

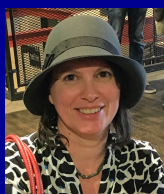
Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning

BRIGHT FROM THE START



DECAL By the Numbers

4,439 - Licensed child care programs in Georgia

3,595 - Quality Rated child care programs in Georgia

66,273 - Students enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K Program

262 - Summer Food Service Program emergency feeding sites

\$92 million - CARES funding dollars to licensed child care programs in Georgia impacted by COVID-19

749 - DECAL employees

Follow DECAL on Social Media



Commissioner's Corner

by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs



Dear DECAL Co-workers,

In this issue of Decidedly DECAL, I want to share with you something I've been thinking about the past few weeks...best summed up in the word **NEW**. Yes, in some ways it looks like 2021 is beginning much the same way 2020 ended: a pandemic is raging; the economy is sputtering; civil unrest is creating a sense of instability and anxiety.

BUT, despite these very real conditions, I'm encouraged. This is a **new** year. Scientists around the world have created vaccines and **new** treatments for COVID-19. Georgia's economy, which is stronger than in many other states, has **new** potential. And we will have many **new** opportunities to serve children and families through the important programs and services we administer and oversee.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "With the **new** day comes **new** strength and **new** thoughts." As I've told you before, this past year you demonstrated your strength and your ability to think new thoughts to accomplish our work in new ways.

That's why I'm encouraged. I begin this **new** day, this **new** year confident that we'll be able to continue our work in 2021 with **new** strength, **new** thoughts, and **renewed** hope. If we did it last year, we can continue to do it this year.

Governor Kemp delivered his State of the State address last week in which he reflected on what Georgia had been through last year...and pointed to a positive way forward for our state. I was particularly encouraged by these words: *In Georgia, our people are the foundation. Despite incredible loss and unprecedented challenges, Georgia is still standing. Our house, built on a sure foundation, survived the storm. ... A better, brighter future is*

New Episodes Every Wednesday

The Faces of DECAL

DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Barbara McWethy, Antavius Thompson, Denise Jensen, David Ginsburg, and Malissa Champion.

right around the corner. Yes, we still have challenges ahead, a virus to beat, an economy to rebuild and restore. But my fellow Georgians, the State of the State is resilient, and we will endure.

While the Governor was referring to our state as a whole in his words, I think they also apply to DECAL: you, DECAL employees, are the foundation. We are still standing...we survived the storm... we are resilient...we will endure...and a better, brighter future is right around the corner.

I'm honored to stand with you in this **new** year.



Celebrating Inclusive Early Learning Week

Governor Kemp has proclaimed February 7-13, 2021 as Inclusive Early Learning Week in Georgia, and we invite you to celebrate the important practice of inclusion!

As champions for young children, we at DECAL want children of all abilities to have equal access to quality early childhood programs that support their individualized learning and development needs and foster a sense of belonging and engagement. The National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Division for Early Childhood describe early childhood inclusion as embodying “the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society.” Ensuring that children with disabilities are included in high quality early learning environments is one of main

Kemp & DECAL Unveil Pre-K, Assistant & Child Care Teachers Supplemental Pay Program

Governor Brian P. Kemp and DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs last week announced plans to provide \$1,000 supplemental payments to eligible Pre-K teachers, assistant teachers, and child care teachers in Georgia. These payments will be funded through the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funds provided in the most recent Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021. These payments are targeted for programs which remained open throughout the pandemic.

“Child care and Georgia’s Pre-K Program teachers were on the frontlines of COVID-19’s impact on our families and communities from the very beginning, caring for the children of first responders and essential workers,” said Governor Kemp. “Throughout the pandemic, we have remained laser-focused on ensuring that parents can return to work safely with the knowledge that their children are well taken care of. I thank Commissioner Jacobs and her team for working tirelessly to administer these funds and support children, parents, and educators throughout Georgia.”

In the next couple of weeks, DECAL will publish eligibility criteria in accordance with federal law and begin disbursing pay to Georgia’s Pre-K and child care workforce.

DECAL Has First Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Director

With abrupt changes to routine and life in general, mental health has come to the forefront during the Covid-19 pandemic. Taking care and responding appropriately

priorities of the Inclusion and Behavior Support Services unit.

One of the ways Inclusion and Behavior Support Services unit supports child care providers is by providing professional development and coaching on how to modify their learning environments, daily activities, and teaching practices to ensure high quality inclusion. The unit also works with families to provide referrals to inclusive child care programs and to identify community resource agencies in their area. By calling the SEEDS for Success Helpline, early childhood providers and families can request support or resources from the Inclusion and Behavior Support Services unit to help them better understand and address the social, emotional, and developmental needs of all children.

