There were **387 pieces of child-relevant legislation** during the 2021 Legislative Session and **Voices for Georgia’s Children** followed them all. Bills and the budget focused on everything from stemming loss of instruction to increasing children’s access to healthcare. Here to help you digest it all is our **Top Issues for Children and Families**.

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HEALTHCARE COVERAGE

One of the first bills to pass both chambers - and doing so without even one “nay” vote - was House Bill 163 (Rep. Sharon Cooper), which directs the state to seek federal approval to allow parents or guardians applying for food assistance for a child (via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or “SNAP”) to simultaneously apply for Medicaid for that child. Both SNAP and Medicaid eligibility are determined by income, and children enrolled in SNAP usually also meet the income requirements for Medicaid. Approximately 197,000 Georgia children are uninsured, but the state Division of Family and Children Services predicts streamlining this enrollment will result in up to 70,000 children acquiring health care coverage and save the agency about $35 in administrative costs per application.

ISSUE 1:
PHYSICAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

STATUS OF HOUSE BILL 163: APPROVED BY THE GOVERNOR

MATERNAL AND INFANT HEALTH

Building on recent years’ work to reduce maternal and infant mortality, the General Assembly passed House Bill 567 (Rep. Sharon Cooper), which sets a tighter timeframe for healthcare providers to deliver relevant medical records to the Maternal Mortality Review Committee. The bill also creates the Newborn Screening and Genetics Advisory Committee to review certain newborn disorders and make recommendations to the Department of Public Health for related policy and budget needs. These reviews are expected to ultimately result in added screenings and appropriations for more conditions.

STATUS OF HOUSE BILL 567: APPROVED BY THE GOVERNOR
INSURER TRANSPARENCY

Insurer preauthorization criteria and claim denials are often shrouded in mystery for both patient and provider, leading to excessive paperwork, a lot of back and forth, and appeals for payment. This lack of transparency can delay and sometimes prevent necessary treatment, increase administrative costs for providers, and exacerbate challenges in the healthcare reimbursement system. In fact, according to an American Medical Association survey conducted in 2020, more than 70% of physicians reported a patient abandoning treatment due to the wait time for authorization and 90% reported that the process had a negative impact on a patient’s treatment outcome. Senate Bill 80 (Sen. Kay Kirkpatrick), among other things, requires insurers to make prior authorization requirements readily accessible on their websites and requires clinical reasons for denials of service coverage to be provided to healthcare providers when they receive the denial notification. SB 80 also requires insurers to make aggregate denial and appeal data available on their website and, perhaps most importantly, eliminates preauthorization for emergency prehospital ambulance transportation and unanticipated emergency or urgent healthcare services.

STATUS OF SENATE BILL 80: APPROVED BY THE GOVERNOR

TELEHEALTH

It’s safe to say that absolutely nobody would have chosen to have a global pandemic, but one helpful thing to come out of the situation was the increased use and improved implementation of telehealth. Policy and payment flexibilities put in place to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus allowed both patients and providers to conduct (and be reimbursed for) physical and mental health visits remotely using computers, tablets and smart (and not-so-smart) phones. House Bill 307 (Rep. Sharon Cooper) would codify a number of these COVID-flexibilities and telehealth reimbursement rules, helping preserve improved access to care for adults and kids – especially those who live in healthcare deserts, have transportation or child-/family-care challenges, or have certain disabilities or behavioral health needs.

STATUS OF HOUSE BILL 307: APPROVED BY THE GOVERNOR
**BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS FOR PHYSICAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>188 primary care residency slots</th>
<th>2 new Federally Qualified Health Centers</th>
<th>HIGHER Medicaid reimbursement rates for certain primary care and dental services</th>
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**GEORGIA REGISTRY OF IMMUNIZATIONS AND TRANSACTIONS SYSTEM (“GRITS”)**

$17.5 million to update GRITS

Georgia’s pre-pandemic vaccine management system, GRITS, was never designed to function in a true global pandemic, let alone reckon with the sheer complexity of scheduling, delivering and accounting for millions of vaccines delivered within a relatively short period of time. Realizing the limitations of the system, lawmakers allocated $16 million in the AFY21 and $1.5 million in FY22 to update and maintain GRITS.

