

Overview: 2025 Fiscal Year Budget for the Georgia Department of Human Services

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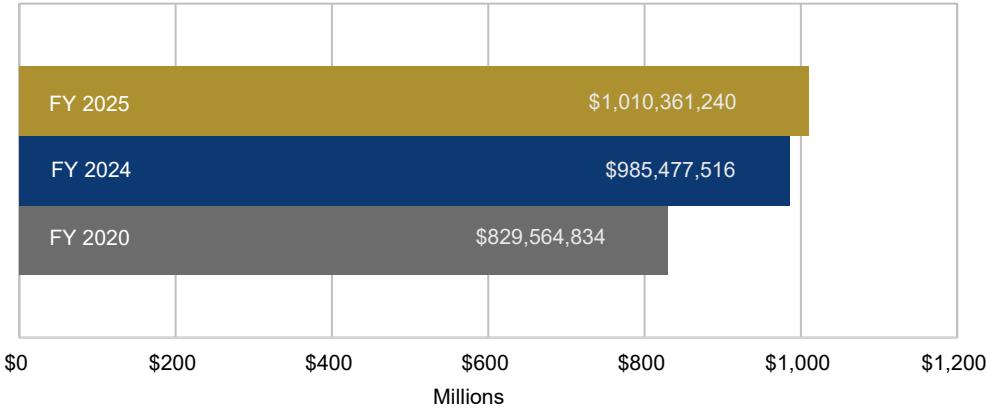
Introduction

The Department of Human Services (DHS) oversees various services including foster care, child welfare, support for low-income individuals, aging services and child support.¹ Governor Kemp proposed increasing spending by about \$1 billion to DHS in the Amended Fiscal Year (AFY) 2024 budget and another \$1 billion to the department in Fiscal Year (FY) 2025.

Most of the Governor’s Proposed \$25 Million Increase to DHS Would be for Pay Raises

The Governor’s proposed budget would increase DHS’s budget by about \$25 million, a 3% increase from FY 2024.

The Governor’s Proposed FY 2025 Budget Would Include \$1 Billion for The Department of Human Services



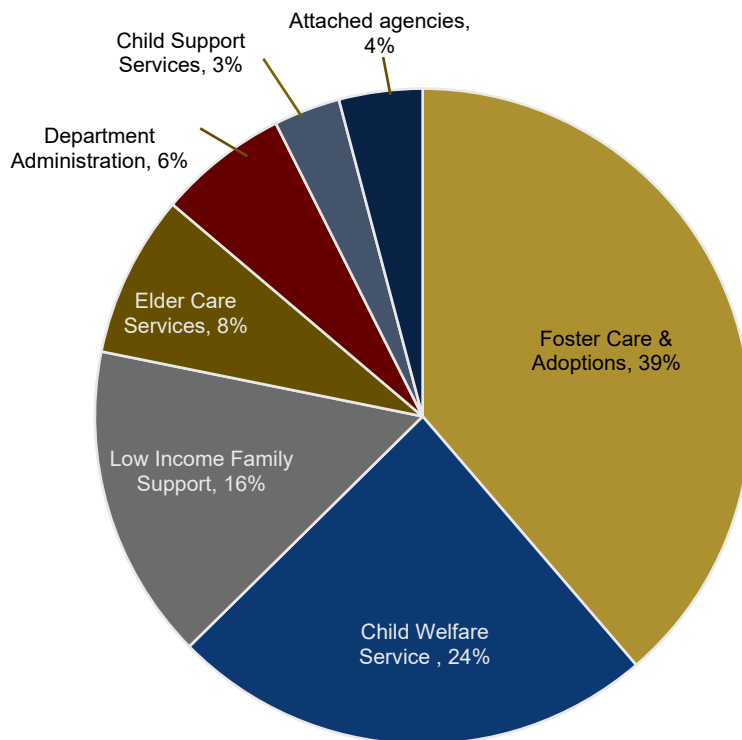
Source: The Governor’s Budget Reports, Amended Fiscal Year 2024 and Fiscal Year 2025 and Amended Fiscal Year 2020 and Fiscal Year 2021.

