



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

It's hard to believe that we're halfway through 2024 already, but we have much to celebrate (as usual), and I thank you for taking the time to read *The Advocate*.

While we look towards the end of another fiscal year, we also look forward to next month, as our agency turns five years old! On behalf of our staff, let me say how fortunate we are to have the opportunity to make such a difference in the lives of the children of South Carolina.

Of course, advocating for vulnerable youth who have been neglected and abused can take its toll. Our divisions were again very active in celebrating May's designation as Mental Health Awareness Month, with lots of activities aimed at self-care practices that can help us stay centered and be the best advocates we can be.

And our GAL staff continue to cover the state raising awareness and seeking new volunteers who can grow our team of advocates.

As always, we thank you for your continued support, and we hope you, too, are taking a break this summer to take care of yourself and your mental health.

We invite you to share your **thoughts and comments** with us.

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

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



Foster Care Review Division
Data & CQI Coordinator

Terri Thompson

Terri Thompson started on May 17. Originally from western North Carolina, she attended Winthrop and Wake Forest universities, earning degrees in psychology, fine arts, and human services. Before graduating, she began her work in child welfare as a group home residential counselor for children and youth in foster care. Over the past 19 years, Terri has continued her child welfare work, serving in a variety of roles at DSS, including child welfare case manager and investigator, foster care and licensing supervisor, IFCCS (Intensive Foster Care and Clinical Services--a DSS division that has since been dissolved) program leader, data manager and performance coach, and county director.

Terri is passionate about the prevention of child maltreatment and human trafficking. In her downtime, she enjoys hiking and visiting new places. She is currently working through the South Carolina State Parks Ultimate Outsider challenge, which she plans to complete by 2025. Upon retiring, Terri hopes to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail.



Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem
Program Coordinator I - Kershaw

Haveonna Greene

Haveonna Greene started on May 2. A native of Camden, South Carolina, she currently resides in Lugoff. She earned a bachelor's in biology with a minor in chemistry from Francis Marion University in 2020. Prior to joining the GAL program, Haveonna was a case worker for DSS.

She is very active in her community and volunteers with the Camden Boys and Girls Club. She is excited to be a part of the GAL family to help advocate for children. She believes that all it takes is one person to make a difference.

Haveonna is eager to bring all her knowledge and experience to ensuring that all children are taken care of, loved, and most importantly, safe.



Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem
Program Coordinator I - Florence

Devin Vance

Devin Vance started May 17. A native of Sumter, South Carolina, she recently graduated from Francis Marion University with a bachelor's in healthcare administration and a minor in psychology. She plans to pursue her master's in social work.

Previously, she worked in an afterschool program and later transferred to the Florence YMCA. Additionally, she briefly worked in the extended day program at Lucy T. Davis Elementary, teaching kindergarten and first graders.

During her college years, Devin completed a semester-long internship at The Care House of the Pee Dee. This experience profoundly impacted her, exposing her to various challenging situations and allowing her to support children in need. It also inspired her to advocate for empathy and recovery opportunities for every child. Devin is dedicated to using her skills and knowledge to help children feel valued, acknowledged, and appreciated as they heal and grow.



Cass Elias McCarter Guardian ad Litem
Program Coordinator I - Lancaster

Shannata Ravenell

Shannata Robinson Ravenell started on May 2. She resides in Florence, South Carolina. Previously, she served as regional training coordinator for DHEC and a middle and high school science teacher in both South and North Carolina. She was a master teacher and served as department chair at her schools where she taught a range of children from exceptional to gifted for more than 10 years.

While at DHEC, she created a Power Skills of Leadership Series which provided current and aspiring leaders with soft skills training ranging from emotional intelligence, critical thinking, communication, self-care, collaboration and teamwork as well as how to deal with micro-aggressions and biases, among others. Her passion to help leaders excel both professionally and personally is a lifelong goal. She hopes to bring some of her expertise to her current position. She also has a passion for helping others and will continue to strive to be the best at whatever is placed in front of her.

We're 5 Years Old! (almost)

July 1 will mark the 5th anniversary of the Department of Children's Advocacy.

Agency Director **Amanda Whittle** shared her gratefulness and congratulations, saying,

“Over the past five years, the Department of Children's Advocacy has been committed to improving outcomes for children. With the support of the Governor's office, General Assembly, and other agencies and organizations, we have been able to help thousands of children and families navigate the system, access services, and get what they need.”

“We are hopeful to receive the 33 new positions requested in our FY25 budget request to continue our good work to provide best-interest advocacy for abused and neglected children who are involved in Family Court and to hire investigative staff to ensure children receive appropriate services from state agencies.”

Here's to many more years of impactful advocacy!





The last day of FY24 is June 30, 2024.

All **Foster Care Review Board members** and **agency employees** are asked to submit any **FY24 requests** for per diem and travel reimbursement for activities occurring on or before June 30, 2024 no later than **June 30, 2024**.

If travel activities cross fiscal years, the expenses must be split, with the FY24 portion submitted by June 30, and FY25 requests (those that occur July 1, 2024 and later) should be submitted on a separate document.

Recognizing MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS

May was Mental Health Awareness Month, and both COC and GAL held activities to encourage others to take a moment to check-in, focus on themselves, and learn about best practices and resources for maintaining a healthy state of mind.

SELF CARE DAY AT DUTCH SQUARE CENTER



COC Region A hosted a Mental Health Awareness and Self Care Day on May 16 at Dutch Square Center.

