



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

Greetings and welcome to the February newsletter! We're delighted to bring you this month's edition that includes new hires and promotions, as well as divisional updates.

I am saddened to share with you the passing of Thom Neal, a well-respected attorney and passionate child advocate. Thom served as a contract attorney with the Guardian ad Litem Program, and DCA extends heartfelt condolences to Thom's family, friends, and coworkers in this edition.

There are two particularly exciting announcements:

- Our agency took part in a cultural exchange program with a delegation from Turkey's Ministry of Family and Social Services to explore different approaches to foster care and adoption.
- On February 5, I was elected to be a Family Court judge for the Second Circuit! While I am elated and grateful for the opportunity to serve in this new role beginning in May, until such time, please know that it is an honor and privilege to continue serving as the State Child Advocate and to work with agency leadership toward a smooth transition that supports the agency's ability to improve outcomes for children in our state.

I'm proud of all that we've accomplished so far, but there is still much to do. Each day the DCA and its employees remain focused on creating a stronger, safer, and more compassionate place for children. Thank you for joining us. As always, we welcome **your feedback**.

MOVERS & **SHAKERS**

*Congratulations to our new employees
and those in new positions!*



Children's Advocacy Administration
Senior Accountant/Fiscal Analyst

Jasmine Dubose

Jasmine started on January 17. She holds a bachelor's in business administration with a focus on accounting and expects to complete her master's from Bellevue University this fall. A native of Florence, South Carolina, she now lives in Columbia. She is eager to use her skills to make a difference for children through her work at the DCA.

Jasmine has three young children—two boys and a girl. In addition to keeping her active and on her toes, they also motivate her to keep growing and improving in all areas of her life.

In her free time, Jasmine enjoys traveling, spending time with family, and taking long walks with her fur baby. She is passionate about helping people, is always ready to learn new things, and looks forward to being a valuable resource to the agency and her team members.



System Improvement
Investigator Team Lead

Anna Ponds

Anna Ponds was promoted to investigator team lead for the Investigations Unit on December 1. She joined the DCA in July 2023 as an investigator just two months after earning her master's of social work. She is excited to grow within the IU by helping children and providing support to the IU director and her fellow coworkers.

The South Carolina native has always been passionate about advocating for children and providing support to families in need. Her professional experience includes working as a foster care case manager, a Guardian ad Litem advocate and supervisor, and a social services intern at a local non-profit.

Outside of work, Anna loves to spend time with her wife, binge-watch Love is Blind, explore local markets, listen to music, go camping, and find peace in the mountains.



System Improvement
Investigator

Samantha Furr

Samantha Furr rejoined the DCA on February 3. She has more than six years of experience in various child welfare roles, including program coordinator for GAL's Dorchester County office and foster care caseworker/supervisor and intake practitioner for various DSS county offices. Samantha earned her bachelor's in human services from the University of South Carolina – Beaufort.

A lifelong native of Chapin, South Carolina, she currently resides there with her husband and two children. In her free time, she enjoys reading, watching Gamecock sports, and spending quality time with family and friends. She is happy to be back and is eager to advocate for the children of South Carolina.



System Improvement
Intake Specialist

Velteeka Wright

Velteeka Wright started on February 3. She is a proud native of Manning, South Carolina, and was previously employed as a family preservation case manager at Orangeburg County DSS. Velteeka holds a bachelor's degree in mass communication and has more than eight years of experience in executive administration and management while working in higher education, including Voorhees University, Southeastern Institute, and Denmark Technical College.

Velteeka is passionate about advocating for the wellbeing of children and families. In her free time, she enjoys playing musical instruments, reading, spending time with family, and trying various culinary experiences.



Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem
County Director - Lancaster

Shanna Leverage

Shanna Leverage was promoted to county director on January 2, but has been with the GAL program since 2021. She holds a bachelor's in criminal justice from the University of North Carolina - Charlotte, as well as a paralegal certificate from the University of South Carolina.

Prior to joining the DCA, Shanna worked as a Social Security disability paralegal. She is passionate about helping the youth in her community and is excited for her new role.

Shanna is a new mom to her four-month-old daughter. When she is not working, she enjoys watching sports with her husband, cuddling with her baby, playing fetch with her dog, and reading.



Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem
Program Coordinator - Dillon

Deja McNeil

Deja McNeil started on January 17. She is a former foster care case manager with the Department of Social Services. She enjoys working closely with the community and children.

Deja has a nephew that she loves to spend time with outside of work. In her spare time, she likes to shop, go out to eat, and read. Deja is excited to start a new beginning as a Guardian ad Litem Program Coordinator with the South Carolina Department of Children's Advocacy.



Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem
Program Assistant - Anderson

Michelle Taylor

Michelle Taylor started on January 2. She holds a technical degree in humanities, with a focus in childhood development. This is her first job with state government.

She has lived in the Anderson area her whole life and looks forward to helping the Anderson team and the local children they serve. Advocating for children has been a lifelong passion of hers.

