

JUDGE ALTMAN OPENING STATEMENT

Introduction:

Good morning, I am Carolyn Altman, the juvenile court judge in Paulding County. I have been on the bench for 5 years and spent 10 years before that as an attorney in juvenile court representing children & parents, and serving as a guardian ad litem. I am a Child Welfare Law Specialist, serve on various committees within the Council of Juvenile Court Judges, and am the vice-chair of the statewide Child Fatality Review Panel. I consider myself a dedicated, career-professional in child welfare.

With 15 years in this field, I could spend hours telling you about the good work that I have seen - children protected, families restored, of dedicated & selfless DFCS case managers, CASAs, & attorneys, doing incredible work – investing in our children & encouraging our families. But today, I come with my concerns. Our child welfare system in Georgia is not doing well; our children and families are not being served well.

Statewide, our foster care population is lower than it was a few years ago. At our highest in 2018, we were at nearly 15,000, and as of March 2023, our foster care population was just over 10,000. And that sounds like a really good thing, but we are missing children who need to be in care & we are not protecting our children well.

There are three ways that I have seen this trend unfold:

1. Overuse & Misuse of Safety Plans: Leaving children in limbo

- DFCS responds to an emergency situation, creates a safety plan as a short-term fix, but then does not circle back to fully address the problem and ensure that the children are being properly cared for.
- The biggest danger is that children are going from the frying pan into the fire. The parents are not safe and then the children are being left with people who may not be safe – they are not screened or approved by DFCS, no criminal background checks, or drug screens, certainly no extensive training as a qualified foster parent. At worse, the child could be just as unsafe with the new caregiver as they were with the parent.

Also problematic because:

- DFCS comes in, rearranges the family, and can then *close* the case. Providing no services to the parents, no services to the child, and leaves the safety resource without any help or legal ability to care for the child. At times the caregiver then calls DFCS and says “I need help taking care of this child,” DFCS says, “Your case is closed. We can’t help you.”
- There’s no court involvement/judicial oversight, no due process, and no clear path for what the parents need to do to fix the problem and how to safely return the children.

2. DFCS resisting high mental health needs children

- A second area of concern is our high-mental-health-needs children – usually teenagers – whose extreme behavioral/emotional/mental health needs cannot be met in the home. Exhausted & frustrated parents are at their wits ends.
- These children are highly vulnerable and need the most help; they are special-needs kids. DFCS is actively resisting these children coming into foster care. I attended a meeting in August this year, with about 30 judges, DFCS Commissioner Broce said that DFCS was not set up to be caregivers for these high mental health needs children. She asked judges to

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consider detaining these children – locking them up in a juvenile detention center – for a few days so that DFCS could maybe look for placements.

- As judges we do not lock children up, and especially not special-needs kids, because DFCS can't find a placement for them!

3. Family Preservation Cases

- A third way that I have observed that our foster care population is decreasing is through an increase in Family Preservation cases where custody of a child is placed directly with a relative, rather than with DFCS.
- Placing the child with an appropriate relative is a *good* thing! But the problem is that the children and caregivers are not getting all of the services and benefits that they would be entitled to if they were in formal foster care. They're not eligible for IV-E or IV-B federal dollars, not eligible for health insurance as our foster children are, not eligible for daycare assistance, and the family caring for this child does not receive a foster care per diem, is not eligible to receive an on-going subsidy if the placement becomes permanent.
- Rather than giving our children and families the *best* – with services and benefit that they could be eligible for – DFCS does the bare minimum for the family & keeps the foster care numbers down.