

# Decidedly DECAL

*Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are*



## DECAL By the Numbers

- 4,420** - Licensed child care programs in Georgia
- 2,900** - Star-rated Quality Rated child care programs in Georgia
- 4,618** - Students participating in 2023 Summer Transition Program
- 70,000** - Families served currently by CAPS (17% of new applicants are student-parents)
- 275** - Applications received for EXPAND Grants
- 262** - Episodes recorded of DECAL Download since September 2018
- 25,073** - Facebook followers
- 8** - US states with agencies dedicated to early childhood education and care

## Follow DECAL on Social Media



## Commissioner's Corner

*by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs*



Dear DECAL Co-workers,

*(Before I say what I want to say, I have an **IMPORTANT** announcement: Save **Wednesday, Nov. 8** for our first in-person **All Staff Meeting** since the pandemic. The event will be held at the Cobb Galleria Centre; the theme is "The Band's Back Together." More details to come.)*

Last weekend I did something I RARELY do...I sat in front of the TV, remote control in hand, and surfed programming. Normally, between my work at DECAL; shuttling children from one activity to another; and maintaining our household, I have little time for TV. (I'm sure I'm not the only DECAL employee whose life looks like mine!!!)

During the short time I surfed the channels, I saw the following:

- Tennis players at Wimbledon...
- Presidential candidates politicking...
- Scores of presenters hawking various products...gutter covers, insurance policies, cars, cruises, Rolex watches...
- News anchors reporting on mass shootings, unrest in Israel, floods, droughts, oppressive heat...

While watching, it occurred to me that these people on TV had something in common. They were all doing things that really **MATTERED** to them: Winning Wimbledon; garnering support for an election; selling products; relaying information of interest to the public.



**New Episodes  
Every Wednesday**

And then I thought about my life in context of what MATTERS to me. Keeping our household running as efficiently as possible MATTERS; meeting the needs of my children MATTERS; doing what I do at DECAL MATTERS. None of my responsibilities is more important than the others; they are equally important to me, and I just need to try to keep these roles balanced.

As the summer ends and your responsibilities at DECAL and at home shift and increase, I assure you that what you are doing professionally and personally MATTERS. And as I've done many times before, I encourage you to maintain a healthy work life balance. What you do at home MATTERS and what you do at work equally MATTERS...to me and to thousands of children and families in our state.

Thank you for all your efforts as we start a new school year and continue serving Georgia's youngest citizens and their families.



## **Expanding Georgia's Child Care to Nontraditional Hours**

School bells are ringing for the state's youngest learners as Georgia's Pre-K Program begins the new school year. The first day of Georgia's Pre-K Program will vary based on school system and child care provider. It started as early as July 27 in Taliaferro County and will start as late as September 5 in Murray and Wheeler counties. Most Georgia school systems begin classes during the first two weeks of August.

Enrollment in Georgia's Pre-K Program has continued to grow since 2020, but has not reached pre-pandemic levels of over 80,000 students. Last year, more than 70,000 four year olds attended Georgia's Pre-K Program. Since 1995, the program has served more than a

The pandemic showed us more clearly than ever that high-quality child care and early education plays an integral role in our state's economic development and workforce. Child care workers or as we prefer to call them, early education teachers, are the most vital part of any classroom. We recognized and rewarded these essential teachers by allocating more than \$100 million in one-time bonuses for them. Our next step is to reduce barriers and provide financial assistance to help early education teachers obtain a professional credential or degree and remain in the early education classroom.

Through extensive engagement with families, child care providers, and other stakeholders, DECAL has learned that many families have child care needs during nontraditional hours (i.e., evenings, overnight, early mornings, weekends, and variable shift schedules) that are not currently being met by available child care. Traditional child care is considered Monday through Friday, 6:00 AM to 6:30 PM.

To address this need, DECAL is offering new EXPAND grants (**Expanding Parents' Access to Nontraditional Delivery**) funded by the American Rescue Plan Act. EXPAND grants align with many of the goals in our DECAL Strategic Plan, including *Expand*

program has served more than 2 million students.

## **DECAL Communications Announces Promotion and Addition**



**Jerry Brown**, Communications Specialist for DECAL since June 2020, has been promoted to Communications Manager, effective July 16, 2023. Jerry joined DECAL during the pandemic and has done excellent work in video, graphics, and podcast productions. He works with Chief Communications Officer Reg Griffin. Jerry is an Emmy Award winning video journalist with 15 years of experience around newsrooms and professional sports franchises, covering breaking news, as well as the NBA playoffs, Stanley Cup Finals, and NBA All-Star games.

