



2022  
**ANNUAL REPORT**  
 WE ARE  
**CHILDREN FIRST,  
 INC.**







*Providers of*  
Athens-Oconee CASA  
SafeCare  
SPARC Access & Visitation



## Letter from the Board Chair

Over the past year, the Children First, Inc. board and staff have worked tirelessly to contribute to and strengthen the mission of our organization. One of our most exciting accomplishments this past year was hosting the first annual Children First Gala. This event helped to nurture new relationships within the Athens community as well as generate many generous donations, which have been used to fund and strengthen Children First programs.

Due to the increased demand for our services in the last year, a strategic plan and an expansion committee have been assembled to identify all possible options for the future of Children First and to ensure that we are serving our community in the most efficient way possible.

We are excited for the opportunities that expanding will provide for us and our community and we look forward to hosting more events in the future.

## THE BOARD

**MOLLY PETNER**

*Board Chair*

**CHARLIE CARABELLO**

*Previous Board Chair/ Secretary*

**JED DEWS**

*Treasurer*

**DAVID MEYERS**

*Board Chair Elect*

**KATIE BEMISDERFER**

*Member at Large*

**KIMBERLY LOCKLIN**

*External Committee Chair*

**RACHAEL ANDREWS**

*Member at Large*

**ALAN PLATT**

*Member at Large*

**MATTHEW WELKER**

*Member at Large*

**JONATHAN PELHAM**

*Member at Large*

# CHILDREN FIRST, INC. ORGANIZATION

CHILDREN FIRST, INC.  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**SUSIE WELLER**



ATHENS-OCONEE CASA  
COMMUNITY  
OUTREACH  
COORDINATOR

**ARDEN BAKARICH**



ASSOCIATE  
DIRECTOR, SAFECARE  
HOME VISITING  
PROGRAM DIRECTOR

**MARY JOYCE**



ATHENS-OCONEE CASA  
PROGRAM SUPPORT

**JON KIRKPATRICK**



OPERATIONS  
DIRECTOR

**CASSANDRA SMITH**



ATHENS-OCONEE CASA  
ADVOCACY  
COORDINATOR

**TASHA NICHOLSON**



ATHENS-  
OCONEE CASA  
PROGRAM DIRECTOR

**EMILY DANT**



ATHENS-OCONEE CASA  
ADVOCACY  
COORDINATOR

**ALLISON LANGE**



ATHENS-OCONEE CASA  
ADVOCACY  
COORDINATOR

**COURTNEY THURSTON**



SPARC PROGRAM  
DIRECTOR

**ROB TURNER**



SAFECARE HOME  
VISITOR

**AUDEY LEE**



# MEET OUR INTERNS

## CASA

## CHILDREN FIRST

## SAFE CARE



**MADELYN  
MACOY**



**JANIE  
JACKSON**



**BAILEY  
KNOCHE**



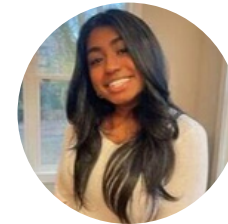
**SYDNEY  
STRICKLAND**



**SARAH  
MONDOCK**



**PAIGE  
POOLE**



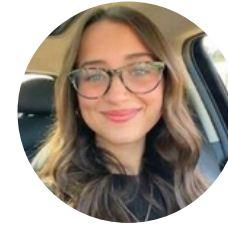
**KHUSHI  
PATEL**



**NATALIE  
ANDERSON**



**SHELBY  
PLUGGER**



**HOLLY  
LYDIATT**



**LEXIE  
BLAKE**

## SPARC



**ERIN  
HOBBS**



**ABBY  
NAND**



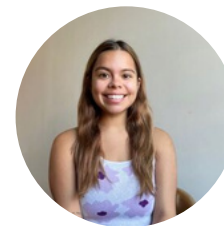
**MARY  
HARRISON**



**ELLIE  
RIDDELL**



**MOLLY  
MARI**



**ANA  
LAURA  
SOLIS-  
SANCHEZ**



**JESSICA  
JEWELL**



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# THE YEAR

## STRATEGIC PLAN IN ACTION

In 2022, we were able to see our strategic plan goals put in action. One of which included the diversification of Children First. This year we have been able to create our Diversity Equity and Inclusion plan. Next year, we look forward to putting in plan to actionable steps to embody.

## PEOPLE

Another goal was to build organizational capacity. Cassandra Smith started Jan. 1st, 2022, as our Administrative Assistant. She has taken that role and flown. Jon Kirkpatrick joined the Children First team Nov. 1st, 2022, as a CASA Program Support Coordinator and has been a wonderful addition to the CASA team.