**EXPANDED NEWBORN SCREENINGS**

$1 million allocated to screen for Krabbe disease

Reflecting an ongoing effort to expand necessary newborn screenings, the FY22 State Budget included an additional $1 million for newborn screening of Krabbe disease, an inherited metabolic disorder that most often affects infants and can cause mental and motor skills deterioration, blindness, and deafness.

**ADDRESSING FUNDING CUTS MADE IN FY21**

$58.9 million restored to DBHDD

The $58.9 million that was cut from DBHDD in FY21 was restored in the FY22 budget. Of particular note are monies for suicide prevention ($394,000), behavioral health crisis centers ($7 million), a 5% rate increase for intellectual and developmental disability providers ($12.3 million) and $9.2 million for core services to increase the service capacity to address addiction and mental illness, serving an additional 7,415 individuals per year. Unfortunately, state funding challenges continue where supports for children and adults with developmental disabilities are concerned.

**INVESTING IN YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH**

$2 million for Georgia Apex expansion

Awareness of mental health challenges kids have faced through the pandemic is accelerating on-going expansion of the state’s school-based mental health program. Georgia Apex will expand to 59 additional schools statewide, adding to the 565 schools currently served by the program.
K-12 EDUCATION

Rarely, if ever, does a legislative session pass without the introduction of bills aspiring to improve Georgia’s K-12 and post-secondary educational outcomes. This year was no different. Notable were two efforts – one successful and one not - to expand vouchers for private schools. **House Bill 60**, which is viable for passage next year, would create a voucher program for public school students to attend private schools. Eligible students would be those whose local public schools did not offer 100% face-to-face instruction in the prior school year, who live in low-income households (under 200% FPL), are in military families, have been adopted from foster care, or have certain special education needs. **Senate Bill 47**, expands the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship (GSNS) eligibility beyond students with Individualized Education Plans to include those with a 504 plan, a specific, qualifying diagnosis and have spent the prior school year in attendance at a Georgia public school, or have received preschool special education services under IDEA in the previous year. In the 2019-2020 school year, Georgia appropriated $35.57 million for the GSNS program, awarding scholarships to 5203 students (68% male, 32% female; 36% Black, 53% White, and 9% Asian/Hispanic/Native American/Multi-Racial) in 254 participating private schools.

**STATUS OF HOUSE BILL 60: DID NOT PASS THIS SESSION**

**STATUS OF SENATE BILL 47: APPROVED BY THE GOVERNOR**
Higher Education

Kids who fail to complete high school or postsecondary education were of particular interest this session, as evidenced by the passing of two senate bills, Senate Bill 204 (Sen. Lindsey Tippins) and Senate Bill 107 (Sen. Brian Strickland). The first creates a pilot program allowing the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) to award high school diplomas for students 16 or older, who have completed certain secondary school coursework requirements but who have dropped out of high school. Members of the Senate Education and Youth Committee extensively discussed the reasons youth drop out of school, including the need to support their families, poor or traumatic school experiences, and struggles with unmet needs. Approximately one in five Georgia high schoolers do not graduate on time, and students report leaving school because of marriage, financial hardship, expulsion or incarceration, academic failure, joining the military, and pregnancy, among other reasons. SB 204 attempts to address some of those issues by changing venue and by allowing youth to simultaneously work towards a technical post-secondary certification at the same time as they complete their high school requirements. SB 107, on the other hand, waives TCSG tuition and all fees for qualifying foster and adopted students, as well as tuition and fees for these students to obtain a GED. This bill also urges the Board of Regents to adopt similar tuition waiver programs within the University System of Georgia (USG). Only approximately 20% of foster youth attend college nationally, versus 60% of their peers. In addition, SB 107 classifies students from a homeless situation as in-state for tuition purposes, easing access to higher education for students experiencing such difficulty.