We encourage providers and staff to celebrate Inclusive Early Learning Week in a number of fun ways! A provider celebration toolkit will be shared with all programs containing activities in which providers might engage children, staff, and families throughout the week.

Commissioner Jacobs will read a social story celebrating our unique differences that was developed by the Inclusion and Behavior Support unit.

Please join us in promoting inclusive practices during Inclusive Early Learning Week and share how you celebrate inclusion by posting on social media with the hashtag #loveinclusion2021 and #GaSEEDSforSuccess!

is important to all but especially to our youngest children. Thanks to the Georgia General Assembly, a new position was created at DECAL to support social and emotional health in a child's critical early years of life. Laura Lucas is DECAL's first Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Director.



Laura Lucas

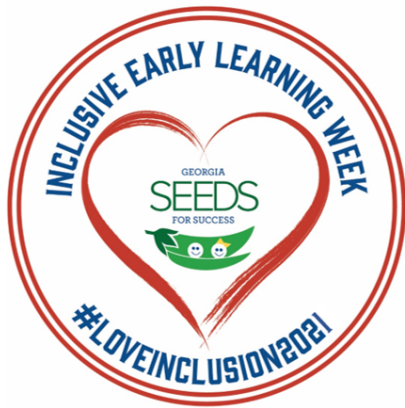
"I am so proud to be the first to serve in this position at DECAL. Everyone here and at other child-serving state agencies and our community partners have been so welcoming and supportive. I look forward to seeing how my role can strengthen the system to better promote and sustain the social and emotional health of our youngest children in Georgia," says Lucas.

With a master's degree in human development and family studies, Laura brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to DECAL. "Many agencies provide services for young children in Georgia and do a great job, and I have had the privilege to work with many of them. I hope to serve as a bridge to connect DECAL to their work for young children and families," Lucas said.

While at the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD), Lucas served as the Director for CASIG (Child and Adolescent Infrastructure Grant) and CHIPRA (Child's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act). The goal of both projects was to build a better system to serve children's mental and behavioral health needs in Georgia. Laura's position at DECAL builds on the good work of the Inclusion and Behavior Support Unit to further focus on children's mental health.

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health is best defined as a young child's capacity to experience, regulate, and express emotions, form close and secure relationships, and explore the environment and learn. Unfortunately, there is a stigma around mental health that can often cause signs to be overlooked especially with all children having different temperaments and personalities. If a child is experiencing a mental health issue, and it is ignored or passed off as bad behavior, it can be a missed opportunity and very stressful for the parent, teacher, or other caregivers. "If a parent, caregiver, or teacher notices that a child frequently has trouble expressing emotions, forming close relationships, or exploring their environment, screenings exist that can help identify if the child is experiencing a developmental delay, and interventions can be administered to address the issue. The key is to identify and address the problem as soon as possible," said Lucas. Laura went on to say that this is most beneficial in the earliest years of life when children experience very rapid brain growth.

The overall goal is to identify these issues early, assess and treat them to prevent lifelong implications. "My goal is to strengthen



Summit Planned to Recruit SFSP Sponsors

With many parents out of work, more kids will be facing hunger in the months ahead, especially when school is out for summer. To ensure kids and teens have access to healthy meals, the Nutrition Services Division is hosting a Virtual **Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Summit** on February 16 at 10:00 a.m. The summit is offered free to any eligible organization that is interested in learning about the Summer Food Service Program, a program that offers reimbursement to approved sponsoring organizations that provide nutritious meals and snacks to children.

COVID made a huge impact on child food insecurity throughout Georgia. According to Feeding America, a nationwide network of foodbanks, the child food insecurity rate increased significantly by 39% in only two years – growing from 16% in 2018 to 23% in 2020.

This year, the need for sponsoring organizations to provide free meals to children will be greater than ever as the

this system by supporting better connections and easier access to services for children, families, and child care providers,” says Lucas. Parents and primary caregivers are of course the first line of defense, which leads directly into the bigger system of early intervention providers such as home visitors and intervention specialists. It takes a village and as Lucas points out “children can be very resilient and while early intervention is better, it is never too late to support a child’s social/emotional health, especially in working with children who have experienced traumatic events.”

Pandemic Office Hours Vary for DECAL Employees

Since the start of the COVID-19 public health emergency in March 2020, most DECAL employees have been working from home. However, a small number of employees never stopped reporting to Capitol Hill, and more joined them when our offices opened to the public on Tuesdays and Thursdays, starting June 2, 2020.

