

JOINT BUDGET HEARING SPEECH  
Commissioner Candice Broce  
January 20, 2022

**Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman Tillery, and Committee Members...

I'm honored to join you to discuss the Governor's budget recommendations for the Department of Human Services for Amended Fiscal Year 2022 and State Fiscal Year 2023.

Before I get started, I'll briefly introduce the members of my leadership team with me today...

- Chief of Staff Craig Foster
- Senior Deputy Commissioner and Deputy Chief of Staff Chris Hempfling
- Deputy Commissioner for Finance Demetrius Taylor
- Asst. Deputy Commissioner for Finance and DFCS CFO Cliff O'Connor

As you know, last summer, Governor Kemp appointed me to serve as interim director of the Division of Family and Children Services, and he subsequently appointed me to dually serve as DHS Commissioner last fall.

In taking on these new responsibilities, I've focused on learning the intricacies of our agency and worked with my leadership team to strengthen the continuum of care for children in state custody, the aging community whom we serve, and the families relying on our services for healthcare, food, utilities, and financial assistance from non-custodial parents.

Despite leadership changes and the pandemic, our agency's goal remains the same: stronger families for a stronger Georgia...

Our workforce continues to demonstrate their commitment to that goal through hard work and determination, even in the toughest of times.

## COVID Operations

In accordance with the Governor's mission to protect lives and livelihoods, we have worked tirelessly to strike the right balance between workforce safety and constituent needs.

I'll touch on each division's current COVID operations...

In the Division of Family & Children Services, Child Protective Services never stopped emergency, in-person investigations...

For those staff who handle benefits eligibility for programs like Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF, we're operating virtual lobbies through the call center.

To avoid one infected employee from knocking out an entire office for quarantine, local DFCS offices continue to follow an "appointment only" model.

Child welfare workers still go to court; they still do in-person home and facility visits unless there is a COVID outbreak.

Benefit eligibility workers are almost entirely virtual, which is conducive to their daily work.

We're meeting our milestones while actively preparing for when we can safely reopen our doors for walk-ins, and we're developing a plan for certain regions to have designated offices open for walk-ins, aiming for March.

In the Division of Child Support Services, local offices also utilize an appointment only model, which has worked well, and we were able to meet our annual, federal paternity requirements to avoid federal penalties.

In the Division of Aging Services, Adult Protective Services never stopped working with law enforcement to refer complaints of abuse, neglect, or exploitation for emergency dispatch.

When you add our budgets and those of our agency's attached entities, the Department's total proposed Fiscal Year 2023 budget allocation is **\$1,989,237,266**.

Now, I'll pivot to discussion of the Governor's recommendations for our agency.

## **Amended Fiscal Year 2022**

On behalf of thousands of frontline workers who keep our children safe, ensure children receive financial support from non-custodial parents, pair Georgia families with resources to keep them intact, and protect our elderly from abuse and exploitation... I want to thank Governor Kemp and First Lady Marty Kemp for their proposed workforce package in AFY22 and FY23.

That \$5,000 pay increase is going to change their lives... Our staff don't do those jobs for the pay. They do good work because they believe in what they do, and they want to make a difference in the lives of those whom we serve...

That \$5,000 represents a 13 to 14% increase in pay for those brand-new social services specialists working in child protective services and foster care...

It's a 16 to 18% pay increase for those entry-level staff working in child support services, as well as those staff who connect families with Medicaid, utility bill assistance, and food stamps...

Throughout DHS, you'll find employees who are deeply grateful not only for this historic pay increase, but also the higher employer match, as well as the option to withdraw leave as pay for unforeseen emergencies, or whatever that need may be.

Long-time veterans have described this workforce package as the best they've ever seen, and for a team who smartly weathered budget cuts to become more efficient... It's a welcome reward for doing more with less.

You'll see – in each of the respective program budgets in AFY22 and FY23 – adjustments to reflect those workforce incentives...