Note: the original version of SB 107 required the Board to waive USG tuition and fees as well, but the Georgia Constitution grants such power not to the legislature, but only to the Board of Regents.

Teacher Workforce

Efforts to maximize Georgia’s teaching workforce passed chambers in the form of the governor’s “Teacher Pipeline” bill, Senate Bill 88 (Sen. Russ Goodman), as well as a tax incentive bill. The latter, House Bill 32 (Rep. Dave Belton) establishes a refundable income tax credit for teachers who agree to teach in certain rural or low-performing schools. The former, SB 88, contains an array of policies, including provisions allowing eligible veterans to teach, requiring supports for less experienced or low-performing teachers, adding teacher preparation course requirements in differentiated and literacy instruction, and promoting increased enrollment in and completion of teacher education programs offered at Georgia’s historically black colleges and universities.

Status of Senate Bill 204: Approved by the Governor

Status of Senate Bill 107: Approved by the Governor

Status of House Bill 32: Approved by the Governor

Status of Senate Bill 88: Approved by the Governor
BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS FOR EDUCATION

In addition to restoring about 60% of education dollars cut from the FY21 base budget at the start of the pandemic, a number of other strategic additions were made by the General Assembly in the FY22 budget, with learning and learning recovery in mind.

$4.73 million for the DFCS Afterschool Care Program to stem loss of instruction due to COVID-19

$1.63 million to pay for a dyslexia screening mandate and a state dyslexia specialist

$951,700 for MAAC’s educational support program for youth in foster care in Fulton and DeKalb

INCREASED FUNDING FOR GEORGIA PRE-K

$1.75 million or 2.5% increase in base spending for Georgia Pre-K

For the first time in a decade, funds were added for Georgia’s Pre-K classrooms. The FY22 budget increases spending for Pre-K teachers for training and experience ($1.45 million), and restored a Pre-K specialist position ($81,149), which had been eliminated in the pandemic-strapped FY21 budget.

UPDATE GEORGIA’S AGING SCHOOL BUS FLEET

$340 million to replace school buses

The Amended FY20 budget allocated funds to replace 520 of Georgia’s school buses, many of which have been used to not only transport students but, more recently, to deliver food and Wi-Fi services to students and families during the pandemic.
ISSUE 3: EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE AND JUSTICE

SCHOOL CLIMATE

Schools consistently refer children to juvenile court at rates higher than public safety entities do. That is why many advocates believe that appropriate and effective school discipline is a policy area where transparency is key to making sure children are not being unduly penalized or denied appropriate services. Senate Bill 42 (Sen. Jeff Mullis) initially sought to remove school discipline from the 5-star rating used statewide to rank public K-12 school climate. This idea raised concerns from many who believe that inclusion of discipline in a school’s climate rating is an excellent way to hold schools accountable for unfair and/or biased discipline. Proponents of the bill believed that inclusion of discipline in the climate evaluation tends to result in an avoidance of discipline so as not to lower a school’s score. Following a legislative journey full of hearings and amendments, SB 42 ultimately evolved into a bill allowing home study students in grades 6-12 to participate in extracurricular and interscholastic activities in the student’s resident public school system and, reversing the bill’s original intent, requiring each local school system to publish the school’s discipline data in a format that is easy to understand and access in electronic or printed form. The bill ultimately did not affect the make-up of the 5-star school climate rating.