So, what’s it been like around the offices during a pandemic? “Very quiet,” says Agency Receptionist Tammy Clark, who has been in-person since June 2 to receive and direct phone calls, greet guests with documents, and manage the mail. “I appreciate our efforts to slow the spread of the virus,” Clark explains. “There are prime parking spaces available and no traffic! I hope we will all be back as soon as the surge is under control along with vaccines administered to all who need and want it.”

CAPS Administrative Services Manager Andrea Moore and Scholarship Administrative Assistant CynQueshia Martin have never stopped coming into the office with a schedule that varies weekly based on workload. Moore and Martin handle CAPS redetermination letters to parents, certified letters for providers, and meet American Document Securities, Inc. monthly for document shredding. “I am okay with limited staff due to the uncertainty of the virus,” Moore says, adding for now she is not looking forward to the staff returning at full capacity. Adds Martin, “I have noticed that traffic to and from the office has been exceptionally light and easy. The Agriculture Building is empty for the most part, and the Towers have very few people present.”

“I only stopped coming to the office for two weeks at the end of March,” says CCS Administrative and Operations Manager LaKeyshia Tucker, who visits the office frequently for Open Records Requests that need information pulled from state files. “The building makes a lot of sounds that you usually wouldn’t notice if the office was full,” she says. Tucker would like to see a hybrid model of staff working from home and in the office, adding, “During this time it has been shown that most of the staff can work from home and not have to come into the office.”

pandemic has left many families facing hunger and poverty.

“Thousands of Georgia’s children are living with hunger right now because of COVID,” said Tamika Boone, Nutrition Services Director. “The SFSP is one solution that benefits the whole community by helping alleviate child hunger and providing local economies with federal reimbursement funds.”

Organizations that are eligible to become SFSP sponsors include nonprofits, libraries, schools, camps, churches, parks and recreation services, and units of local government. If you know of eligible organizations that may be interested in learning more about SFSP, please share this link to register for the [SFSP Summit](#). For more information, please contact Gaby Garza at gaby.garza@dec.al.ga.gov. Together, we can help feed Georgia’s children!

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

SAVE THE DATE

Summer Food
Service Program

Virtual Summit | FEB. 16, 2021



DECAL Expanded SOLVE Program in December 2020

Beginning December 18, 2020, DECAL began expanding a financial program to include children and young adults with disabilities whose school systems offer a primarily virtual learning model and who need care while their parents work. The program, referred to as the SOLVE (Supporting Onsite

Meanwhile, in Finance, Accounts Receivable Supervisor Bart Ellington and Financial Operations Assistant Rosalind Morris have been coming to the office twice each month to check mail, scan, and e-mail to the appropriate person, and deposit any checks that come in for payment. “It’s very quiet in the office, almost eerily quiet,” observed Ellington. “I have also noticed all the social distancing measures in the building such as limiting elevator capacity to four.”

Legal Supervisor Avery Jenkins says he needs to keep coming to the office so child care employees awaiting results from Criminal Background Checks can continue working. “I receive Child Abuse Registry results from other states so applicants can be cleared to work,” Jenkins explains. “I also handle walk-ins in case someone comes to the office for assistance with their background check.” Jenkins says coming to the office isn’t a problem: “The cafeteria is open and the GBA has provided hand sanitizer to make us feel comfortable and safe. I do enjoy working from home, but I also like coming into the office just to get out and interact with others.”

Interim Procurement Manager Lisa Rambhajan recruited her family to help distribute personal protective equipment for staff and contractors. “We got our PPE items from GEMA (Georgia Emergency Management Agency), and my family came into the office one Friday and helped me fill more than 650 bottles of hand sanitizer. Lately I have been putting together PPE equipment for Audits and Compliance, Child Care Services, and Practice and Support Services.”

Dennis Brice, Chief Information Officer, points out that his IT Support Desk team has reported to the office through most of the pandemic, now assisting any staff that may come in four days per week. According to Customer Relationship Manager Andres Bernal, since the start of the pandemic, his team has received more than 10,000 tickets and delivered more than 80 laptops, 30 printers and scanners, and 250 new phones, mostly the new iPhone SE. They have also welcomed three new staff members to the Service Desk: Blessings Blanford, Shanell Fairell, and Amir Nilforoosham.

While working remotely, DECAL has stayed in touch with employees through Zoom meetings, All Staff webinars, podcasts, social media, quarterly newsletters, and text messages, as needed.

