

Overview of Georgia's 2016 Fiscal Year Human Services Budget More for Child Welfare, but Other Services Still in Need

By Melissa D. Johnson, Policy Analyst

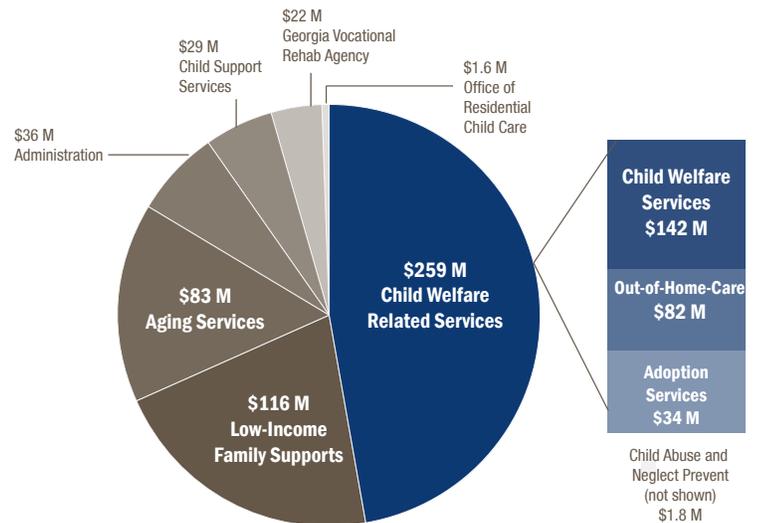
The governor's \$547 million human services budget proposed for the 2016 fiscal year makes strategic additions to help protect Georgia's children and adults, but falls short of meeting the many different needs of its growing population. The spending plan promises to take a solid step to meet Georgia's child welfare needs, but more money is required to better serve children in foster care and the elderly.

In the governor's proposed 2016 budget, state money is distributed among services for the most vulnerable children and adults as shown in the accompanying chart.

Notable provisions of the 2016 Department of Human Services budget include:

- \$12.5 million more than 2015 to hire 278 more child protective services workers
- \$9.8 million to manage the growth in the number of children placed in foster homes and group homes
- \$690,000 more than 2015 to hire 11 more Adult Protective Services workers

Department of Human Services \$547 Million 2016 Budget



Source: Governor's Budget Report - 2016 Fiscal Year

Child Welfare Budget Adds Needed Resources

Child welfare services account for the largest share of the human services budget and are set to increase by nearly 24 percent over the previous year in the proposed budget. A significant portion of this increase comes from the \$12.5 million infusion the Child Welfare Services division would use to hire 278 additional child welfare caseworkers.

Child welfare caseworkers are often a child's first line of defense against abuse, abandonment and neglect. Between 2009 and 2014, they were saddled with the cumulative effects of budget cuts while the demand for their services increased. The average caseload per worker increased nearly half from October 2011 to October 2014.

A new centralized phone number for people to report suspected child abuse and neglect is only adding to the workload. The Department of Family and Children Services opened 58 percent more investigations or cases for family support services in October 2014 than in October 2013. The average caseload for child welfare workers escalated nearly 23 percent during that period, from 16.4 to 20.1 cases per worker.

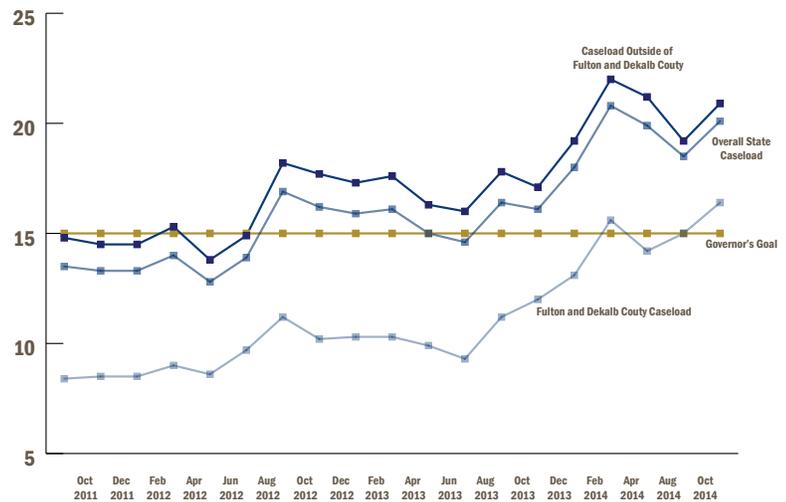
Gov. Nathan Deal recognized the need to bolster the ranks of caseworkers and reduce caseloads in late 2013, prompting him to create the Georgia Child Welfare Reform Council. His announced goal is to reduce child welfare caseloads to about 15 per case manager by 2017. The new spending proposed in the governor's budget is designed to help meet this goal.