This tenant appreciation event featured chair massages, a vision board creation station, stress reduction and coping tools, self-care assessments and "mocktails" at noon!

Left: Letitia Dowling of Orangeburg and Voorhees College's Devin Randolph with COC Midlands Regional Director Debra King.

LET'S GET MOVING FOR MENTAL HEALTH 21 DAY CHALLENGE

GAL offices across the state participated in a 21 Day "Let's Get Moving For Mental Health Challenge."

Staff took walks during lunch or 15-minute breaks through out the day, performed desk exercises and stretches, and practiced moving their bodies and slowing their minds to reduce the daily stressors that come with the job.

Thanks to everyone who participated and we encourage you to continue to keep moving for mental health throughout your daily routines.

"Exercise is really for the brain, not the body. It affects mood, vitality, alertness, and feelings of well-belling."

- John Ratey, associate clinical professor of psychiatry, Harvard Medical School and mind-body connection expert



Sarah Schultz and Christy Vinson, Recruiter/Trainers



LaDara Depugh goes for a spin, State Office.



Erna Jacobs, Latika Smith, Barry Knighton, State Office.



Latika Smith and LaDara Depugh, State Office.



Brooklyn French and Sharika Hacker, Colleton County



Jennifer Fenters and Jennifer Burch, Chesterfield County



Haveonna Greene and Demarius Alexander, Kershaw County

BETTER TOGETHER

The Florence County GAL office joined Continuum of Care's Pee Dee office for a mental health day on May 17. Together, they engaged in mentally stimulating activities that brought joy, peace, and laughter.



OUT AND ABOUT

Cerrita Pixley, Aiken County Advocate Supervisor, **Lindsey Loparo**, Midlands R/T, and **Christy Vinson**, R/T Director, joined DSS and other community members at the Mental Health Awareness Walk in Aiken County on May 18. **Valarie Hilton** attended the Clarendon County Mental Health Fair. We are grateful for their efforts to spread awareness about the GAL program, and build relationships with the public and other agencies.



Cerrita Pixley and Lindsey Loparo.

Cerrita Pixley and Christy Vinson.

Valarie Hilton.

From Runways to Rodeos...

These GALs go all out to recruit volunteers and raise awareness for the program:



Erin Petrella, Upstate Regional Recruiter/Trainer, had a table at the Curvey for a Cause fundraiser for the Greenville nonprofit **Beauty 4 Ashez**. Their mission is "to empower girls in the foster care system with tools, mentorship, and resources to succeed in life."

During a break in the fashion show, a call was made for those who wanted to walk the runway. Petrella seized the opportunity, agreeing to strut her stuff *if* she could also have the microphone to talk about the GAL program.

"I let them know that each of the girls they are raising money for in foster care has a GAL too, and that if they couldn't donate money (or even if they could) maybe they could donate time. Then, as promised, I took the runway. As I walked, the emcee continued to speak the praises of the GAL Program, which was fantastic!"

Petrella also attended the Capstone Church Foster Parent Information Session Night in Fountain Inn on May 23, where she spoke about the GAL Program to foster parents and other community members who had a desire to get involved with the children their community.





Brandi Johnson, Pee Dee Regional Recruiter/Trainer joined **Bailee Prather**, Georgetown County Director, at the Blessing of the Inlet festival in Georgetown on May 4.

Brandi also took the photo (left) of **Lenzene Rufus**, Sumter County GAL coordinator, at the Black Cowboy Rodeo and Festival in Sumter.



GAL Volunteer Spotlights



DEBBIE HOCKADAY

GEORGETOWN COUNTY

Debbie Hockaday is an astute thinker with an excellent ability to communicate with children of all ages. She thoroughly investigates, asks great questions, and shows unwavering care for her appointed children.

Debbie was involved with the state's first case for the new permanent KinGAP plan, which provides financial assistance payments to kinship foster parents to assist the caregiver in meeting the child's needs until the child reaches adulthood. There were many uncertainties and a lot of questions in this groundbreaking case, but Debbie maintained her role throughout all of the reservations and adapted to the changes accordingly. In the end, the child was able to stay in a stable environment with a familiar relative in a closely bonded relationship. This might not have happened without Debbie's firm ability to "stay the course" and stand by this child's side.

The Georgetown County Guardian ad Litem Program is thankful to have Debbie Hockaday on their team.



BETTY MCWHIRTER

YORK COUNTY

Betty McWhirter has been with the York County Guardian ad Litem Program for five years. During this time, she has taken on some of the more difficult foster cases and has changed the lives of many children by ensuring they find permanency.

Betty is always willing to travel, no matter how far, to make sure her babies are being seen and that they are taken care of. She is an extremely active volunteer and participates in all of the county office's monthly trainings and the CLC trainings.

Meet Bella M.

Photo credit: Claude Cumbee, 2023

McKinzey M. (born in 2011) prefers to go by Bella. She is a very social child who absolutely loves animals, especially dogs. Pitbulls are her favorite breed because they are loving. Bella wants to become a veterinary technician when she grows up. Her favorite food is mac and cheese. Bella describes herself as sweet, respectful, and kind. She would enjoy a family that likes to cook, spend time together, and who will teach her about projects around the house. Bella would enjoy having younger siblings as she does well in a guiding role where she can nurture others. Her ideal day would be eating Mexican food or IHOP, shopping at the mall or Sephora, and then relaxing with family while watching movies.

[WATCH HER VIDEO](#)

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

Want to contribute?

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

[SUBMIT](#)



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