After 14 years of service, Mary Joyce has stepped down from Children First to become the new Executive Director of AthFest as of January 2023. We miss her and know that it is a wonderful fit to merge her love for music and non-profit leadership.

Along with our wonderful staff members, the mission of Children First would not be able to succeed without our board. Molly Petner took on the role of Board Chair in late 2022, and we cannot wait to see what the board is able to accomplish under her leadership. We also welcomed new board members, Rachel Andrews, Jed Dews, and Katie Bemisderfer and are so excited for the fresh engagement.

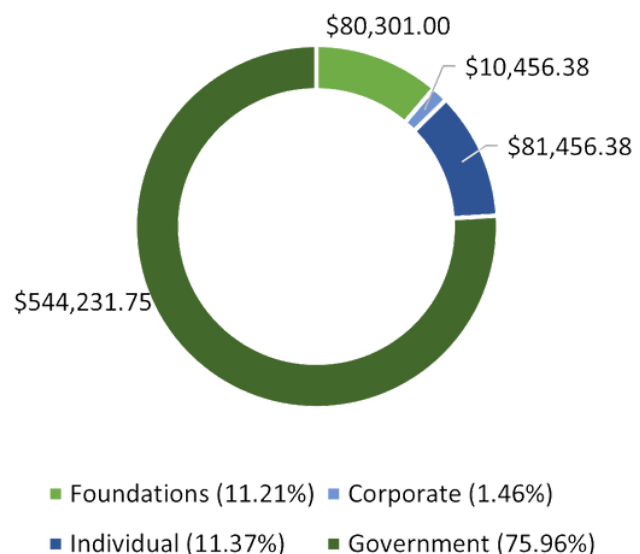
## DIG DEEP TO BUILD STRONG

Increasing financial stability has also been on our strategic to-do list. One of the ways that we have implemented our fundraising plan has been our Dig Deep to Build Strong campaign where we have asked others and ourselves how we can dig deep within ourselves and our community to build a stronger Children First.

Thanks to our dedicated and enthusiastic board members, we were able to establish our First Annual Children First Gala in October 2022. At the Georgia State Botanical Gardens, we were able to see our vision come to life with wonderful food from Heirloom, great attendance, and fantastic speakers. The evening before the Auburn vs. UGA game was full of building new relationships and spending time with old friends all in an attempt to further Children First's mission. Our First Annual Gala was a success! We raised almost \$20,000. We will be holding our Second Annual Children First Gala this upcoming fall, and we hope to see you there!

## OUR COMMITMENT

Children First, Inc. is grateful for the continuing support of our donors and funders. We are committed to act as good stewards of the investments made in our agency by providing exceptional service to the children and families served and our community.





# CASA: YEAR IN REVIEW



As the CASA program moved into 2022, we continued to focus on how to strengthen the structure of our program for future growth. We've hired a Program Support Coordinator and increased the number of interns to help out with projects around the office. In 2022, CASA staff supervised 13 new CASA interns! This is the highest number of interns ever accepted into the CASA program, but the outcome of their combined work has been phenomenal. Strengthening structure also means evaluating areas of weakness. With the extra support provided by new volunteers and staff, the program has been able to really consider what areas of the program need a focus. One answer has been clear: Volunteer Retention efforts.

We wouldn't be able to support the children in foster care without our amazing volunteers, and we believe retaining skilled advocates is just as important as training new ones. While a more in-depth plan is being put into place for 2023, the CASA team took small steps with big goals in mind to meet some retention targets. One of these goals has been better communication. To solve this, CASA staff now sends out a monthly newsletter that contains program information and events, upcoming in-service opportunities, and monthly CASA successes. This has helped streamline communication while allowing staff to celebrate our volunteers' victories with the entire CASA body. Our staff has made intentional efforts to add more structure to our continuing education program. A greater emphasis has been placed on increasing the variety of opportunities offered (in-person, virtual, facilitated by CASA staff or outside organization guest speakers, community events/trainings, podcasts, books, documentaries) so we can meet the needs of every type of learner.

