



South Carolina Department of
**CHILDREN'S
ADVOCACY**
Advocacy. Accountability. Service.

The Advocate

PARTNERS EDITION

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A Message from
the State Child Advocate

Amanda F. Whittle, JD, CWLS

I am grateful to share with you the August edition of the Department of Children's Advocacy's newsletter.

In addition to the new faces that have joined our team, we are highlighting a new look for several of our websites, a brand new exhibit for the SC Heart Gallery that had its soft open this month, and the Foster Care Review Division's new database management system has already been nominated for an award.

You'll read about one of our guardians ad litem's efforts to create a stronger network of churches to meet the needs of adoptive and foster families in his community--and how you can, too.

We also share new tools available to help educators and child advocates teach children how to identify and avoid becoming a victim of human trafficking.

Please share the news about the work that is underway in our state and **send us** your questions, concerns, and recommendations.

WELCOME NEW STAFF

As our team grows, so do the opportunities to improve the lives of all children in South Carolina.



Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem
Program Coordinator I - Oconee

Anna Holbrooks

Anna Holbrooks started June 2. She is an Oconee County native and is pursuing her associates in arts at Tri-County Technical College with the intention of working towards a bachelor's in Social Work.

She previously worked as a floral designer and wedding planner, but found her passion lies with serving her community.

In her free time, Anna enjoys playing the cello, volunteering at her church, and cooking with her family. She is excited for this opportunity to advocate and give back to her community.



Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem
Program Coordinator I - Marion

Qualina Murrill

Qualina Murrill started August 2. A New Jersey native, she migrated to South Carolina eight years ago and says she has always had a passion for helping others in a capacity that will make a difference.

Qualina comes to this position with the experience to handle a case load effectively and efficiently. She is ecstatic to be a part of a program that does such amazing work throughout the Marion County community. She could not be more excited to embark on this new journey and advocate on behalf of abused and neglected children.



Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem
Program Coordinator I - Spartanburg

Jason Watson

Jason H. Watson started on August 2. He is a graduate of Clemson University and has worked for the Department of Social Services for the past 23 years in foster care, intensive foster care, adoptions, and as the SNAP employment and training coordinator for Anderson and Oconee counties.

Jason is excited to join the Spartanburg team and hopes to be an effective advocate for the children of Spartanburg County.



Foster Care Review Division
Program Coordinator I

Natalie Graham

Natalie Graham started on August 17. She is from Columbia, South Carolina, and has a bachelor's of social work from Benedict College. Upon completion of her degree, she worked with homeless families as a case worker at the Family Shelter. Natalie later transitioned into a 10-year career as a 911 call taker with the City of Columbia.

She enjoys traveling, spending time with family and friends, and networking with new people. She is very passionate about helping others in need and is excited to take on her new role as a Program Coordinator.



Foster Care Review Division
Program Coordinator I

Markailah Jones

Markailah Jones started on August 17. Before joining the FCRD, she worked as a middle school English teacher for two years and served in the Army National Guard for six years. During her teaching career, she learned that she had a passion for advocating for vulnerable children.

Markailah has a bachelor's degree in middle level education from USC-Aiken and is pursuing a master's of social work at Walden University.

She enjoys spending time with her family and friends, traveling, learning about different cultures, and trying new foods. She always believes in finding the silver lining in any situation and is excited to begin this new journey.



Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem
County Director - Edgefield

Breunna Perry

Breunna Perry started on August 17 and will oversee McCormick, Saluda, and Edgefield counties. She was employed for the last three years by the Department of Social Services.

She was born and raised in Aiken County and earned her bachelor's in politics and justice, with a minor in psychology, from Claflin University in May 2015.

Breunna enjoys spending her off time with her daughter and her family, catching up on tv shows, and attending church.

She is excited to join the Guardian ad Litem program where she can advocate for children in communities of South Carolina one day at a time.



Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem
Program Coordinator I - Florence