Increases include:

- \$15 million for a 4% cost of living adjustment for state employees.
- \$4.7 million for an additional salary increase for child welfare caseworkers.
- \$4.7 million for the Gwinnett Commercial Sexual Exploitation Recovery Center.
- \$630 thousand to hire 23 county customer service staff to allow DFCS offices to re-open in certain counties.

Child welfare, foster care and adoption-related services account for about 63% of the agency’s budget. The next biggest share of spending is federal low-income assistance programs such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), accounting for 16% of the agency’s budget. The department’s administration and smaller programs such as elder care services, child support services and the attached agencies account for the remaining funds.

Foster Care, Adoption and Child Welfare Services Make Up 63% of the DHS Budget



Notes: In the budget, the Council on Aging, Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, Family Connect, and the Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Children Fund Commission are attached to DHS for administrative purposes.

Source: The Governor's Budget Reports, Amended Fiscal Year 2024 and Fiscal Year 2025

Progress in Hiring Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) Eligibility Workers Does Not Eliminate Need for Higher Pay

DHS has hired several hundred workers over the past year, particularly at DFCS, yet retention remains a problem.² Between December 2022 and December 2023, the average headcount of frontline eligibility staff increased from 1,751 to 2,126, a difference of 375 workers.³ This is positive news for a workforce that has seen declining staffing levels since 2021. However, DFCS experienced a 12% turnover among eligibility staff in the first six months of FY 2024. According to state data, more than half of staff turnover is from employees who have worked in the position for a year or less.⁴ This trend should be concerning for DFCS, as it must prioritize retaining workers to preserve its progress.

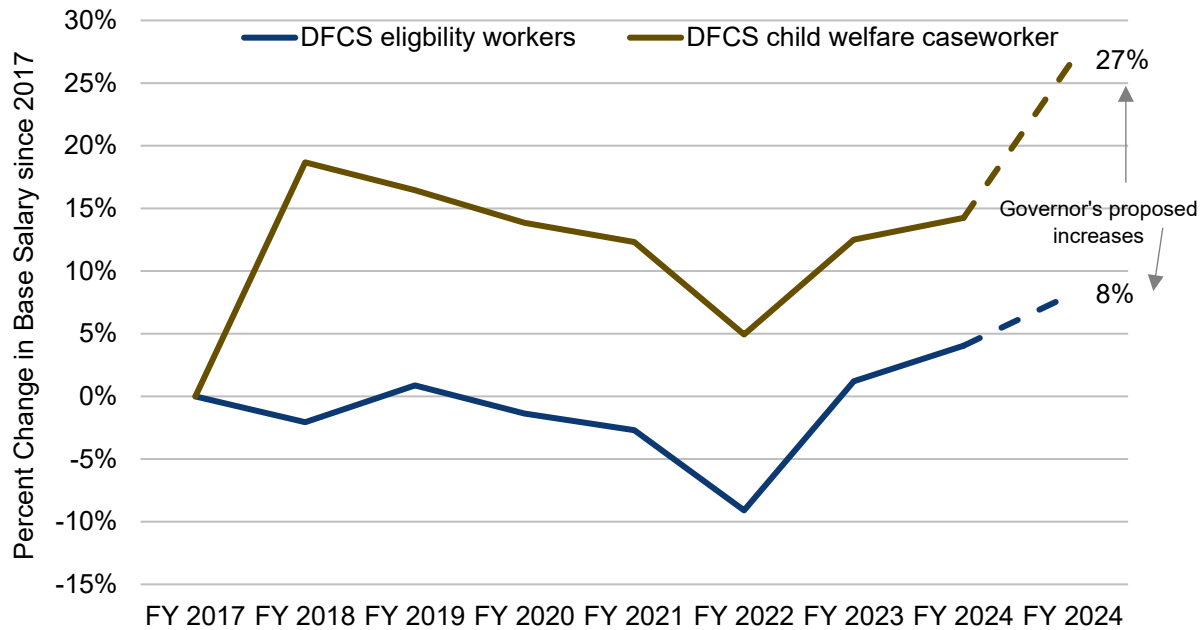
Eligibility workers are essential to DFCS's core operations. Despite hiring efforts, the office has struggled with high workloads. In October 2023, eligibility workers had, on average, more than 950 cases.⁵ Higher caseloads limit workers' ability to help families maintain health coverage or receive other benefits on time.