- **86** volunteers worked a combined **10,523** hours for their CASA case.
- **1,432.72** inservice/training hours completed.
- Served **197** children,
- CASA attended **370** hearings.
- **13** interns were accepted and trained

## CASA Participated in

- **13** reunifications with biological parents
- **16** guardianships
- **11** adoptions

# CASA: POSITIVE OUTCOMES AND GREAT VOLUNTEERS



## CASA SUCCESS STORY

After 3 ½ years in foster care due to parental substance use and the child's unmet medical needs, one youth our program served was able to be reunified with their father this past year with the support and incredible hard work of their CASA volunteer! When the CASA was assigned to the case, both biological parents were incarcerated and not working services towards reunification. The child was placed with a relative and had been diagnosed with several medical issues. The CASA quickly connected with all parties and was able to create a detailed list of services that DFCS completed for reunification to be achieved. This clear and straight forward communication helped the biological parents understand what tasks needed to be completed and what changes needed to take place to ensure the child's safety. The CASA monitored the progress of the child and biological father, while navigating difficult family dynamics, in order to provide the court with an unbiased view and recommendations. The court was able to better direct the case with the information provided, and dad received the treatment and education he needed. We were pleased to have the opportunity to recommend to the court that the child should be returned to the father's full custody. Since that return, the child has attended all needed appointments and the family is thriving. We are so proud of this family and our CASA volunteer for working together in the best interest of this child!

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Katie Greenway joined our program in Spring of 2019 and has demonstrated exemplary casework and commitment to our mission ever since. During her time with CASA, she has impacted 11 children, 3 CASAs, and spent numerous hours in court. Her support is inexhaustible as she carries a case, supports volunteers, and spreads the word about our work. We are so grateful to have this incredible person on our team!

Katie recently shared why she continues to volunteer: "I volunteer because CASA gives me the chance to make a positive impact in my community and be a part of something bigger than myself. Being a CASA has made me a more understanding, empathetic, and overall better person. I think CASAs play an incredibly important role in child welfare because they have the ability to fully invest in one family and make sure their needs are met and that they don't fall through the cracks of an overburdened and underfunded system. CASAs can provide a consistent and positive relationship that children in crisis can count on to be there, advocating for them every step of the way."

# SAFECARE: YEAR IN REVIEW



2022 was a significant transitional year for SafeCare. Program Director and Children First Associate Director, Mary Eleanor Joyce moved to Athfest Educates to become their new CEO. Before she did, she built up the SafeCare program in significant ways. She won several new grants, reached new donors, built a database, and deepened connections in the community through her work on committees and completing the intensive LEAD Athens program. Through all of this she onboarded Audey Lee as the new SafeCare Program Director, who was thrilled to hire Imani Scott-Blackwell as Home Visitor. As for the families we serve, we saw children returned home, DFCS cases closed, and parents able to move from emergency housing to signing leases in homes where children have their own rooms.

## 46 FAMILIES WITH SERVICES

In the past year, our SafeCare Visiting Program provided 46 families with quality, evidence based, in-home visitation and parenting education.



## IMPACT TESTIMONIAL

Kelly and Bill had been living in a long-stay hotel room for two years when they started SafeCare. DFCS had concerns about substance abuse when their daughter was born and Kelly asked about parenting resources. Both parents participated enthusiastically – their adoration for their child was delightful to witness. Thanks to emergency funding we were able to provide, the family was able to move into a three bedroom trailer, with plenty of room for their daughter and her grandmother to stay and offer support. Through community partners, we gave them a washing machine and many baby items. Their home was child proofed in a matter of weeks, they fulfilled all other requests from DFCS, and their case was closed. The family's status changed dramatically in just over two months.

- 71%** → completed at least 1 module
- 54%** → completed 2 or more modules
- 46%** → increase in proper response to instances of illness or injury after child health session
- 28%** → increase in positive interactions with child after parent-child interaction session
- 97%** → reduction in common household hazards through home safety session



# SPARC: YEAR IN REVIEW

## 2 NEW COUNTIES



The Supportive Parenting and Access Resource Center (SPARC) had a great year in 2022. The program continues to grow, and we are very excited about what is coming in the new year. This year, we had two stellar interns that worked under SPARC staff to serve clients in an effort to help out Access and Visitation programs. Because of this hard work, we were able to add two new counties and Child Support offices to our service area and are very excited to see where these new relationships will take us. This brings our total to 12 counties and 5 offices served!

## 128 NEW INTAKES

### 15+ VISITS

This past year was one of our biggest ever as far as the number of clients served. We were able to serve clients from all across the state. We had 128 new intakes, 27 more intakes than last year. This means that we made contact with 128 new non-custodial parents in an effort to increase their parenting relationship with their children. For these 128, we were able to facilitate over 15 direct visits while also encouraging communication between parents to help set up more visits in the future.



## OVER 100 LEGITIMATIONS

We were able to assist over 100 non-custodial fathers with the legitimation process. This will lead to them becoming legal fathers and increasing their rights and ability to have a relationship with their children.