We Are Here to Help!

The DECAL Service Desk has many ways to help you get connected and have your issues, requests, or questions resolved in a simple and fast way:

- Call us 404.463.1198
- Email us at itservices@dec.al.ga.gov
- Create a ticket online <https://itservices.dec.al.ga.gov/sp>
- Order different kinds of items and/or services thru our new and improved service catalog page

Learning for Virtual Education) program, originally offered scholarships for students ages 5-12 only.

Under the expanded SOLVE program, children and young adults up to age 22 who have a disability are eligible for a SOLVE scholarship regardless of the family's income. Also, the SOLVE payment rate for caring for children and young adults with disabilities will increase based on the provider's location, facility type, and Quality Rated star level.

SOLVE is administered by DECAL's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) unit that oversees Georgia's subsidized child care for low income families. SOLVE is funded by the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund, part of the federal CARES Act.

For more information on the SOLVE Program or on applying for these special resources, visit www.decalsolve.com; call 1-833-442-2277; or e-mail solve@decalsolve.com.

CDC Report Highlights Success of Georgia Head Start Programs in Mitigating Spread of COVID-19

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in December released a report highlighting Head Start's effective response in managing the spread of COVID-19. View the report here:

<https://bit.ly/2JPESgL>

The study found programs have been successful at implementing CDC-recommended guidance

https://itservices.decalsolve.com/sp?id=order_my_items

- Resolve some of their issues on our Knowledge base page https://itservices.decalsolve.com/sp?id=kb_view2



DECAL IT team stands ready to support staff reporting to work. Front row (L-R) Amir Nilforooshan, Andres Bernal, Alphonso Rembert; Middle row (L-R) Blessings Blanford, Ebony Ford, Shanell Fairell; Back row (L-R) Antavius Thompson, Nate Smith, Logan Simpson

and other mitigation strategies that could serve as a model for the early care and education system across the country. The report also validated the critical role that increased funding, provided through the CARES Act, played in enabling Head Start programs to support families in a safe, healthy manner.

The study, which included Head Start grantees in Georgia, Alaska, Idaho, Maine, Missouri, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin noted several factors contributing to successful implementation of CDC-recommended guidelines that helped to prevent COVID-19 transmission among children and staff members, including:

- Following the lead of experts and their recommendations;
- Funding programs through the CARES Act to enable necessary adaptations;
- Providing flexibility and support for Head Start staff, including flexible medical leave, reimbursement for health care costs, remote work options, and flexible hours;
- Taking a nimble, multi-pronged approach that evolves as circumstances change; and
- Conducting multi-faceted, ongoing communication with consistent messaging among program administrators, parents and caregivers, teachers, and other staff members, as well as continuous engagement with community partners.

Allison Setterlind, Director of Georgia's Head Start Collaboration Office, added:

“This CDC report provides positive reinforcement for the hard work we have seen on the ground here in Georgia. Our



DECAL Receptionist Tammy Clark has been reporting to her office since June 2.



Interim Procurement Manager Lisa Rambhajan recruited her family in June to help her prepare PPE for employees and contractors.

Breakroom Renovation Underway

Head Start and Early Head Start programs continue to provide essential services to more than 24,000 young children and their families during this stressful time. Our Head Start staff have gone the extra mile these past months to keep families safe and provide a critical lifeline to health, mental health, early education, and nutrition resources. Georgia Head Start programs have benefited from the support and resources from the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning in providing high- quality services during the pandemic.”

Congratulations to Bartlett and Davis on Years of Service

Join us in congratulating Compliance Supervisor Richard Bartlett in the Audits and Compliance Division on 35 years of service to the State of Georgia. Richard manages compliance examiners whose job is to review CAPS referrals for potential improper payment. Richard has been with DECAL since July 2013.

We also congratulate Compliance Examiner Katie Davis on 20 years of service to the State of Georgia. Katie has been with DECAL since January 2017.

Richard (top photo) and Katie (bottom photo) are pictured below.

When we return to the office later this year, DECAL employees will see a new breakroom on the seventh floor of the East Tower. But these renovations were not planned. On Tuesday, August 11, Agency Receptionist Tammy Clark found a leak in the water cooler that had occurred sometime over the weekend.

“When Tammy came into work on Tuesday, the floors were buckled, and there was water up to her ankles,” explained Lisa Rambhajan, Interim Procurement Manager. “The leak caused mold in the wall and under the sink.” As a result of the damage, floors had to be replaced and new countertops and a sink installed.