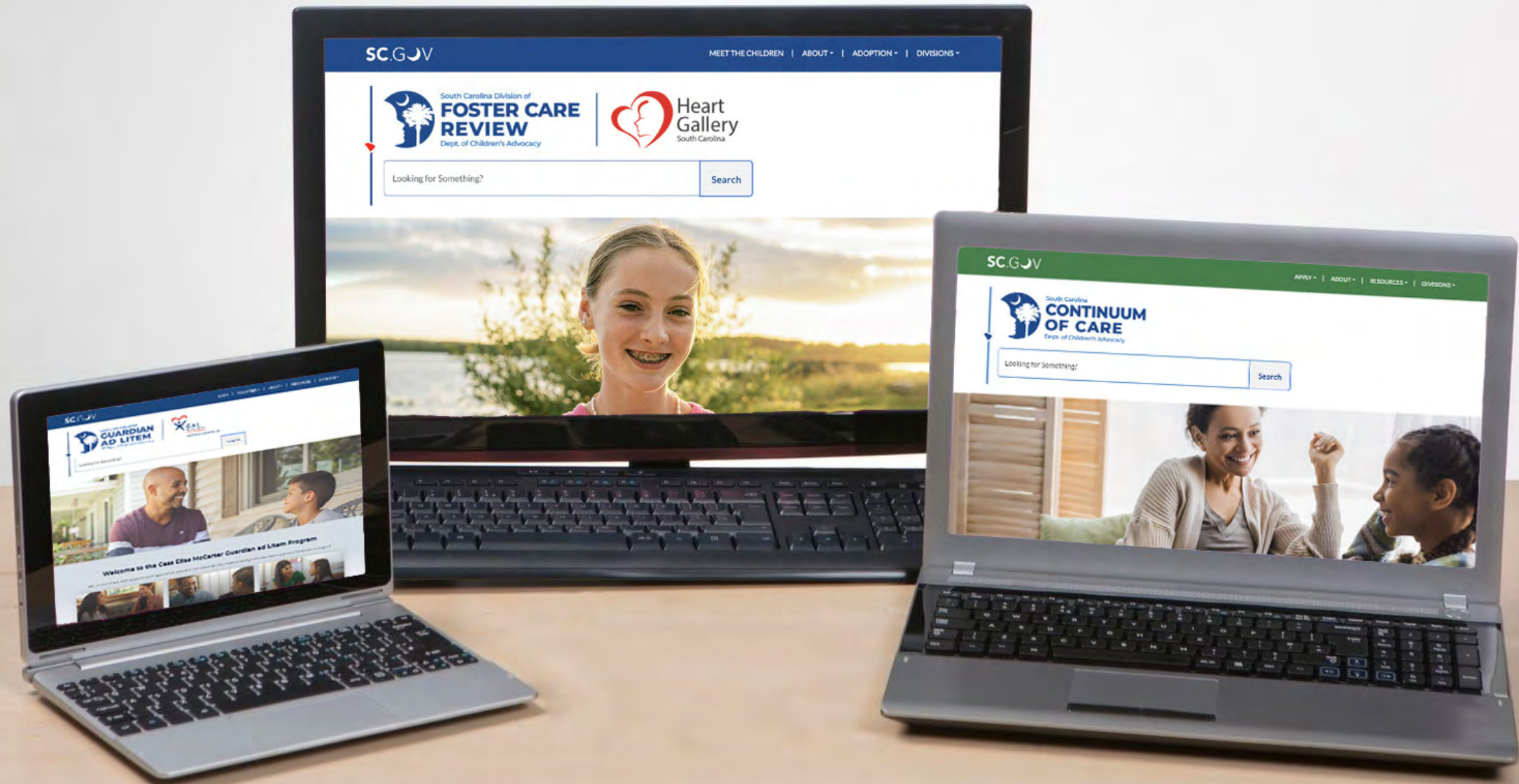
Tamechia Elder

Tamechia Elder started on August 4 as the new case manager for the Kershaw County GAL office.

She is a native of Lancaster, South Carolina, where she and her family reside. Prior to this position, she was a case manager assistant with foster care at DSS in York County and then an eligibility specialist at DSS in Lancaster County.

Tamechia is extremely excited about her new role with the Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem Program!

Same URL. Brand New Look.



The redesigned websites for **Guardian ad Litem**, **SC Heart Gallery**, and **Continuum of Care** were launched this month. In addition to an updated and streamlined look that shares a visual identity with the **DCA's site**, we've also modified the logos so each division is instantly recognizable as part of the DCA. We hope you will check them out and let us know what you think!

New Heart Gallery Exhibit Now Open

On August 31, the SC Heart Gallery held a sneak peek of its most ambitious exhibit to date -- a storefront inside Columbiana Centre Mall.

Hats off to **Christina Grant**, SC Heart Gallery coordinator, and the many many FCR employees and board members who made this incredible venue a reality through their time, talents, and donations.

The grand opening will be held on **Monday, Sept. 18**. But don't worry--this semi-permanent display will be open until at least August 2024, so those who live or work across the state are encouraged to stop by whenever they are in the area!

[Learn more](#)





Meet Michael M.

Photo credit: Coreen Williams, 2023

Michael M. likes to play basketball for fun. His favorite subject in school is science. He enjoys watching horror movies, and his favorite foods include chicken and hot wings.

