and accurate. He said another measure implemented was allowing foster homes to convert to host homes which allowed aging out youth approved for waivers to remain in the foster home and remain with foster siblings in the same home.

Ms. Carroll shared that CNAT is currently tracking/consulting on over 250 youth, and 37 young adults will be successfully transitioned in 2025 which is four times more than 2024. She said there are no youth over age 21 in DFCS care. Mr. Morgan said a lot of positive work has been done simply by working together to remove bureaucratic barriers in the process and increase efficiency. He emphasized the importance of sharing information between agencies. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked for clarification about how these measures are different from MATCH (Multi-Agency Treatment for Children). Mr. Morgan explained that

MATCH eligible youth are not limited to those with intellectual or developmental disability. Nonetheless, some MATCH youth may fall into this category.

4. Polly McKinney (Voices for Georgia's Children)

Ms. McKinney stated that, despite high rates of poverty and unemployment, former foster youth participate in SNAP at low levels. She said that the federal government eliminated a prior exception, so now former foster youth must report 80 hours of work, volunteering, or school attendance per month to receive benefits. She explained that the few former foster youth in Georgia who need SNAP also need assistance navigating eligibility and enrollment as the new reporting requirements may make access more challenging. She recommended improving technical assistance for SNAP application processes and requiring care management organizations to facilitate food access for former foster youth through screening, benefits enrollment, and food provision (prepaid food cards, food boxes) as value-added services.

Ms. McKinney explained that all youth who were in foster care at age 18 are eligible for Medicaid up to age 26, but many youths are unenrolled due to renewal barriers. She said that youth may not receive renewal notifications due to housing instability, or a youth may distrust the child welfare system and thus avoid seeking assistance from DFCS with enrollment and renewal. She provided the following recommendations to address this issue: ensure data is checked across agencies to determine the extent to which eligible former foster youth are losing Medicaid coverage; providers and agencies should use multiple channels of communication to provide notice of Medicaid renewal requirements; DCH/DHS should increase outreach and assistance efforts for Medicaid enrollment and renewal; and ensure that Gateway is functioning and easily navigable.

Ms. McKinney also shared that former foster youth are more likely to need behavioral health supports, but face barriers in accessing the care they need, including: lack of providers that accept Medicaid, lack of access to complete health history, long wait time for services and delayed approval processes, lack of trust due to trauma experienced in care, and lack of coverage for alternative therapeutic modalities. She shared several recommendations to address behavioral health concerns, including: incentivize combining primary health care and mental health care in one setting; streamline the insurer provider certification process and billing practices; require providers serving foster youth to create sharable real-time electronic health records; require care management organizations to cover alternative therapeutic modalities; and enforce parity so that insurance companies treat behavioral health equal to physical health.

Ms. McKinney concluded by sharing more general recommendations: provide funding for programs providing holistic support to former foster youth; ensure that programs for transition age youth are adequately funded; create a more independent DFCS youth advisory council or other mechanism for routinely gathering feedback from current and former foster youth; and encourage care management organizations to work with former foster youth to access mobile phone benefits. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick gave an overview of the goals of President Trump's recent foster care Executive Order, and she said she is looking forward to hearing how state experts determine how we can take most advantage of the Order. Ms. McKinney said that it could be helpful to explore standardizing applications and eligibility for multiple assistance programs that transition age youth could use. Senator Parent asked about interfacing with apps for the benefit programs. Ms. McKinney said usability of the apps is not the primary concern. She said more issues seem to arise with gathering paperwork to apply for benefits or delays for getting approved for benefits.

5. Jerry Bruce (Office of the Child Advocate)

Mr. Bruce emphasized the complexity of the child welfare system. He said the law requires case plans, starting at age 14, to include a plan for services a youth must receive, but juvenile courts are not complying with these laws. He said this is a judicial responsibility issue, and transition age youth are can fall through the cracks in juvenile court. He said there is a need for better advocates who are prepared to challenge the

court and hold them accountable. He explained that some lawyers are afraid to raise issues because they often rely on the judge to appoint them to cases or approve their pay. He stated that the Office has been working with DFCS to provide counties with reimbursements for advocates trained by the Office. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked if he had any specific recommendations. Mr. Bruce said the Senate's resolution urging counties to sign up for reimbursement was helpful, but the Office is small and has to juggle a growing number of counties signing up for the program. Chairwoman Kirkpatrick said SB 401 worked to improve juvenile court data reporting. Mr. Bruce said the Office is working with the Administrative Office of the Courts to review the data coming in, and we really need to work to develop an active dashboard with data from every juvenile court in the state. He explained that more robust data reporting will help diagnose issues and determine ways to solve issues.

