

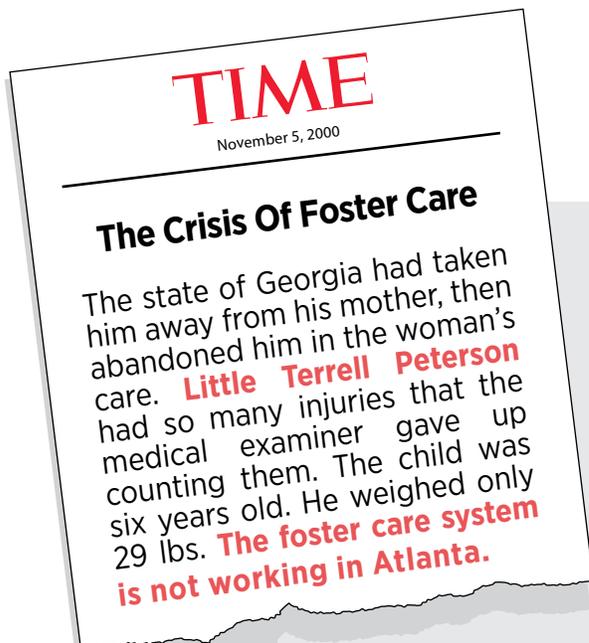
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way it treats its children.”

— NELSON MANDELA

Metropolitan Atlanta - Fact Sheet

In 2002, Children’s Rights, along with co-counsel Bondurant Mixson & Elmore, brought a legal reform campaign against Georgia’s state and county child welfare departments, alleging major systemic problems which were harming the very children they were obligated to protect. Foster children were being denied access to medical, dental and educational services; far too many were languishing for months in dangerous emergency shelters; caseworkers were straining with 100+ cases; and similarly, juvenile attorneys were overwhelmed with up to 500 cases each, preventing them from adequately representing the children to whom they were assigned.



In 2002, Maya C., a spirited 17-year-old former honor student, became hopeless after being placed in an **emergency shelter** and abandoned her education.



In 2002, Kara B., a 14-year-old girl, had up to **15 different placements** before ending up in a residential treatment facility where she was **sexually abused by a staff member**.



In 2002, Sabrina E. and Korrina E., African-American sisters (3 years old and 1 year old), were **deprived of speedy adoptions** simply because the couple who wanted to adopt them was not African American.

When Atlanta child welfare officials made the critical decision to remove children — like Terrell, Kara, Sabrina, Korrina and Maya — from their homes, it became their responsibility to protect them and take care of them while in the state’s custody, not cause them further harm. In 2002, Children’s Rights and Bondurant Mixson & Elmore LLP set out to make it **RIGHT** for Atlanta’s foster youth. 

Every day, children are harmed by America’s broken child welfare, juvenile justice, education and healthcare systems. A leading national advocacy organization since 1995, Children’s Rights demands government accountability and systemic reform on behalf of America’s most vulnerable population — including the nearly 700,000 voiceless and invisible children who spend time in state foster care annually. Through relentless, strategic advocacy and legal action, we demonstrate that dangerous, failing government systems don’t have to be the norm... not on our watch.

www.childrensrights.org

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS
PROTECTING KIDS.
PROVIDING HOPE.

Children's Rights has displayed a, "higher degree of skill, commitment, dedication, and professionalism... than the Court has seen by the attorneys in any other case during its 27 years on the bench... [a]fter 58 years as a practicing attorney and federal judge, the Court is unaware of any other case in which a plaintiff class has achieved such a favorable result on such a comprehensive scale."

— FEDERAL JUDGE MARVIN SHOOB, 2005

"It's no stretch to say those lawyers single-handedly reformed the foster care system in metropolitan Atlanta."

— MAX KENNERLY ESQ,
LITIGATIONANDTRAIL.COM

In 2005, Senior U.S. District Court Judge Marvin Shoob approved an agreed upon action plan that paved the way for systemic reform and greatly increased safety and protective services for approximately 3,000 children in metropolitan Atlanta. Judge Shoob also issued a landmark federal ruling, which ensured that all abused and neglected children in Georgia's child welfare system have a constitutional right to legal representation at every stage of their experience in foster care. Just a handful of the **MANY** achieved reforms are featured below.

ATLANTA'S DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES MAKES MASSIVE TURNAROUND!

2000

OVERWORKED: Social worker caseloads in DeKalb and Fulton Counties consistently carried cases between **35-50** cases. Because of these excessive caseloads, children regularly went **6 months or more** without a visit from their caseworker.

OVERBURDENED: Foster children were frequently left in dangerous emergency shelters for **months and even years** at a time. In 2001, the Georgia Child Advocate reported that the Fulton shelter was "unfit for the children who reside there," and that the DeKalb shelter "is grossly inadequate." Physical conditions were **overcrowded, unsanitary and in severe disrepair**; and children were exposed to **violence, gang activity, sexual assault prostitution and illicit drug activity**.

UNDER-REPRESENTED: In DeKalb County, there were just **2 lawyers representing 500 children each in foster care each**.

In Fulton County, the largest metro-Atlanta county, there were **4 lawyers with an average of 400 cases each**.

OVERSTAYING: **More than 900** Fulton and DeKalb County foster children had been in state custody for **4+ years**.

UNADDRESSED RACIAL DISPARITIES: The state regularly **denied African American children speedy adoptions** when the adoptive parents were not African American.

TODAY

Case managers in both counties are now expected to have caseloads of no more than **12-17** each. As of 2016, more than half of caseworkers were meeting this requirement.

Dangerous emergency shelters have been **permanently shut down** in Fulton and DeKalb Counties, and family homes are now being used for emergency or temporary placements.