Not exactly an Extreme Home Makeover, but a Breakroom Makeover under Extreme Conditions.



DECAL Download Enters Third Season of Production

Our weekly podcast, DECAL Download, has entered its third season of production. Begun on September 24, 2018, the program is hosted by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs and Chief Communications Officer Reg Griffin. DECAL Download features topics and interviews concerning all divisions of the agency. The podcast has even attracted a few celebrity guests including



Governor Brian Kemp, Department of Public Health Commissioner Dr. Kathleen Toomey, Consumer Advocate Clark Howard, Musician and Author Coy Bowles, former US Secretary of Agriculture and former Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue, and former Georgia First Lady Sandra Deal.

In addition to the interviews, each episode of DECAL Download includes a “water cooler” question for Commissioner Jacobs and a quiz question from the episode where all correct responses are entered into a drawing for a prize.

“Effective communication is very important but can also be challenging with staff members located throughout the entire state,” said Commissioner Jacobs. “DECAL Download has allowed us to provide updates on the work of DECAL but also other important initiatives. It has really been fun to co-host with Reg Griffin and interview so many excellent guests. I’m looking forward to continuing to provide informative and fun podcasts to our DECAL team and other listeners.”

The suggestion for a podcast originally came from CCS Quality Improvement Training Coordinator Candace Gilbert. “As a field-based member of the CCS team, I have always found it difficult to keep up with all the email alerts, to watch a quick video, or spend time looking at booklets or flyers,” Gilbert explained. “When I thought about how I received information, I realized it was mostly through something that I listened to, as most of my time was spent traveling and out of the office. It is also great for providers we serve, who may also struggle with keeping up with all the emails and paperwork.”

In May 2020, DECAL Download was the winner of the Academy of Interactive and Visual Arts’ 26th Annual Communicator Award of Excellence for Podcast-Series-Government.

DECAL Download is available on all major podcast platforms including Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, TuneIn Radio, iHeartRadio, Overcast, Podbean, Pocket Casts, and others. A new episode is posted every Wednesday.

More than 130 episodes of DECAL Download have now been recorded and are archived on each podcast platform with links also available on POLAR and here in Decidedly DECAL. To give your feedback or suggest future topics and guests, please e-mail decaldownload@dec.al.ga.gov.

***Supporting and guiding
the mission and vision
of Bright from the Start:***

Board of Early Care and Learning

VACANT

First Congressional District

Susan Harper, Albany
Second Congressional District
(Chair)

Kathy Howell, Carrollton
Third Congressional District
(Secretary)

Phil Davis, Stone Mountain
Fourth Congressional District

(Vice Chair)

Kristy Beam, Ed.D, Atlanta
Fifth Congressional District

VACANT

Sixth Congressional District

Kristin Morrissey, Cumming
Seventh Congressional District

Luann Purcell, Ed.D.,
Warner Robins
Eighth Congressional District

Cristina Washell, Ed.D.,
Cleveland
Ninth Congressional District

Theresa Magpuri-Lavell, Ed.D.,
Milledgeville
Tenth Congressional District

Jen Bennecke, Atlanta
Eleventh Congressional District

VACANT

Twelfth Congressional District

Melissa Boekhaus, M.D.,
Smyrna Thirteenth
Congressional District

Debra Brock, Calhoun
Fourteenth Congressional
District

**Sign up for DECAL
text messages by
texting DECAL to
474747**

TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL

VIRTUAL MEETINGS EVERY TUESDAY AT 12:05 PM

COME JOIN OUR CAPITOL HILL TOASTMASTERS CLUB!

SEE WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT:

- Leadership Skills
- Personal Growth
- Improve Communication
- & more!

Interested? Contact:
gaby.garza@dec.al.ga.gov

Join the Capitol Hill Toastmasters Meeting virtually every Tuesday at 12:05 pm and see what it's all about. You will learn leadership skills, improve communication, gain personal growth, and more! If interested, contact Gaby Garza for more info at gaby.garza@dec.al.ga.gov.

Employee Suggestion Program



Visit the Virtual Suggestion Box now!



Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive SE, 754 East Tower,
Atlanta, GA 30334
404-656-5957



Georgia Dept of Early Care and Learning

BRIGHT FROM THE START

[Contact Us](#)



DECAL | 2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, Atlanta, GA 30334

[Unsubscribe {recipient's email}](#).

[Update Profile](#) | [About our service provider](#)

Sent by reg.griffin@decals.ga.gov powered by



Try email marketing for free today!