

GEORGIA CASA CONFERENCE 2026

WORKSHOP BLOCK I: 10:30 – 11:45

Title: Appointed to Advocate: Strengthening Your Courtroom Presence

Facilitator: Hon. Carolyn Altman, Paulding County Juvenile Court

Description: Strengthen in-court advocacy and presence by learning to improve written reports and in-court testimony. This workshop is an annual favorite and includes practical tips on testifying, answering questions from judges and lawyers, introducing new information, making service and placement recommendations, and increasing credibility as a witness and advocate.

Title: Embark Georgia, Georgia ETV, & Georgia CREW

Facilitators: David Meyers, Senior Public Service Associate, JW Fanning Institute for Leadership Development, Embark Georgia Center, University of Georgia and Jason Bedgood, Program Coordinator, JW Fanning Institute for Leadership Development, Embark Georgia Center, University of Georgia

Description: This workshop provides an overview of the Embark Georgia Center, the Education and Training Voucher program in Georgia, and the Georgia CREW program that just completed its summer 2026 session. We will also highlight the Embark Georgia Summer Program series with North Georgia Technical College and Albany Technical College, along with other opportunities to engage with the Embark Georgia Center in the coming months.

Title: Educational Advocacy & Legal Protections for Youth in Foster Care

Facilitators: Tanesse Brown, Georgia Appleseed Program Manager and Jossette Franklin, PH.D, Division of Family & Children Services, EPAC, Education Quality Specialist

Description: Youth in care often face educational barriers that can increase their risk of exclusionary discipline and school instability. This workshop provides an overview of the school discipline processes, students' rights, and key legal protections that support educational access and stability for youth in foster care. Participants will gain practical strategies to advocate for students and help ensure they receive the support and protections they are entitled to under federal and state law.

Title: Keeping Children & Families First: Accountability & Advocacy in Changing Times

Facilitators: Melissa Carter, Clinical Professor of Law, Barton Child Law & Policy Center, Emory University School of Law and Chris Hempfling, Vice President, Service Excellence & Stakeholder Relations, BrightSpring Health Services

Description: Federal oversight has long influenced how child welfare systems operate. Recent policy developments, however, suggest a potential change in the fundamental relationship between federal and state governments impacting child welfare. This workshop will help courtroom and community advocates understand what these changes could mean for children and

families in Georgia. Participants will receive an overview of current performance trends and outcomes in Georgia's child welfare system and examine how shifts in federal oversight could affect system improvement efforts.

Title: Preserving Sibling Relationships: Benefits & the Law

Facilitators: Stephany Zaic Garrett, Union & Towns Counties Special Assistant Attorney General
Stephanie Boylan, DFCS Region 2 Regional Adoption Coordinator and
Kris-Ann Poe, Enotah Judicial Circuit Attorney

Description: Every dependent child is going to experience a trauma. The extent of that trauma is lessened when the child can be placed with family. Reasonable and diligent efforts need to be made to seek out biological connections, including siblings. The quality and scope of those efforts can affect the long-term relationships a child may have with that biological connection and promote that sense of belonging. Participants will receive an overview of the laws that impact preserving sibling relationships as well as an exploration of the benefits of ongoing family connections.

WORKSHOP BLOCK II: 2:00 – 3:15

Title: Meeting Families Where They Are: A Trauma & Poverty-Informed Approach

Facilitators: Audrey Idaikkadar, MPH, Director of Regional Programs, Resilient Georgia,
Laura Beth Newsom, Coordinator, Walker County Family Connection and
Gabrielle Stewart, MSW, Strategic Advisor, Change Makers Leadership Institute

Description: This interactive workshop will provide a clear, practical understanding of how trauma and economic stress shape the families you serve. Participants will engage in activities that bring these challenges to life and explore simple, actionable steps to begin using immediately. We will emphasize that this work is not about getting it “right” all at once, but about continually shifting how we see, respond, and build understanding over time. Each participant will leave with a concrete goal and practical tools for immediate use and ongoing growth.

Title: Pathways to Behavioral Health Supports in Georgia

Facilitators: Danielle Fish, DBHDD Match Specialist,
Dr. Evelyn Davis, DBHDD Clinical Placement Team Director,
Layla Fitzgerald, DBHDD Community Program Director and
Heather Stanley, DBHDD MATCH Program Director

Description: This discussion will provide valuable information on the referral processes and support options available for pathways to help access the range of resources that are available for

behavioral health and complex youth and families through DBHDD – Office of Children, Young Adults and Families. We will also review the continuum of care at the point of entry into crisis services and supporting successful discharge into ongoing services.