So I won't go through each of those, instead focusing on new additions to AFY22 for specific initiatives, starting with Departmental Administration, page 221.

Recommended change 2: There's four million sixteen thousand five hundred and ninety five dollars to cover a funding gap for enhancements to the state's integrated eligibility system, Georgia Gateway – used to determine a person's eligibility for benefits like Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, and utility bill assistance.

Next, in the Elder Community Living Services program budget, recommended change 2, you'll see \$2,718,854, which will draw down \$37,993,513 in federal funding from last year's American Rescue Plan... and with that match, the state will serve an additional

5,731 clients over the next three years with supportive services, congregate meals, home-delivered meals, and additional caregiver services.

In FY21, we served 40,146 clients with home- and community-based programs through our twelve area agencies on aging.

(Pause)

Those are the only two adjustments in AFY22 outside of the Governor’s workforce recommendations...

I’ll now move to his recommendations for Fiscal Year 2023.

### **Fiscal Year 2023**

#### **Community Action Treatment Teams**

I’ll go to FY23 Child Welfare Services, page 225.

First, for recommended change 6, you’ll see \$1.5 million to fund a new pilot for “community action treatment teams.”

A few years ago, Florida’s legislature included funding for their state child welfare agency to contract with 24/7 healthcare treatment teams – comprised of a physician, nurses, behavior aides, therapists, a social worker, and an administrative support specialist – for state officials to “deploy” this team of experts to serve a high-needs child – medically, behaviorally, or both – **in that child’s home**, if possible, delivering tailored care and increasing the odds of that family remaining intact – in other words, reducing the risk of foster care.

Those same teams can also serve children in foster care living with kin or a foster family...

Currently, our agency employs a part-time physician who reviews medical records, evaluates assessments, and checks prescriptions for contraindication...

Her work is immensely helpful as we work to address a child’s needs on managed care Medicaid.

But her work – and our work – is primarily focused on children *already in foster care*.

We want to dramatically increase preventative services, especially as we face a rising incidence of parents feeling forced to abandon their children to foster care because they cannot seem to find the right resources for their high-needs, delayed or disabled child.

With your blessing, our agency will hire these healthcare strike teams and deliver care where families need it most – at home, in person, available around-the-clock, and tailored to that child's needs... with that child surrounded by their loved ones, in the setting they're most comfortable.

### **Autism Assessment Pilot**

Next, for recommended change 7, you'll see \$451,978 for an autism assessment pilot in Region 12, which covers Bryan, Bulloch, Camden, Chatham, Effingham, Glynn, Liberty, Long, and McIntosh counties.

Some of you know Dr. Michelle Zeanah, a physician in South Georgia who specializes in diagnosing and treating children with autism spectrum disorder...

I've worked with her over the past six months to develop a proposal where she and her team will screen every child in foster care in Region 12 for autism and ideally publish her findings – in partnership with Georgia Southern University – on the prevalence of ASD of youth in state custody.

Why is that project important?

We have anecdotal evidence that the prevalence of autism among children in foster care is higher than that of the general population...

We're also dealing with more parents abandoning their children to state custody because of unmet mental and behavioral health needs... the difficulty in finding providers able to meet the level of care for those children... the sheer amount of staff resources going into coordinating their care... frequent placement disruptions... and that those children, usually teenagers, often have the same cluster of diagnoses and behaviors...

What we most often see for youth with complex needs without suitable placements are the following: PTSD, ADHD or ADD, autism or suspected autism, self-harm, physical violence to themselves or others, mood dysregulation, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, anxiety, and depression... and they're in and out of emergency rooms or psychiatric facilities.

This project will help us better understand whether we're missing the right diagnosis altogether, diagnosing it something else, or improperly treating...

It'll help us – as a state – better marshal the right resources to the problem if we understand the actual prevalence of autism in that region.

And it'll help us strategize more effective, time-sensitive therapies to get to these kids younger, when therapies are most effective, before they risk entering foster care.