Michael describes himself as funny, energetic, and crafty. He likes to do archery and his favorite color is red. His perfect day would consist of going to the park because it is peaceful.

To inquire about adopting Michael, or any of the other Heart Gallery children, visit scheartgallery.sc.gov.



Hyland Customer
Innovation Awards
FINALIST



Environmental/social impact

FCRD Named Finalist for Social Innovation Award

In July, the Foster Care Review Division launched its new database management system, CAMS, replacing the outdated methods used to manage the foster care review process.

Built using Hyland software, the new tool will provide a central case management platform that integrates with DSS' system to minimize the amount of manual data entry and streamline internal processes. The result will allow staff to easily and quickly see all related case data on each child in one place as well as analyze data at a high-level to identify barriers impacting children statewide.

In August, the division learned it was one of three finalists for Hylands' Customer Innovation Awards in the Environmental/Social Impact category!

The final winner will be announced in October during the company's CommunityLive national conference.

Volunteer GAL spearheads efforts to bring churches together to meet needs of foster families



Scott Bowser
Volunteer GAL



Susie Boyle
Fostering the Family

After his daughter became a foster parent in 2019, **Scott Bowser** saw first-hand the difference foster families can have on the life of a child. He also saw the many hurdles that these parents face trying to raise a foster child. That was when he decided to get involved and become a volunteer guardian ad litem.

As a new GAL, Bowser said he was “blown away” when he learned about the number of children in the counties he serves (Aiken, Edgefield, McCormick, and Saluda) who were either homeless or in DSS custody and living with foster parents. However, he also discovered the limitations on how he could help.

“As a GAL we are not allowed to assist the family directly, but we can point them to the resources in their community,” says Bowser. And that’s what he did.

Bowser started researching ministries and programs at nearby churches to learn what resources they could offer, and he began sharing that information with foster families.

Even so, he noticed that the needs of the community outweighed what even his own church, Fairview Presbyterian, could do. Additionally, he found that while many churches are willing to help, they seldom ask DSS workers or foster families what their specific needs actually are. And there were occasional overlaps in resources, with a surplus of some and not enough of another. He knew there must be a better way.

He and his church reached out to **Fostering the Family**, a nonprofit organization that “empowers and engages churches to raise up and support foster and adoptive parents.” In May, Fostering the Family helped establish its first charter, a network of six churches in Aiken and Edgefield counties that work independently but are still able to share resources and meet the needs of foster families and homeless children in their communities.

“Ultimately we are bridging churches to help solve the foster care crisis using the unique gifts of each church and communicating through Fostering the Family to help get this accomplished,” says **Susie Boyle**, Fostering the Family’s director of outreach and partnerships. “Typically each church has an advocate team lead who communicates through the FTF employees or the county coordinators.”

Foster or adoptive families can reach out to Fostering the Family and request the supports they need. The organization then directs those requests to the churches in the charter who work together to coordinate the response.

“We all don’t need to be doing the same thing, but we all should be doing something,” says Bowser. “Sharing resources allows individual churches to do what they do best and share their talents and resources with other churches. We are better when we work together.”

Now Bowser is an advocate not only for the children he helps as a guardian, but for the charter program.

“Our hope is that this model will expand into every county in South Carolina,” he says. “We want foster parents to know that they aren’t alone and that there is help for them by reaching out to Fostering the Family.”

While Edgefield/Aiken was the first official charter, Fostering the Family is working in six other counties, including its second charter in Anderson County.

“We would love to speak to anyone interested in seeing this happen in their county,” says Boyle who encourages individuals to contact her or **Kim Trainer**, CEO of Fostering the Family.

Volunteer Spotlight



Since joining the Charleston County Guardian ad Litem Program in 2021, volunteer GAL **Sheila Russell** has changed the lives of 34 children.

When not working her GAL cases, Sheila also volunteers for My Sister's House, advocating for victimized women of domestic violence. She is an active participant of belly dancing, yoga, an actress in mystery dinner theaters, and a frequent performer at local "open mic night" events.

Her daughter, **Abi Luftig**, a program coordinator in the Dorchester County GAL office, agrees that she is a caring individual who always helps others, but she offers this advice: "Never play a board game with her; you will lose."

National Night Out



National Night Out is a nationwide event where law enforcement partners with local agencies to raise community awareness. **WHAT BETTER PLACE** for the GAL Program to be present, get to know their neighbors, and encourage them to volunteer?

Charleston staff had a blast at the Mt. Pleasant event on August 1!



BACK to SCHOOL

Friends of Pickens County Guardian ad Litem

helped almost 160 children begin the school year with new shoes and clothes during its 17th annual Heart and Sole benefit on August 4th.