Improvements included a dramatic sustained reduction in the caseloads of attorneys who represent children in foster care. In 2008, when the county successfully exited from the lawsuit, there were **11 full-time attorneys representing fewer than 100 children**.

Improvements included reduced caseloads for attorneys representing foster children. In 2010, when the county successfully exited from the lawsuit, **there were 63 children per lawyer. Attorney staffing increased to 18 full time lawyers (even as the population of children in foster care decreased by 40%),** and the county hired trained investigators, social workers and an education advocate, all to better advocate for the needs of children.

As of December 31, 2016, the average amount of time youth were spending in state custody was **under 21 months**.

The Federal Inter-Ethnic Adoption Provision of 1996 states that race/ethnicity cannot be used as the basis of delay in placement or adoption. Today, the State is in compliance with this Provision.

HELP US TO CONTINUE TO DO **JUSTICE** BY ATLANTA'S MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN.

Their right to a safe and healthy childhood counts. Their right to an education counts. Their right to a fair shot at life counts. And they are counting on all of us to make it right.

www.childrensrights.org

Contact

ADRIANA PEZZULLI

apezzulli@childrensrights.org

646.216.3334

CHRISTINA REMLIN

cremlin@childrensrights.org

646.831.3543

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way it treats its children."

— NELSON MANDELA

Georgia's Children at a Glance



42 is Georgia's child welfare national ranking (with no. 50 being the worst), just behind Texas

24% of Georgia's children live in poverty

21% of Georgia's children do not graduate high school by 18

8 A 2016 federal study found that Georgia ranks 8th highest for children living apart from their parents

12k of Georgia's children are currently in the custody of the Division of Family + Children Services

0 is the number of Georgia's protective child welfare policies for LGBTQ foster youth

27k of Georgia's children were child abuse victims in 2015; in 2011, the number was 18,500

1 In 2013, a federal study found that Georgia's juvenile detention facilities had the highest sexual abuse rates in the nation

Every day, children are harmed by America's broken child welfare, juvenile justice, education and healthcare systems. A leading national advocacy organization since 1995, Children's Rights demands government accountability and systemic reform on behalf of America's most vulnerable population — including the nearly 700,000 voiceless and invisible children who spend time in state foster care annually. Through relentless, strategic advocacy and legal action, we demonstrate that dangerous, failing government systems don't have to be the norm... not on our watch.

www.childrensrights.org

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS
PROTECTING KIDS.
PROVIDING HOPE.

From the Frontlines of Georgia Foster Care

Losing My Father, Landing in Foster Care

By Edgar Carranza

Children across the nation are forced into foster care systems with alarming frequency because the people they have grown to love and trust are deported to other countries and forced to abandon them.

Immigration has taken a toll on more than 80,000 Latino youth, according to the United States Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau. I am one of them. I was thrown into foster care at age 13 when my father was deported. To me there is no logic in putting kids in care when they have loving parents—parents who came here to do their best for their families and lack only one document.

For the past five years I've had a real lens with which to examine foster care, and I have seen children become lost in a whirlpool of anger, neglect and despair. They land in child welfare systems that are so overburdened, it feels like kids are viewed as mere numbers rather than individuals with real needs, particularly as the placements and paperwork start to stack up.

This felt especially true for my younger brother. He and I were separated in care. Adjusting to his new life was really difficult, and sometimes he acted out. He was put in placements that were meant to help him deal with our situation, but they were restrictive, lock-down style facilities. Our caseworker would promise to move him to an independent living program when his behavior improved, but when he progressed, he was told there was nothing open. That would cause him to act out more, and he'd get blamed for the shortcomings of the system.

My brother and I have different styles of coping, and I ended up with fewer placements. But that doesn't mean foster care was easy. **I remember the first night I spent at the shelter that ended up being my "home" for nine months. I cried. I was lost. I felt abandoned. I balled up on my bed not being able to speak to anyone, not being able to confide in anyone. I desperately needed it to be a bad nightmare. Instead I woke up to staff, to other residents, hearing about medication, curfews. I had never experienced something like this.**

I left the shelter to live with a distant cousin for two years, but it didn't work out. I came back into care and was put in a group home in a different county, and I had to start a new school. My caseworker told me that education was not her priority at the time. That she didn't care if my records or my GPA were affected by the move. For six months I was at this group home, then another group home for about nine months. And it did affect my education—my teachers could tell you I was a great student, the instability in my life meant poor grades and poor attendance on my transcript. This troubled me greatly because all along, the only support I got came from school. It was a haven where I could release all the negativity in a positive way.

If the system did a good job at keeping me close to the family I grew up with, then maybe I would've had some kind of emotional stability. The first time I came into care they moved me about an hour away from where my family was, and for a good six months I had no contact with them, not even my brother. As often as I tried to advocate to see my brother, it would always take three months or more just to be able to see him for an hour. I grew up with my brother as far as I can remember. It would have been better if they kept us together.

The system showed no remorse for taking my innocence or childhood. My father isn't here to support me in the way that I would have liked. He will not get to see me buy my first car or go to my senior prom. Most importantly, he will not be at my graduation when I give my speech as senior class president and receive my diploma. These are the significant moments that any teen, of any background, would want his parents to support.

Published on May 9, 2013 as part of Children's Rights' annual "Fostering the Future" advocacy campaign.



HELP US DO **JUSTICE** BY GEORGIA'S MOST
VULNERABLE CHILDREN.

Their right to a safe and healthy childhood counts. Their right to an education counts. Their right to a fair shot at life counts. And they are counting on all of us to make it right.

www.childrensrights.org

Contact

ADRIANA PEZZULLI

apezzulli@childrensrights.org

646.216.3334

CHRISTINA REMLIN

cremlin@childrensrights.org

646.831.3543