In her free time, she enjoys playing video games, sewing, crafting, and spending time with friends, family, and her pets.

CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY

ALL RISE!

On Wednesday, Feb. 5, at 1:10 pm during a joint session of the General Assembly, State Child Advocate and DCA Director **Amanda Whittle** was “duly elected to the South Carolina Family Court for the term prescribed by law.”



She will sit on the bench for the Second Judicial Circuit, which includes Aiken, Bamberg, and Barnwell counties beginning on May 5. Her last day as the State Child Advocate will be announced in the coming weeks.

Whittle told the Aiken Standard,

“It’s one of the happiest days of my life. It’s an honor to run and it’s humbling to be chosen.”

We are excited to see Director Whittle realize her dream, and wish her the best of luck.

FOSTER CARE REVIEW

International Exchange



A delegation from Turkey's Ministry of Family and Social Services paid a visit to the Department of Children's Advocacy to learn about the roles the Foster Care Review Division and Foster Care Review Board play in the state's child welfare system.

It was the last stop of a 10 day trip that also included visits with multiple government and nonprofit organizations in several states to explore various aspects of foster care, adoption, and other social services for children.

FCRB State Board Chair **Andrea McCoy**, FCRD Division Director **Lindsey Taylor**, Heart Gallery Program Manager **Christina Grant**, and DCA Director of Communications **Rob Schaller** represented the agency during this international exchange.

As of February 19, there are **82** open seats on boards across the state. Learn more about those available positions and the process to become a volunteer board member by visiting <https://fcrd.sc.gov/volunteer/prospective>.

SC HEART GALLERY



Meet Jaylen M.

Photo credit: Stephanie Warren, 2024

Jaylen (born in 2009) describes himself as kind, handsome, and confident. He enjoys sports like basketball, but football is his favorite pastime. Jaylen enjoys math and would like to join the Army when he is older. His favorite food is pizza, favorite color is blue, favorite show is S.W.A.T., and he enjoys action movies.

Jaylen describes his ideal forever family as a mom and dad who are respectful, clean, enjoy the beach, and like to chill. He is a very social child and would enjoy a family that is outgoing and likes spending time together especially during the summer when school is out.

[**WATCH HIS VIDEO**](#)

To learn more about Jaylen or other children in the SC Heart Gallery, visit [**scheartgallery.sc.gov**](https://scheartgallery.sc.gov).

GUARDIAN AD LITEM

Sharing the Love



The Florence County GAL office wishes you a Happy Valentine's Day! Left to right are **Taydra Burroughs**, **Michelle Manning-Ham**, **Brandi Johnson**, **Destiny Robinson**, and **Gregory Stephens**.



Once again, the Marlboro County GAL office wears its heart on its, er... window, in appreciation of their wonderful volunteers—and GAL volunteers around the state. Thank you, **Shannon Wilder**, for another creative display!



Brandi Johnson, recruiter/trainer for the Pee Dee region, and **Margaret Chapman**, Darlington County director, shared about the GAL program while attending the Business Before Hours networking event hosted by the Darlington County Historic Commission Museum.

While no picture is available, staff from Charleston and Colleton counties had a booth at the Colleton Open House on January 31. In attendance were **Connie Legare**, **Travis Shafer**, **Brooklyn French** (and her son), **Shateque Hacker**, **Talika Green**, and **Charlene Gadsden**.

In Memoriam



The Guardian ad Litem program would like to pay tribute to the late **Thom Neal**, a contract GAL attorney for Kershaw and Lexington counties, who died on January 28.

Thom was a fierce advocate for the rights and protection of all children, especially those who were abused or neglected. He had the respect of the legal community for effectively arguing for the best interests of the child in court, often coming up with alternative solutions to resolve complicated cases.

Christy Vinson, Sarah Schultz, and Lisa Crawford all remember Thom as more than a great friend and attorney. They say he was a wonderful mentor who played a pivotal role in their success with the GAL program.

Christy described Thom as the type of person who, if you had the desire to learn, was always willing to share his time, experience, and knowledge of child advocacy. Sarah said even though they were roughly the same age, she considered him to be her mentor. She fondly remembers his ability to lighten the mood during difficult times with his wicked sense of humor. Lisa Crawford said not only was Thom a great attorney, but he was also a great friend.

COC Shoutouts



COC Director **Greg Wright** presented at the South Carolina Bench/Bar Committee's January meeting. During his talk, he provided an overview of the services COC provides, the population it serves, and how to make a referral.

The Bench/Bar Committee was created to focus on and monitor the legal process of the child protection system and to make recommendations for its improvement.



Congratulations to our latest Top Turtles for COC's Upstate Region. **Stephanie Placek** (left) was named Top Turtle for January, while **Linda Williams** received it in December.



Emma Cowley (fourth from the right) was surprised to receive a wonderful "get well basket" from Upstate COC staff upon her return to the office after an extended absence.

Want to contribute?

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

[SUBMIT](#)



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