Caseworkers still face a tall order, even with the reinforcements. Outside of Fulton and DeKalb counties, where the department is bound to a federal consent decree that mandates lower caseloads, child welfare staffers carried an average of at least 15 cases since September 2012.

Other recommendations of the Georgia Child Welfare Reform Council's personnel subcommittee are included in the proposed 2016 budget. This includes a plan to construct a career path for case workers designed to help bring their pay in line with market rates. Child welfare caseworkers earn an average of \$31,913 per year. That is about 161 percent of the federal poverty level for a family of three, a tight financial situation for a caseworker trying to support a family on one salary.

The proposed 2016 budget adds \$5 million to implement career ladders and performance-based salary increases for caseworkers and supervisors. Salaries could increase for case workers who earn special credentials, such as a clinical social worker license, or certifications in subject areas like intimate partner violence and substance abuse and addiction.

Child Welfare Worker Caseloads up Nearly 50% in Three Years



Source: Georgia Department of Human Services

The budget proposal also incorporates other council recommendations, providing:

- \$220,000 to construct a supervisor-mentor program for caseworkers. This amount is only a fifth of the council's estimated \$1.1 million cost of the program.
- \$620,000 for training to enhance caseworker safety, which includes developing verbal skills to de-escalate volatile situations.
- \$1 million for mobile technology to support child welfare work. This will likely include tablets for timely data access and entry when child welfare workers meet with families.
- \$5.8 million to improve foster care parent training and recruitment. The council identified a need for more and better-trained foster parents and staff to approve training activities, determine training needs and identify qualified trainers.

Foster Care Gets Boost, but Budget Challenges Remain

Child welfare case workers need improvements to salaries, training and other support, according to the council. Foster families, child placing agencies and child care institutions, or group homes, are also dealing with significant unmet needs.

The governor's budget proposals add \$9.8 million in both the amended 2015 budget and the proposed 2016 budgets to address an increased growth in foster care. Recent child deaths and a new centralized toll-free number for suspected child abuse reports contributed to an increase of children placed in foster care. Foster care placements grew 22 percent since November 2013, coinciding with a spike in news coverage of deaths of children with a history of interaction with Georgia's child welfare system.

The safety of Georgia’s children is the state’s first priority, which requires their removal from perilous homes and situations as soon as possible. A safe and effective foster care placement must be immediately available upon removal for the system to work. Some referred children had to be turned away by placement agencies in the past year. The budget must be adequate to consistently accommodate all potential foster children.

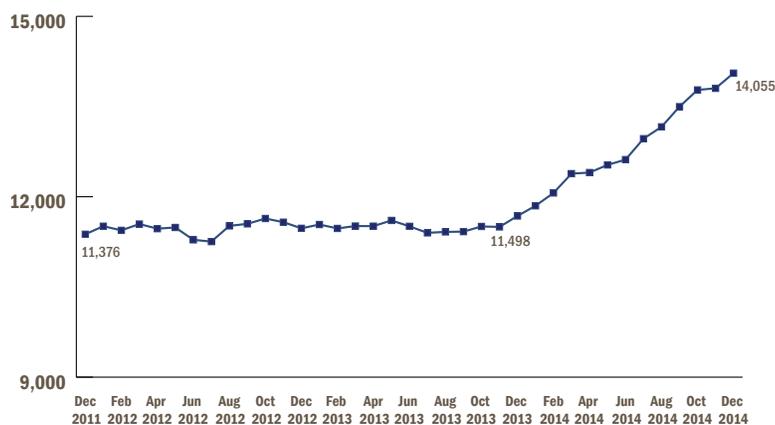
The proposed 2016 budget is only enough to pay for increased capacity at current rates. Rates paid to foster families, child placing agencies and group homes could still prove inadequate to cover the cost of caring for children.