### **Autism Respite Care**

The remaining, new item in this program budget is \$1 million for autism respite care.

This funding will allow our agency to contract with providers to offer more respite services for families – not just for children with autism in foster care, but also for those families experiencing burnout... when caregivers may consider relinquishing their rights if there's no reprieve on the horizon.

We have a lot of work to do to improve the continuum of care for ASD.

I am deeply thankful to the Governor and First Lady for including these recommendations...

With your support, we'll be able to make life-changing improvements for our most vulnerable children.

### **Provider Rate Increase**

Shifting to page 227, recommended change 2, for Out-of-Home Care...

Importantly, of all our program budgets, this one is the most variable.

We never know how many children will enter or leave foster care on any given day.

No staff are paid out of this budget...

It's where we pay foster parents, child placing agencies, child caring institutions, and what we call "supplemental supervision" – which covers what we pay through wraparound services – like behavior aides – as well as "hoteling" costs, including the rates for those who stay with the child in the hotel or office, that child's meals and transportation, and the remaining costs of his or her supervision.

“Hoteling”... Many of you are already familiar with this term, which means a child in foster care has been temporarily placed in an office or hotel... stemming from a lack of foster families **and** group homes able to accept youth with complex needs...

We’ve marshalled more resources, man hours, and flexibility to proactively address this problem...

Over the past few months, we piloted enhanced provider rates – on a case-by-case basis – to keep kids out of hotels and offices... and to remove them from hotels and offices into placements tailor-made to serve their needs...

We also started paying outright for necessary health services so that a child’s behaviors – rooted in trauma – didn’t jeopardize them being able to safely remain with their foster family or group home.

Since July – when the state was averaging fifty to sixty children in a hotel or office on any given day – we’ve prevented at least sixty children from being hoteled.

The Monday before Thanksgiving, we had seventy children temporarily placed in an office or hotel...

We’d managed to get down to the forties before we saw that jump back up... But in only a week and half, we got that number down to the thirties – the first time it’s been that low in years.

Unfortunately, the delta and omicron variants have temporarily sidelined the effectiveness of our strategies... We’re working closely with the Department of Community Health and the Governor’s Office to secure emergency staffing for providers, which have been forced to take placements “offline.”

Once we address this temporary staffing issue, we’ll get back to aggressively identifying better placements for our kids and free up bandwidth to plan for more preventative work... keeping more children out of foster care altogether.

(Pause)

With that background, I’ll turn to this point: you’ll see that the Governor has included **\$27,810,584 in Out of Home Care** to *raise what we currently pay foster families, child placing agencies, relative caregivers, and child caring institutions – a.k.a. group homes – by 10%.*

The impact that this new funding will have on recruitment and retention of high-quality caregivers for children in foster care cannot be overstated...

Foster families aren't in this business for the money, nor are child placing agencies or child caring institutions.

In fact, many of you know from personal experience that your friends and those nonprofits in this line of work are, financially speaking, in the red.

A provider rate increase will give foster families more flexibility to meet the needs of the children in their homes.

If they need shoes, clothes, school supplies, a haircut... or they want to pay for extracurricular activities... this increased per diem means our foster parents aren't taking as much of a financial hit by opening up their homes.

It means that our group home providers can better recruit high-quality staff to care for children with unique needs...

And as we continue to battle the effects of COVID, workforce challenges, and inflation, these increases will *prevent* foster families and providers from leaving our ranks.

Right now, we cannot afford fewer homes to keep youth safe and address underlying trauma... Not if we want to be more aggressive about deploying preventative services, identifying appropriate placements, and holistically improving the continuum of care.

(Pause)

Now, I'd like to take a few moments to highlight the Divisions of Aging Services and Child Support Services.

As we spotlighted in our annual report, Aging Services continued its work to safeguard vulnerable adults from abuse, neglect, and exploitation and provided resources to support older Georgians, persons with disabilities, and their caregivers.