Most recently Jerry worked with NBC Sports Washington and prior to that with NBC 12 News in Richmond, Virginia. He holds a Broadcast Journalism Degree from Virginia Commonwealth.

Jerry and his wife Liz and their two children, Austin (7) and Mikayla (3), live in Winston. Liz is Assistant Director of Communications for the Georgia

many of the goals in our DECAL Strategic Plan, including *Expand Two Generation (2Gen) approaches to better support children and families* and *Enhance the use of technology and data to better support our shareholders*.

Three types of grants will be offered: one for licensed child care providers to expand their operating hours; a second for businesses to support their staff working nontraditional hours; and the third for government entities and nonprofit organizations to form a collaborative to address this challenge in their local community.

Funding can be used for a wide range of needs. The grants for child care providers could be used for staff pay and benefits, child transportation costs, or necessary health and safety improvements to support extended hours of operation. Grants to for-profit businesses could be used for stipends to families for child care expenses, creating resources that can help match families to providers that meet their needs, and working with DECAL and other resources to increase licensed child care options in their area. Grants to non-profits and government agencies could help build collaborations with local businesses and child care providers for parents working nontraditional hours.

Grant amounts for child care providers range from \$50,000 to \$500,000 and for other businesses and organizations from \$100,000 to \$750,000. DECAL staff will be available to provide considerable support as grantees administer the funds.

The deadline for applications was July 17, 2023; finalists will be notified soon.

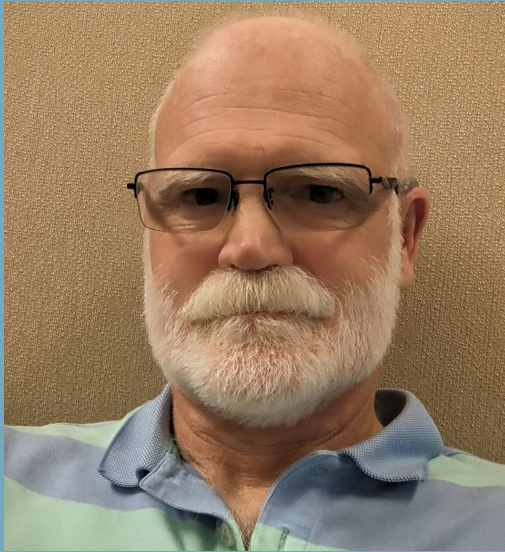
According to Dr. Bentley Ponder, Deputy Commissioner for Quality Initiatives and Partnerships, "DECAL is excited to support Georgia families and businesses through the EXPAND grants. For Georgia to have a strong workforce, families must have access to quality child care, especially in nontraditional hours. The high number of applications for EXPAND indicates the across the board need for high-quality child care options during hours other than the traditional work day.

## **Enhancing Support for Child Care Providers: Introducing DECAL's CAPS Provider Relations Division**

Child care providers play an essential role in the lives of our little ones, providing a nurturing environment that supports their growth and development. These dedicated professionals often face tremendous challenges, juggling multiple responsibilities while striving to deliver the best care possible. Recognizing the critical need for increased support, DECAL is introducing a new functional area within the Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS)

Department of Agriculture.

Congratulations Jerry on this well-deserved promotion.



**John Huston,** Communications Specialist for Quality Initiatives and Partnerships, is joining the DECAL Communications Team with Jerry and Reg, effective July 16, 2023. John joined DECAL in February 2022 to assist with marketing and outreach for Quality Rated. He is also a contributing writer for Airways Magazine.

John is a graduate of the University of Mount Union in Ohio and Kennesaw State University. He has extensive experience in event, educational, and international marketing. John spent 13 years with LOMA, a worldwide trade association providing research, development, and consulting services to the financial services industry. He was also a Business Development Graphic Artist with the law firm Alston & Byrd. John worked in graphics at Coke alongside North American Marketing Group and did projects for the Olympics, Women's World Cup, and American Idol.

Division, CAPS Provider Relations. CAPS Provider Relations will administer the provider management function of CAPS, work that has historically been accomplished by a contractor, Maximus.

CAPS Provider Relations will optimize the provider experience by coordinating the services of DECAL programs, innovating systems, and providing unparalleled customer support. CAPS Provider Relations will enhance the support provided to child care providers through four teams: Enrollment Services, Quality Assurance & Payments, Provider Support, and Education & Outreach.