STATUS OF SENATE BILL 42: APPROVED BY THE GOVERNOR
TREATING 17-YEAR-OLDS AS JUVENILES VERSUS ADULTS

This session saw movement on a number of policies - some helpful and some not - addressing undesired behaviors often displayed by youth. Key among legislative progress was the advancement of House Bill 272 (Rep. Mandi Ballinger), which seeks to “Raise the Age” of juvenile court jurisdiction to include 17-year-olds who are charged with less serious offenses (leaving the more serious offenders to be processed through adult court as they are now). While like bills have been drafted in the House and often heard in committee in prior years, 2021 became the first year when a Raise the Age bill actually passed the House completely and was then recommended Do Pass by the Senate Judiciary Committee. As of the end of session, the bill remains in the Senate Rules Committee where, hopefully, it will progress next session to the Senate floor, pass there, and then be signed into law by the governor. Of note is the fact that Georgia is one of the last three states in the nation to Raise the Age. Clearly, HB 272 seeks the most restorative, data-supported approach for youth - whose brains, by virtue of their age, are still rapidly developing and are especially subject to environmental influences, both negative and positive. Sanctions and therapies handed out by juvenile courts are specifically designed to rehabilitate youth, seeking not only address misbehavior, but also to support positive adolescent development, good mental health and other factors which can keep a kid out of the criminal justice system and on a path to long-term success.

STATUS OF HOUSE BILL 272: DID NOT PASS THIS SESSION

STREET RACING

Some bills passed this year raise questions as to whether or not certain policies will actually alter the behaviors they seek to curtail. One such bill is House Bill 534 (Rep. Josh Bonner), which increases the charges and penalties for anyone who knowingly promotes, organizes or participates in an exhibition of illegal street racing or of laying drags. Drag racing has recently surged in popularity, causing dismay and concerns in many communities across the state. Those in attendance are frequently young people, for whom existing penalties and the subsequent criminal record can already have long term consequences in terms of housing, employment, or school admissions. The desire to enhance penalties, as SB 534 would do, can exacerbate these challenges for youth or young adults without taking meaningful, evidence-based steps to change behaviors. Some believe that, given the developmental predisposition teens and young adults have to peer influence, coupled with current conflicting perceptions about large gatherings of youth, particularly youth of color, that this measure could easily increase the already problematic disproportionate court involvement of Black and Brown youth.

STATUS OF HOUSE BILL 534: APPROVED BY THE GOVERNOR
School safety and discipline activities are often carried out by School Resource Officers (SROs), even when those individuals are not adequately trained to work with children of various ages and needs. A number of interested state agencies and other organizations are meeting to assess and define SRO challenges. The FY22 budget allocates funds for the SRO training program in the Department of Public Safety.

The Department of Juvenile Justice has a 97% officer turnover rate. Both the Amended FY21 and the FY22 budget direct existing funds to be used for a pay increase for DJJ correctional officers. For those youth who are in detention, adequate staffing and competency of security staff help keep youth safe. Additionally, the budget includes bonds for a few of the much-needed repairs to certain DJJ facilities.
ISSUE 4: STRONG AND STABLE FAMILIES

PAID PARENTAL LEAVE

Regardless of biological relationship to a child, parents, foster parents, adoptive parents and kinship caregivers can best help their kids (and other family members) when home-life transitions or challenges are less likely to result in wage or job-loss. **House Bill 146** (Rep. Houston Gaines) moves the state in this direction by requiring the state to offer paid parental leave for eligible state employees and eligible local board of education employees (such as teachers) for the birth of a baby, or the adoption or fostering of a child under 18. The bill allows a maximum 120 hours of paid leave during a rolling 12-month period. It can be used as needed and taken in increments less than 8 hours. This indeed will be a welcome change for Georgia’s estimated 245,000 eligible state workers and teachers, and, whether they know it or not, for countless infants, children and youth.