Title: Understanding Addiction

Facilitator: Bonnie Lockwood, Director, Cornerstones Counseling Center

Description: Addiction impacts children and families every day. A deeper understanding can help volunteers and staff sharpen their skills when addiction is a factor in a case. This workshop will review substances of misuse and abuse, discuss testing, medication-assisted treatment, stages of change, assessment, and treatment options for those struggling with addiction.

Title: A Home for Every Child

Facilitators: Mary Havick, Deputy Chief of Staff, Georgia Department of Human Services and Wayne Naugle, CEO/Founder, Families 4 Families

Description: Georgia DHS/DFCS has joined the *A Home for Every Child* initiative through the Administration for Children and Families as an alternative Performance Improvement Plan following the Child and Family Services Review. This workshop will explore Georgia's approach to achieving a 1:1 ratio of homes to children in foster care, including key strategies, supporting data, and implementation efforts.

Ask the Judges Panel

Facilitators: Hon. Carolyn Altman, Paulding County Juvenile Court
Hon. Nhan-Ai Du, Gwinnett County Juvenile Chief Judge
Hon. Michael Key, Troup County Juvenile Court
Hon. Wayne Grannis, Cobb County Juvenile Court
Moderator: Jerry Bruce, Director, Georgia Office of the Child Advocate

Description: Engage in dialogue with a panel of judges on topics of law, process, procedure, and child welfare philosophy. Ask questions about decision-making, volunteer advocacy, CASA reports and recommendations, law interpretation, and trending issues in child welfare. Please note that specific cases will not be discussed.

WORKSHOP BLOCK III: 3:35 – 4:50

Title: Leveling the Field: Balancing the Expectation of Substantial Progress with Reasonable Efforts

Facilitator: Jerry Bruce, Director, Georgia Office of the Child Advocate

Description: In 2024, Georgia Senate Bill 376 added required findings at review hearings as to whether the parents have made “substantial progress” toward the completion of the case plan and tightened the time limits for developing and ordering concurrent plans. What happens when there is a lack of substantial progress due to a failure of the State to make reasonable efforts? Do the substantial progress requirements effectively shift the burden to the parents? What does “substantial progress” mean within the context of mental health, substance use, and other causes of dependency rising to the level of removal? This workshop will answer these questions and empower advocates to hold all parties accountable.

Title: I Can Do It with a Broken Heart: Conquering Secondary Trauma in Child Welfare

Facilitator: Hon. Nhan-Ai Du, Gwinnett County Juvenile Chief Judge

Description: This workshop explores the hidden toll that child welfare work takes on the professionals who show up every day for the most vulnerable children and families. Drawing on neuroscience, this workshop examines how chronic exposure to trauma rewires our stress responses and manifests in the body in ways we often mistake for something else entirely. Through candid personal reflection, participants will recognize their own experiences in the signs and symptoms of secondary traumatic stress.

Title: Applying Infant Mental Health Principles to the Child Welfare System

Facilitators: Dr. Laura Jane Miller, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Assistant Professor, *Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences* at Emory University School of Medicine
Hon. Michael Key, Troup County Juvenile Court

Description: This workshop will present basic concepts of infant mental health and apply those to the child welfare setting. Topics include the importance of attachment, attachment styles, impact of exposures to drugs/alcohol in utero, trauma and neglect, and what we can do to buffer against negative impact of these stressors. The presenters will take questions to help participants integrate the principles into their advocacy work for infants and young children.

Title: Supporting Transition Age Youth into Adulthood: Lessons from Lived Experience with Georgia EmpowerMENT

Facilitators: Lived Experience Experts: Niko Sanford, Michael Conger, Reggie Holloway, and TBD

Description: What does it truly take to support young people as they navigate the transition to adulthood? Georgia EmpowerMENT puts lived experience at the center of the conversation. Four lived experience experts that were Transition Age Youth will be facilitated by a lived experience moderator and joined by a mental health and child welfare professional. We will engage in candid dialogue — both through prepared questions and a live audience Q&A. Panelists will share resources they helped create and make a compelling case for why authentic youth engagement

isn't just good practice — it's transformative for systems and individuals alike. Nothing About Us Without Us.

Title: From Assessment to Advocacy: Strategies to Drive Cases to Permanency

Facilitators: Angela Tyner, Advocacy Director, Georgia CASA and
Heidi Grimmert, Advocacy Practice Consultant and Trainer

Description: Successful advocacy requires more than monitoring a case, it means identifying opportunities to move children and families toward permanency. This workshop explores strategies for advancing case progress, preventing delays, and improving outcomes through early service coordination, meaningful family engagement, effective court advocacy, strong case planning, and authentic youth participation. Participants will also learn how to address barriers, engage stakeholders, and maintain accountability while fostering collaborative relationships. Attendees will leave with practical tools to advocate confidently at every stage of a case.