## UPCOMING

We are excited about new opportunities in the coming year. We will begin offering mediation services to not only our clients in the Access and Visitation program, but to others in our community as well. We are also looking to expand our team in the coming year as well. Thank you for your support of Children First and all of the work you do for our community.

# 5 Year+ Donors

Special recognition to our donors who have contributed for the past five years in a row!

**Will Holmes**  
**Katie Bemisdefer**  
**Bonnie Dunn**  
**Suzanne Joyce**  
**Mary and Sam Elliott**

**Angela Meltzer**  
**Marie and Kenny St. Romain**  
**Nancy MacNair**  
**Mary Kay Mitchell-Hodler**  
**Charles Carabello**  
**Ralph Stephens**



Georgia Department of Human Services



LAUREN GERMANY  
 FOX FAMILY TRUST





THE UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST  
FELLOWSHIP



Lois & Lucy Lampkin Foundation



TURNER WOOD & SMITH  
— I N S U R A N C E —



CHI ZETA SERVICE SOCIETY

ATHENS AREA NEWCOMERS CLUB

ATHENS ANNUAL HOLIDAY BENEVOLENCE MARKET

SHANE DEKLE AND ASSOCIATES

CHERI CHERRY REAL ESTATE SERVICES

NEWLAND FOUNDATION

PERNO INSURANCE

MARY ALLEN LINDSEY BRANAN FOUNDATION



# 2022 DONORS

The names below represent both long-time and first-time donors of Children First, Inc. We are so thankful for the generous support and for fellow advocates dedicated to *putting children first*.

Emma Bagwell· Tom Bardner· Katie Bemisderfer· Katherine Boyce · Sherryl Branch· Mercer Brockenbrough· Elena Brown· Joann Brown· Judith "Judy" Burch· Kathy Burns· James & Tyra Byers· Charles Carabello· Andy Case· Buddy Cashwell· William Cashwell· Patricia Caulton· Austin Chambers· James Cook· Frances Covert· R. Mark Cronquist· Caroline Davis· Jed Dews· David Dixon· Barbara Dorsey· Bonnie Dunn· Bob Dyer· Kimberly Edwards· Jared Elder· Joseph Ellenberg· Mary & Sam Elliott· Michelle Elliott-Gower· Jonathan Evans· Jackson Fagundes· Yvina Fernandez· Brooke Fielder· Meredith Finnie· Meghan Flanagan· Madison Franklin· Lori Gage· John Gagliano· Ania Gardner· Thomas George· Rachele Gibson· Katherine Graham· Joanna Guy· Robert Guy· Isaiah Harrison· Michelle Henn· James Hicks· Hoffman Carol· Will Holmes· Jasmine Hsieh· Veronica Imery· Robert Irwin· Sherry Jackson· Karen James· Stanley James· Mary-Eleanor Joyce· Suzanne Joyce· Bryan Kamau· Cameron Keen· Sally Kimel-Sheppard· Jennifer King· Hadley Kirsche· Margaret Kowalski· Cathy Kroeger· Kristen Landry· Kristin Lawrence· James Locklin· Kimberly Locklin· Robert Long· Elizabeth Lucero· John Lyndon· Nancy MacNair· Morgan Malanoski· Angela Meltzer· David Meyers· Mary Kay Mitchell-Hodler· Blanche Moreman· Virginia Morris· Jonathan Moses· Robert Murray· Arezoo Nabipour· Daniel Navarro· Dorothy Newland· Sharon Nickols· Gayle Noblet· Hannah Noltimier· James Noltimier· Emily Nusbickel· Oonagh Benson· Jordan Osborne· Richard Owens· Lennice Parker· Andrea Pelham· Geoffrey Pelham· Preston Pelham· Clay Pender· Ryan Pepperhorst· Reagan Peters· Molly Petner· Julia & Sherman Pills· Alan Platt· Sammantra Randolph· Bryan Reber· Pascale Riley· Robert Romano· Melissa Schofield· Melinda Scott· Van and Susan Scott· Anne Shaffer· Jackey Sherraker· Zachary Sims· Kelly Skoglund· Cassandra Smith· Riley Smith· Marie St. Romain· Andrew Steck· Ralph Stephens· Matthew Struble· David Sweat· Claudia & Joel Taxel· Carolyn Taylor· Brent Temple· Victoria Tobin· Jane Ullah· Danielle Vito· Kim Wall· Holly Warnock· Debra Watson· Mary Lillie Watson· Matthew Welker· Susan Weller· Herb & Myrna West· Mary Wood· Elinore Young.

# 2022 VOLUNTEERS

The names below represent both long-time and first-time volunteers of Children First, Inc. We are so thankful for the generous support and for fellow advocates dedicated to *putting children first*.