A family caring for a foster child younger than five is paid as little as \$15 a day, while daily rates to institutions can be as low as \$105 per day. This is expected to cover food, shelter, clothing, supervision and oversight. Child care institutions shoulder greater costs than foster homes, including larger staff and insurance expenses. Private providers must often raise outside money to cover the cost of care.

Providers are working with ever more challenging children and family situations, responding to multiple regulatory agencies and making do with stagnant resources. In the past two years, 20 percent more children overseen by these providers require the highest level of supervision.

Resources are not keeping up with these challenging needs. Foster families, child placing agencies and group homes received a 3 percent increase in pay in July 2014, the first increase for the agencies and institutions since 2007 and the first increase for foster families since 2008.

Foster Care Placement Surges by 22 percent in Little More Than a Year



Source: Georgia Department of Human Services

Needs of Older Georgians Outstrip Proposed Budget

Georgians 65 and older are the state’s fastest growing age group. That aging population requires increased support services. The proposed 2016 budget sets aside some money to address this growth, but is not enough, according to experts on Georgia’s aging population.

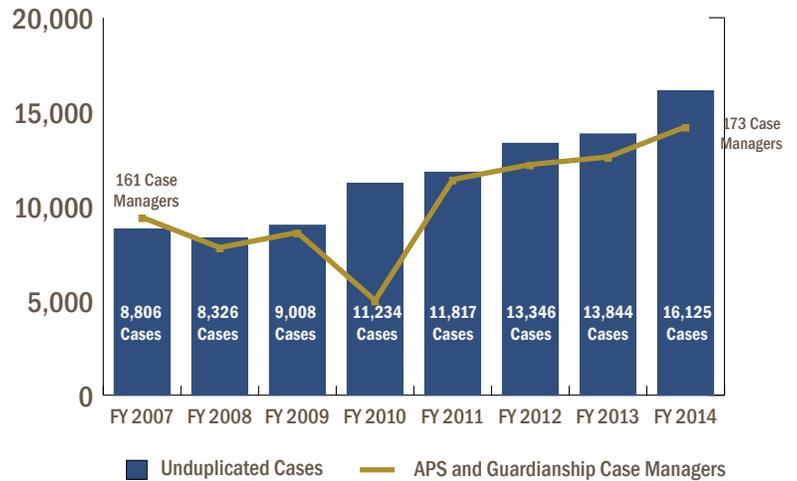
A spike in crime targeting the state’s senior and disabled citizens for financial gain creates the need for more workers to protect their interests. Predators assume seniors control large bank and retirement accounts. Adult Protective Services cases nearly doubled between 2008 and 2014.

The proposed 2016 spending plan adds \$690,000 for Elder Abuse Investigations and Prevention. This money is allotted to hire 11 additional Adult Protective Services workers, but does not include enough for technology or travel. The 2016 addition is the second year in a three-year plan to add 33 new Adult Protective Services workers over three years, lagging about a year behind the need, according to aging experts.

Home and community-based services remain limited due to cuts in recent years. Next year’s budget for Aging Services maintains a reduction of \$8 million, or about 9 percent, since 2009. Alzheimer’s respite, wellness and nutrition education programs and other aging services bore the brunt of these cuts in recent years. The proposed 2016 budget is short of money to restore aging services to pre-recession levels.

People who rely on the state's Elder Community Living Services are particularly hurt by the ongoing budget shortfall. This initiative allows older Georgians to live independent lives in their own communities and to avoid moving to nursing homes. Nursing homes cost the state an average of \$11,316 more per year than community-based services. The proposed 2016 budget provides no additional money for these services. It will take \$50 million over the next five years to help shrink the waiting list of requests for assistance, according to aging advocates. That list includes more than 13,000 people asking for assistance with home-delivered meals, transportation, minor home repairs and other services.

Staff Levels Stagnant as Adult Protective Services Cases Continue Climb



Source: Georgia Department of Human Services