#### **Enrollment Services:**

- Enroll new providers
- Complete annual renewal for providers
- Review rate requests
- Coordinate with the QIP Division on Quality Rated tier and status requests

#### **Provider Support:**

- Serve as first point of contact for all provider calls
- Support providers with billing, payment, and scholarship issues
- Connect providers with resources to resolve issues

#### **Quality Assurance & Payments**

- Receive and review provider invoices
- Ensure payments are timely
- Oversee and complete quality assurance processes to support accurate payments

#### **Education & Outreach**

- Conduct outreach to providers to promote CAPS participation
- Conduct provider orientations and ongoing training
- Conduct technical assistance to enhance provider success

CAPS Provider Relations is also developing a user-friendly system that will enhance the CAPS provider experience by automating forms and processes related to enrollment and payment requests. The transition of the work to CAPS Provider Relations and the system implementation is slated for fall 2023.

Until the transition, Maximus is still the primary point of contact for providers. Providers can contact Maximus by calling 1.877.755.6522 or emailing [MAXIMUSContactCenter@maximus.com](mailto:MAXIMUSContactCenter@maximus.com). Provider questions regarding the upcoming transition should be directed to [CAPSProviderSupport@decals.ga.gov](mailto:CAPSProviderSupport@decals.ga.gov).

Creating the CAPS Provider Relations unit marks a significant milestone in DECAL's ongoing commitment to supporting child care providers. Stay tuned for further updates as we transition to the CAPS Provider Relations unit.



John and his wife Beth have two children, Grace (19) and Joe (14), along with Bella the Wonder Cat. Please join us in welcoming John to the DECAL Communications Team.



Quality Assurance and Payments



Provider Support

## Happy Helpings Events promote Summer Meals in Georgia

Throughout the summer, the Nutrition Services Division partnered with several Happy Helpings, Georgia's Summer Food Service Program sponsors, to host events promoting summer meals in Georgia.

In June, events were coordinated with Rabun County Family Connection and Bryan County Board of Commissioners to officially kick-off the summer meals season. In July, Bread of Life Development Ministries hosted a spike event to remind families that summer meals are available until school starts.

“Happy Helpings, Georgia’s Summer Food Service Program, is crucial to a child’s growth and development during the summer. Combining both nutritious meals with physical activities ensures children are ready to learn when they return to school,” said Tamika Boone, Director of Nutrition Services.

All the summer events provided free nutritious meals to children 18 and under along with activities such as hopscotch, egg relays, hula hoops, and bean bag toss to help keep them active and healthy. In addition to the meals, thirst was quenched at a

hydration station that offered



Kay Mayfield, Director

*Meet the CAPS Provider Relations Leadership Team!*



Education and Outreach



Enrollment Services

## Birth to Eight Focus of DECAL Informational Meeting

DECAL held an informational meeting with members of the Birth to Eight Team in Valdosta on Monday, July 17, 2023 at Valdosta State University’s Education and Human Services Building. Members of DECAL’s Community Partnerships and Projects and the Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program participated. The period from birth to age eight is critical for a child’s health, development, and learning. DECAL and child care advocates across Georgia focus on advancing research, policy, and advocacy that will strengthen the development of children during those early years. As part of the meeting, the group visited three local child care programs: Bright Horizons Preschool, Bright Start Preschool 1, and Tender Years Learning Center 8.

several flavors of fruit and herb infused water. Local fruits and vegetables were also on-hand for taste testing.

The kick-off event in Bryan County was held in conjunction with Farm to Summer Week. This week promotes awareness of the many opportunities that summer brings to serve fresh, local foods and hands-on agriculture activities that help children develop healthy habits.

Happy Helpings will wrap up when school starts back in August.



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



## **Cultural Spotlight: Reflections in Leadership**



On a Wednesday morning last May, Radha Datla, DECAL's Chief Information Security and Technology Officer, was making a presentation to more than 50 agency directors, managers, and others in the Oak Conference Room. All the participants sat silent...eyes closed...breathing deeply.

But this wasn't the result of a bad presentation. Radha was simply sharing his love of meditation with the group, encouraging them to focus their attention on heart and eliminate the stream of jumbled thoughts that may be crowding their minds and causing stress. He believes this simple process, practiced for at least a half-hour daily, may result in enhanced physical and emotional well-being.