The children, who are in area foster care, received gift cards to be spent at the Easley Walmart and Academy Sports + Outdoors, which helped sponsor the event.

Friends of Pickens County GAL also raised approximately \$13,000 during the fund drive, 100 percent of which goes directly to aid children. The organization was established in 2002 to fill the gap of financial needs for foster care children.





Sound of Freedom Screening

In appreciation for the work Guardians ad Litem do with vulnerable children, Coastal Community Church recently donated tickets for the Charleston GAL staff to attend a screening of the **Sound of Freedom**, a movie that highlights the horrors of child sex trafficking.

Attending the screening were (back, l to r) **Lamia Elhag, Travis Shaffer, Scott Wagner, Topher Emmolo**; (front, l to r) **Kayley Willoughby, Katelynn Lemire, and Roanna Miller**)

Charleston GAL appreciates its partnership with local faith-based organizations.



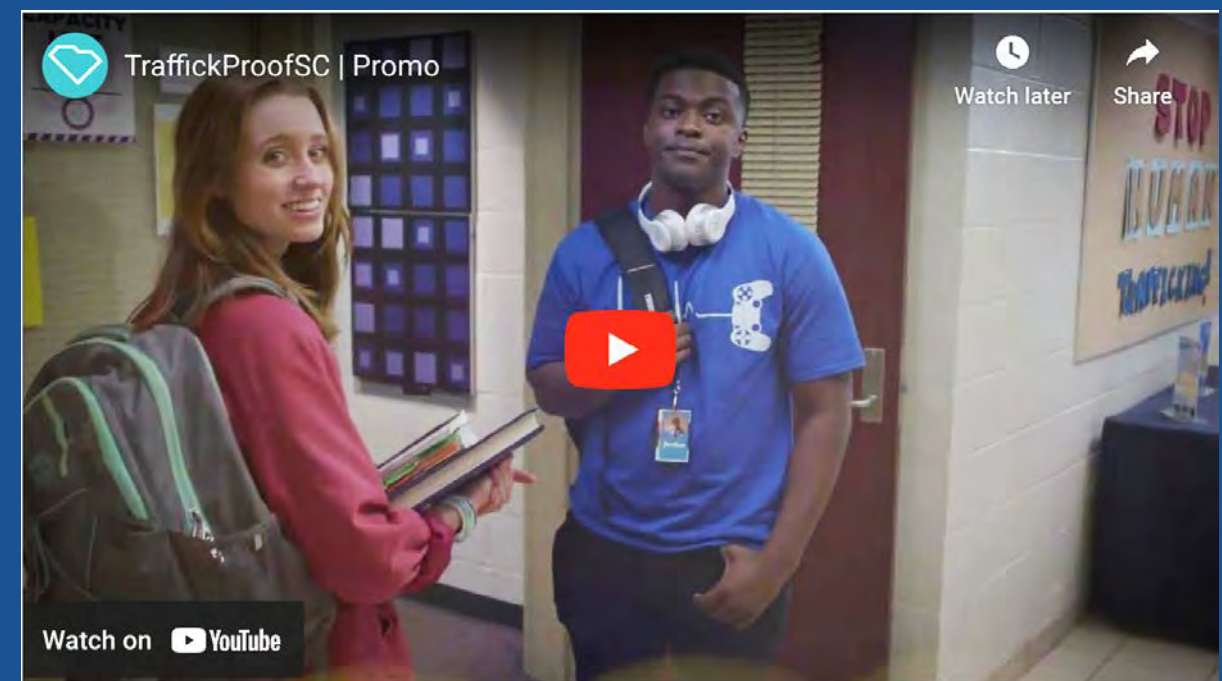
State Child Advocate **Amanda Whittle**, a member of the South Carolina Human Trafficking Task Force, shared that South Carolina's efforts to stop human trafficking were recognized by **Shared Hope International**, which upgraded the Palmetto State to a 'D' in its annual **Child & Youth Sex Trafficking Report Card**, up from an 'F' last year.

While that doesn't sound great (and, yes, there is still much work to be done), it is worth noting that South Carolina is now one of only 14 states that did NOT receive an 'F' in the report.

One effort that is helping win the battle against trafficking is a partnership between the Task Force and SCETV to create **TraffickProofSC**, a series of free, age-appropriate, educational videos and curricula catered to middle and high school students.

The TraffickProofSC curriculum provides teachers and CAC staff with tools to facilitate discussions with students on how to identify different types of human trafficking, associated warning signs, methods used by traffickers to exploit victims, and what to do if they think someone is being exploited.

Learn more about becoming a facilitator and how to use these resources:



Want to contribute?

Send your feedback and items for next month's edition:

SUBMIT



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