For example, participants of the Senior Community Services Employment Program volunteered over 44,000 hours of service, including over 19,000 hours of service to organizations serving older adults, and the Georgia Fund for Children & Elderly – which is co-administered with DPH - provided home-delivered meals and transportation for seniors as we continued to battle the COVID-19 pandemic.



The Division of Child Support Services continued working to build stronger families by getting children the financial support that they need and equipping parents with more tools to provide for their children.

8,121 new parents enrolled in the Fatherhood Program, which connects parents with training and employment opportunities.

In FY21, over \$10 million in child support was collected from Fatherhood participants, and 1,761 children received increased support from parents who participated in Georgia's Parental Accountability Court program.

(Pause)

Quickly, I'll touch on \$6.7 million originally added to the FY22 budget on the Senate side... specifically designated for therapeutic foster care.

It's referenced on page 227.

It was added to ensure collaboration with the Department of Community Health for more therapeutic services reimbursable under Medicaid, but our federal partners have not yet granted approval...

In the interim, these funds can be redirected for immediate needs – specifically, the ability to fund more preventative services for children – which is a moving target, exacerbated by the pandemic – by giving us flexibility to use it with an amended caption.

(Pause)

Under the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Program budget, there is a technical revenue item with \$1,100,533 in dedicated state revenue from marriage and divorce filing fees... recognized via the Children's Trust Fund while general state revenue support of this budget is reduced by an equivalent amount.

There is no program impact from this technical change... just a clarification of what revenues are supporting our important work in this area.

## **New Projects**

Quickly, I'll touch on some exciting projects that we've recently initiated...

We're in the final planning stages for implementing upgrades to our child welfare case management system... which – right now – isn't "caseworker mobile."

If you're a case worker going to do an emergency welfare check, going to court, visiting a foster family... You can't add notes or photos, review case history, or sync new data with our system out in the field.

You've got to drive back to your computer and manually type it in.

Not only does that risk losing information because of the time gap, it's time-consuming and takes away from personal interactions critical to a case worker's job and child safety.

We're also working on customizable software so we can better coordinate a child's care between our staff, foster families, our providers, and everything in between, including an exciting new foster parent eligibility and training module to make it easier and faster – without compromising safety – to get approved to become a foster family.

(Pause)

On the benefits eligibility side, we've made some very timely upgrades to Georgia Gateway...

Right before the pandemic hit, we made SNAP applications available online.

We added new automation, called "bots," to help workers analyze data and process cases faster and more accurately, as well as automated appointment scheduling...

By leveraging technology and automating processes, we're alleviating burdens for our workers at a critical time.

## **Leadership Vision**

In my new role, I'm intensely focused on improving mental health and behavioral health services for youth at risk of entering foster care or currently in state custody...

With the Governor and First Lady's support, collaboration with my fellow health agency counterparts, words of wisdom and support from you...

We're going to ensure that every child who enters foster care has the best placement and resources to meet their needs.

These budget recommendations invest in high-quality preventative services to keep kids from ever being separated from their families, and to address their trauma if they do enter custody.

In these budgets, we're going to gain a better understanding of the prevalence of autism among foster youth in our state... and build a robust network of healthcare services so children can access autism services at a younger age.

We'll better recruit and retain high-quality foster care providers...

We'll draw down critically needed federal funding to deploy supportive services and meals to aging Georgians who need it the most...

And we're making strategic, positive investments through good government with an emphasis on a seamless continuum of care for all Georgians.

I want to take this opportunity to personally thank House Appropriations Chairman Terry England... Chairwoman Katie Dempsey... Chairwoman Sharon Cooper... and Senate Appropriations Chairman Blake Tillery for their words of wisdom, honesty, and partnership over the past six months – if not longer.

(Pause)

With your support, we'll continue to build stronger families for a stronger Georgia.

Thank you, and now I'll take your questions.