- DFCS started redetermining 2.8 million Medicaid cases this past year, and many children are losing coverage due to administrative or procedural reasons.⁶
- Most new hires have been trained in Medicaid, leaving the SNAP program with inadequate support. Tens of thousands of households experienced delayed SNAP payments last year and the problem has continued.⁷ Georgia is now under a corrective action plan from the federal government to explain the root causes of the delayed benefit dispersal.⁸
- Even though DFCS offices are now open for more days each week, there still are not enough eligibility workers available to directly assist clients with their cases. The governor's proposal to spend \$630,000 to hire 23 front desk staff is helpful but does nothing to address the pressing need for more eligibility workers.

Despite eligibility workers' immense responsibilities, the governor's proposals for DFCS frontline workers create an unnecessary disparity. The proposed FY 2025 budget includes the statewide 4% COLA and a \$3,000 pay increase for child welfare caseworkers. In contrast, the governor's budget only includes the 4% COLA for entry-level eligibility workers.

This is not the first time that DFCS child welfare workers have gotten a major pay increase, while DFCS eligibility workers did not receive a corresponding pay increase. In FY 2018, salaries for entry-level child welfare workers increased by more than \$6,000 in nominal dollars. Entry-level eligibility workers got a pay raise of about \$1,300 in nominal dollars in FY 2019. Under the governor's proposed budget, pay for entry-level child welfare workers would have grown by 27%, adjusted for inflation, since FY 2017, while entry-level eligibility workers would have only seen a growth of 8% in their salaries.

Pay Increases Entry-Level Salaries among DFCS Frontline Workers Have Been Unequal



Note: Analysis is adjusted for inflation

Source: GBPI analysis of entry-level salary data from the Department of Human Services, Division of Family and Children Services

The Georgia General Assembly must focus on retaining DFCS eligibility workers to maintain the progress made in rebuilding the agency’s staffing levels. One effective way to improve retention would be to give DFCS eligibility workers the same \$3,000 pay increase as DFCS child welfare workers. This step would not only boost employee morale but also lead to better services for families and children in need.

Endnotes

¹ There are four agencies that are attached to the DHS budget for administrative reasons: the Council on Aging, Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, Family Connect and the Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Children Fund Commission.

² Nolin, J. & Ross, W. (2024, January 18). *State agency heads outline spending plans for Georgia’s child welfare, safety-net, mental health*. Georgia Recorder.

<https://georgiarecorder.com/2024/01/18/state-agency-heads-outline-spending-plans-for-georgias-child-welfare-safety-net-mental-health/>.

³ The average headcount accounts for departures and hires each month. The Office of Family Independence hires people to not only fill recent departures but also add new staff.

⁴ GBPI open records requests from DFCS' Office of Family Independence.

⁵ Georgia Department of Human Services, Division of Family and Children Services. (2023, December 8). Presentation to the DHS & DFCS advisory board.
<https://dfcs.georgia.gov/document/document/november-2023-board-meeting-presentationpdf/download>.

⁶ Chan, Leah. (2023, August, 29). Children stand to lose during Medicaid Unwinding, but there's more we can do to keep Georgians covered. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute.
<https://gbpi.org/children-stand-to-lose-during-medicaid-unwinding-but-theres-more-we-can-do-to-keep-georgians-covered/>.

⁷ Aragon, Rachel. (2023, November 16). *'It's a struggle': Georgians report SNAP benefits delay as state works to resolve backlog*. Atlanta News First.
<https://www.atlantanewsfirst.com/2023/11/16/its-struggle-georgians-report-snap-benefits-delay-state-works-resolve-backlog/>

⁸ Lucas, L. (2023, December 29). *Documents show staffing issues are root cause of 'unacceptable' SNAP delays in Georgia*. 11Alive News.
<https://www.11alive.com/article/news/state/snap-delays-georgia-staffing-issues-root-cause-documents-show/85-8f9798e8-c35e-4d35-afd4-466d0b0a513d>.