**STATUS OF HOUSE BILL 146: APPROVED BY THE GOVERNOR**
ADOPTION

There are approximately 12,000 children ages 0-18 in Georgia’s foster care system (as of April 2021). While many children will be reunited with their biological families, there are a number of children who will not be able to return to their families and will need a new “forever home.” For some years now, the state has worked to clean up its adoption laws and to encourage permanency for such children and youth. **House Bill 114** (Rep. Bert Reeves) furthers that effort by increasing the existing adoption tax credit from $2,000 to $6,000 per qualified foster child per taxable year for the five taxable years and $2,000 per taxable year thereafter until the child turns 18. **House Bill 154**, also sponsored by Rep. Reeves, lowers the age at which an individual may petition the court to adopt a child from age 25 to 21, making it easier for close relatives to adopt children out of foster care. This bill also improves other adoption procedures regarding such things as changes to venue, interstate adoptions, virtual appearances in uncontested hearings, and protections for prospective adoptive parents and biological parents.

**STATUS OF HOUSE BILL 114: APPROVED BY THE GOVERNOR**

**STATUS OF HOUSE BILL 154: APPROVED BY THE GOVERNOR**

HOMELESSNESS

One bill, ostensibly seeking to mitigate homelessness (and perhaps with a nod to what many expect to be an impending flood of evictions when the public health emergency wanes) but giving heartburn to many who advocate to eliminate homelessness, is **House Bill 713** (Rep. Katie Dempsey). This bill did earn a House committee hearing with no vote taken. HB 713 brought the challenge of homelessness to the forefront for many. Included in the bill are provisions redirecting state funds for short-term housing or shelters to address homelessness instead toward safe parking areas, structured camping facilities, and individual unit shelters. The bill would also shift monies for permanent supportive housing toward a survey of individuals who are homeless, asking questions regarding the number of days they have been unsheltered or unhoused, spent in a correctional facility, or been hospitalized. The bill purports that this data should then be used to allocate funds to the non-profits serving those individuals who have spent the most time in these three scenarios. What’s more, the legislation would prohibit the use of state property for long-term homeless shelters, except in the aforementioned structured camping facilities. Supporters of the bill claim that current prevention and methods are not addressing the current need and that more analysis is needed to solve the problem, while the bill’s opponents state that these policies are not evidence-driven and would sap much needed funding from programs that are proven to work, and which in fact need more funds. Given the activity around this bill so late in the legislative session, one might expect the resumption of this particular conversation in the year to come.

**STATUS OF HOUSE BILL 713: DID NOT PASS THIS SESSION**
BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS FOR STRONG AND STABLE FAMILIES

Budget writers appropriated funding to better support families in a number of places, including:

- **$3.5 million** in childcare subsidies
- **$200,000** for community food banks
- **$39.5 million** allocated to OneGeorgia Authority for improvements in rural economic development, medical, technological, and infrastructure needs
- **$5 million** for school nutrition

**INCREASING ADOPTIONS OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE**

Recent efforts to increase adoptions of children in the foster care system appear to be proving fruitful when looking at the provisions in the FY22 DFCS budget.

- **-$14.4 million** subtracted from the out-of-home care division due to decline in out-of-home placements
- **$4.5 million** added for caseload growth in adoptions

**ADDRESSING AN INCREASE IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

From 2019 to 2020, there was a **46%** increase in domestic violence program crisis calls and a **90%** increase in sexual assault program crisis calls. The FY22 budget restores the **$700,000** for domestic violence shelters and sexual assault centers cut from the FY21 budget.

- **$1 million** or 9% increase in state funding for all domestic violence shelters
- **$150,000** to bring two new shelters up to the minimum state funding level
- **$150,000** in additional funds for sexual assault centers

**COMMITMENT TO UNIVERSAL BROADBAND**

More than **$30 million** in new state funding were added and **$10 million** existing state funds repurposed to expand broadband connectivity in our state. Healthcare and education challenges were highlighted by the pandemic. Additionally, a spate of private initiatives and partnerships blossomed this year amongst an array of Georgia Electric Membership Corporations and others to expand broadband in rural areas.

- **$40 million** to expand broadband access in Georgia