6. Dr. John DeGarmo (The Foster Care Institute)

Dr. DeGarmo gave an overview of the issues faced by youth in care. He said we need to develop mentorship programs and emphasized that anyone, not just foster parents and caseworkers, can mentor these youth. He said more can be done to work with these youth to develop job interview skills and personal responsibility skills. He emphasized the importance of the Independent Living Program and transitional housing programs. He said that everyone can work with youth to develop personal financial responsibility by teaching them how to open a bank account and balance a budget. He said youth need more support in the critical period at the end of high school, and many choose to drop out because they have no support for the next step. He said providers and volunteers can step in with providing help with applications, school supplies, transportation, or even providing support for joining the military or obtaining employment. He repeatedly emphasized the importance of and need for getting the whole community involved in supporting these youth. He said that so many things can be done to improve outcomes for transition age youth in addition to the work being done by state agencies.

7. Zach Blend (Goshen Valley)

Mr. Blend gave an overview of the Goshen Valley Foundation. He emphasized the need to prioritize permanency before youth in care turn 18. He said the best way to combat the aging out crisis is to limit its size. He said providers should be required to partner with DFCS to identify mentors, supportive kin, or adoptive family before the youth ages out. He stated that more can be done to ensure strong support for youth aging out without a permanent family connection. He explained that someone needs to teach aging out youth how to access to current mental health supports, like those available through Medicaid, before the youth ages out of care. He said that someone needs to teach the youth how to drive and help them obtain a driver's license, insurance, and transportation before the youth ages out. He also said that we need to open more employment pathways, through collaboration with local employers and county and state agencies, by creating incentivizes for employing youth. With foster care experience. He stated that we need to expand innovative services, like the Fostering Success Tax Credit, that provide direct aid which allows students to focus on education and career building. Mr. Blend concluded by emphasizing that there are solutions that can be implemented without additional appropriations from the state.

8. Jennifer Justice (Wendy's Wonderful Kids)

Ms. Justice explained that the Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK) program is a part of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, a national non-profit dedicated to finding permanent homes for children waiting in foster care. She said WWK focuses on the youth who have been in foster care the longest and follows a child-focused recruitment model. She explained that the model emphasizes the child's voice and focuses on identifying pre-existing relationships who may be potential adoptive families. She shared that children served by WWK are 1.7 times more likely to be adopted, and older children and children with specific mental health needs are three times more likely to be adopted. She explained that children referred to WWK in Georgia are, on average, 14 years old, have spent five years in foster care, and have had an average of six placements. She shared that over 300 children have been served by WWK in Georgia. She said that permanency is prevention. She explained that stable family connections prevent homelessness,

unemployment, and justice system involvement. She shared the following recommendations: invest in additional WWK recruiter positions, require that every transition age youth have a current permanency strategy, and use concurrent planning aggressively and limit the use of extended foster care.

9. Lauren Padget (Kennesaw State University)

Ms. Padget explained that care services at Kennesaw State University (KSU) provide comprehensive basic needs support for students who are experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, or have experienced the foster care system. She said that these supports are often the difference between students staying enrolled or dropping out. She explained that KSU's Ascend program is for students who experienced homelessness in high school or experienced the foster care system. She said the program allows students to come to campus a week early to learn about supports, attend workshops about resources available on campus, access peer and professional mentoring, and access individual case management.

Ms. Padget explained that the Ascend Center works with other University System of Georgia and Technical College System of Georgia institutions to develop programs and train staff to best assist former foster youth. She said the Center has worked with designated points of contact across the state to help former foster youth find support on campus and has found several practices that can be implemented right now, at little to no cost, to help former foster students. She explained that one of the best practices is to increase campus visibility of the designated point of contact for former foster students. She said schools need to create ways for students and faculty to get those in need in touch with support, like implementing a self-identifying process at orientation or admission for former foster students. She explained that some students do not wish to be identified as former foster youth, so systems need to be developed and outreach conducted to ensure these students are aware of available resources.