Nasreena Ali  
Lydia Atkinson  
Caitlin Banks  
Cindy Barber  
Sarah Baugh  
Kathryn Birch  
Katie Boyle  
Judy Burch  
Camille Campbell  
Olivia Carlson  
Cheri Cherry  
Megan Cherry  
Sara Ann Clemmons  
Jenny Danker  
Mia De La Guardia  
Susan Evans  
Allison Fine  
Karen Fite  
Christina Foard Hunady  
Ashlyn Frank  
Grace Gilbert  
Katie Greenway  
Audrey Harris  
Bonnie Harris  
Ellen Harris  
Barbara Houze  
Leslie Hunsinger  
Jennifer Ingle

Kaitlynn Isley  
Raymond Jarvis  
Alissa Kiefer  
Jun Tai Kim  
Carly Joy King  
Jon Kirkpatrick  
Scott Luis  
Michelle Maddox  
Barbara Marable  
Jessica McGahee  
Jake Modica  
Rebecca Moore  
Meg Morrison  
Maria Mueller  
Arezoo Nabipour  
Bridget Nabors  
Lindsey Neel  
Laura Nichols  
Jo Nicol  
Savannah Lane Orange  
Xochilth Ortiz  
Michael Palmer  
Abbie Parkes  
Millie Price  
Bitsy Quist  
Maggie Reinberger  
Patty Riehm  
Carson Roberts  
John Rogers

Shannon Romano  
Ashley Russell  
Lisa Saunders  
Margie Scaffa  
Hilary Schofill  
Malinda Sees  
Kaylor Sexton  
Kristen Shockley  
Kimberly Simpson  
Art Smith  
Alex Smolyar  
Nicole Spittler  
Rachel Surrency  
Bonnie Tappan  
Carolyn Taylor  
Cynthia Teeter  
Catherine Tillman  
Sally Vandiver  
Christen Warren  
Robyn Wasserman  
Terri Watts  
Rebecca Weck  
Jennie Welch  
Amy White  
Jennifer Whitlock  
Kathi Wilson  
Katie Wooten  
Maddie Zgonc

## Peer Coordinators

Sarah Baugh   Kathryn Birch   Cheri Cherry   Susan Evans   Katelin Greenway  
Audrey Harris   Bonnie Harris   Alissa Kiefer   Jon Kirkpatrick   Xochilth Ortiz  
Patty Riehm   Bonnie Tappan   Maddie Zgonc

# HOW YOU CAN HELP!

**Volunteer:** Athens-Oconee CASA is composed of hardworking volunteers within our community. If the mission speaks to you, we encourage you to join our next CASA volunteer class and become a part of our over 30 year legacy of advocating for children in foster care. Our informational sessions are held regularly throughout the year. Our next meeting will be May 10th. It will be hosted at 12:30pm and 5:30pm at our office.

**Donate:** We need your financial support help to continue putting children first. To be able to sustain the great services we provide for the families in our region we need your continued support. We aim to serve all foster children in Clarke and Oconee counties through CASA, help parents regain and retain custody of their children through SafeCare, and provide non-custodial parents with services in our 12 surrounding counties through SPARC. Are you able to give \$25 a month?

**Sponsor:** If your business or community group believes in and supports our mission, you can join our legacy. Our sponsors will be recognized through our social media platforms and at events.

**Partner:** We can't improve child welfare alone. If you or your organization would like to help build support around the child welfare community, please reach out.

**Follow:** Want to stay up to date with all that is happening with Children First, Inc? Follow us!

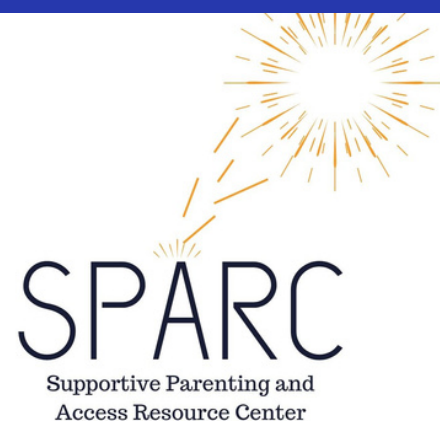
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AthensOconeeCASA

SafeCare Home Visiting at Children First, Inc.

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**Instagram:** @casaathens @childrenfirstincga @safecare.childrenfirst

**Website:** [www.childrenfirst-inc.org](http://www.childrenfirst-inc.org)  
[www.athensoconeeCasa.org](http://www.athensoconeeCasa.org)







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