Radha joined DECAL in 2020, recruited from the private sector... including Change Healthcare, McKesson, SAP, IBM, and Newell

Brands...by Chief Information Officer Dennis Brice. Originally from Banatla in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, Radha, his

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born Dapata in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, Radha, his wife, Lakshmi, and children Prasanthi and Chethan, have lived in Atlanta (Alpharetta area) since 1999. He earned bachelor's degrees in mechanical engineering from Karnataka University in India and an MBA in Finance and Healthcare from Emory University's Goizueta School of Business. He also holds a Juris Master (JM) in law from Emory Law School in Atlanta.

So how does someone so immersed in cloud infrastructure, contact centers, and application rationalization and modernization become involved in helping people achieve relaxation and stress reduction? Radha says as a child he was always curious and anxious about everything on earth and where he fit in. This became a lifetime journey of self-introspection. Radha says he tried partying and gaming as an adult, but the happiness was only momentary. That's when he found a YouTube video called, "How to Gain a Higher Consciousness" which included an introduction to meditation. "I found the purpose of my life is to make an impact," he explains. "The best service I can ever give to another person is helping them find peace of mind."

Dennis has known Radha for more than ten years and witnessed first-hand his lifetime commitment to helping others. "He spends his night and weekends helping others through difficult times," Dennis explained. "While most see him as a technology leader, I see him beyond that. He really wants to use his role to help the families and children of Georgia while improving the tools used by DECAL staff to do just that."

Radha believes in its 20 years of existence, DECAL has made an "outstanding impact to our providers, families, and the children of Georgia." But he challenges leadership to take the agency to the next level...gold to platinum.

"Everything that we do has a tremendous impact overall and creates huge responsibility and accountability for every employee and leader of this agency," Radha explains. "The leaders must set a vision with goals at the forefront and create an environment to promote the right culture by serving employees and making them successful. They also need to know their employees, really know them...not just through surveys...but one-on-one."

Radha prides himself on being a good listener and says his favorite quote is: "You don't work for me, but I work for you." For more information on meditation and relieving stress in your daily life, contact Radha or visit [www.heartfulness.org](http://www.heartfulness.org).

## Finalists Named for Georgia's Pre-K Program Teachers of the Year 2023-2024

DECAL has announced the six finalists for 2023-2024 Georgia's Pre-K Program Teachers of the Year representing high quality early childhood education programs in LaGrange, Conyers,

## Employee Suggestion Program



**Visit the Virtual Suggestion Box now!**

Cussetta, Hoschton, Decatur, and Atlanta. The 2023-2024 finalists are Kerri Metcalf from Hollis Hand Elementary in Troup County, Kimberly Tomlinson from Barksdale Elementary in Rockdale County, Charlotte Richards from Chattahoochee County Pre-K in Chattahoochee County, Shereka Jenkins from St. John Child Development Center in Fulton County, Merodie Brown from New Odyssey for Children in Gwinnett County, and Robin Davis from The Sunshine House #63 in DeKalb County.

Each finalist received a \$500 cash prize from the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning after their applications were reviewed and scored by a panel of impartial judges. Next the six finalists will each receive a classroom observation this fall, submit a small group video to be scored by outside judges, and face a panel for a personal interview. In September, DECAL will select a winner from a local public school system and a winner from a private child care center. They will receive a \$3,000 check for themselves, \$2,000 for a classroom makeover and supplies, and funds to cover out of the classroom costs while the teacher is away

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

## Faces of DECAL

*DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Amy Hill, Angela Sisco, Chondra Bolton, Farouk Baksh, and Julie Edwards.*



**Charlotte Richards**  
Chattahoochee County Pre-K



**Merodie Brown**  
New Odyssey for Children



**Kerri Metcalf**  
Hollis Hand Elementary



**Robin Davis**  
The Sunshine House #63



**Kimberly Tomlinson**  
Barksdale Elementary



**Shereka Jenkins**  
St. John Child Development Center



## 2024 State Holidays

The following is a list of state holidays when the Capitol and state agencies will be closed in 2024.

New Year's Day	Monday, January 1
Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday	Monday, January 15



Washington's Birthday	February 19 – Observed on Tuesday, December 24
State Holiday	Observed on Good Friday, March 29
Memorial Day	Monday, May 27
Juneteenth	Wednesday, June 19
Independence Day	Thursday, July 4
Labor Day	Monday, September 2
Columbus Day	Monday, October 14
Veterans Day	Monday, November 11
Thanksgiving Day	Thursday, November 28
State Holiday	Observed on Friday, November 29
Christmas Day	Wednesday, December 25

## Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

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[Contact Us](#)



**Georgia Dept  
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**BRIGHT FROM THE START**