She explained that Ascend provides year-round housing, but the program also allows Ascend students to live in other communities. She said that Ascend has built community partnerships to provide temporary housing options, like hotels, for students who do not live in the year-round housing, and the Center helps other schools develop these partnerships for their students who face housing instability. She explained that implementing peer-led mentoring and coaching, under the supervision of a professional/full-time staff member, is a low-cost method for making services more accessible to students. She said that another best practice is to improve communication between on-campus departments to better serve former foster students. She also said that utilizing current student surveys to collect data can indicate student needs and how services are helping students.

Chairwoman Kirkpatrick asked how KSU Care Services makes sure it's finding the students in need. Ms. Padget explained that Care Services conducts intentional outreach to community partners in high schools to let them know about the services offered. She said Care Services brings students to campus to see what resources are available before the student enrolls, and there are opportunities for students to self-identify throughout their time at KSU. She said once a student self-identifies, Care Services conducts direct outreach. She explained that the financial aid office sends out an email about services to eligible students based on FASFA status. Senator Parent asked how many students are currently in the Ascend program. Ms. Padget said the program's capacity is 60, and the program currently has 52 active Ascend scholars. She said there are about 30-40 students served by supports who aren't in the Ascend program. Senator Parent asked how many students can live in Ascend housing. Ms. Padget said 30 students can live in Ascend housing, and it is intended for primarily first- and second-year students.

| MEETING FIVE |
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| **Date**: November 21, 2025<br>**Location**: Georgia State Capitol – Atlanta, GA<br>**Topic**: Adopting the Final Report and Recommendations |

**Committee Members Present**

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| --- |
| **Chair**: K. Kirkpatrick<br>**Senators**: C. Payne; B. Hatchett (Zoom)<br>**Speakers**: N/A |

The committee discussed and adopted the Report and Recommendations.

# FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the testimony and research presented, the Study Committee on Additional Services for Transition Age Youth in Foster Care discovered several areas of improvement. These areas include: housing, education, and workforce. The following recommendations address these areas of improvement and outline future initiatives:

**Housing**

- Convene a meeting with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, advocacy groups, and the DHS Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) to determine ways to enhance participation in the Foster Youth to Independence voucher program.

**Education**

- Ensure school districts are in compliance with enrollment requirements, including credit transfers, and consider legislation to address noncompliance;
- Appropriate necessary funding for Senate Bill 85, the Georgia Foster Care Scholarship; and
- Encourage statewide hands-on involvement with transition age youth in the Technical College System of Georgia and the University System of Georgia by ensuring that each institution has a direct point of contact for transition age youth on campus.

**Workforce**

- Convene a meeting with the Technical College System of Georgia and transition age youth stakeholders to develop a plan to address employment issues with transition age youth participation, including workforce participation of justice involved youth.

**Complex-Needs Population**

- Review current reimbursement rates, delivery options, and supervision requirements for Advanced Behavioral Analysis treatment for autism spectrum disorder;
- Continue current pilot programs screening foster youth for autism spectrum disorder and collect additional data for the pilot by implementing screening in two additional DFCS regions; and
- Prepare for broad implementation of autism screening for youth in foster care and increase autism treatment as a means of prevention and as a means of cost savings for the state.

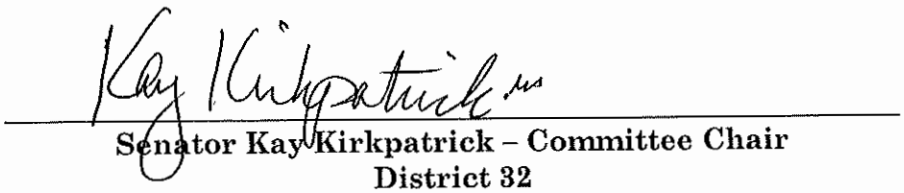
**Future Initiatives**

- Improve utilization and awareness of the Fostering Success Tax Credit by encouraging all transition age youth stakeholders to promote a tax-credit infographic to be developed by the Department of Revenue;
- Enhance exit-planning by utilizing technology to streamline online resources available to transition age youth and fully utilize providers to ensure wraparound services are administered; and
- Work with federal partners to ensure that Georgia takes full advantage of President Trump's Fostering the Future for American Children and Families Executive Order.[12]

[12] The Executive Order was issued November 13, 2025. Information on the Executive Order can be found here: https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/11/fostering-the-future-for-american-children-and-families/

Respectfully Submitted,

# FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE STUDY COMMITTEE ON ADDITIONAL SERVICES FOR TRANSITION AGE YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE (SR 310)



**Senator Kay Kirkpatrick – Committee Chair**
**District 32**