

# Decidedly DECAL

*Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are*



## DECAL By the Numbers

**66,155** - Applications for CAPS scholarships received in Fiscal Year 2025  
**4,286** - Licensed child care programs in Georgia  
**2,937** - Quality Rated child care programs in Georgia  
**69** - Rising Pre-K classes in the Summer Transition Program  
**327** - Rising Kindergarten classes in the Summer Transition Program  
**212,125** - Registrants in the Georgia Professional Development System  
**933** - Happy Helpings summer food sites  
**1,180** - People completing the new OLLI training *Introduction to Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health*  
**1,423** - Children in 33 counties viewing the 2025 Children's Mental Health Week Puppet Show  
**38,148** - Weekly views of [dec.al.ga.gov](http://dec.al.ga.gov)  
**1,679** - Questions to AskCALi Chatbot (June 27-July 8)

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## Commissioner's Corner by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs

Dear Fellow DECALers,

I recently took some time off, but as you'll probably relate to, I couldn't help but occasionally think about our work. As we approach the beginning of the 2025-2026 school year, I thought about the **thousands of children** across our state who will **start "school"** in the next few weeks...an exciting, memorable time for young students, their families, and their teachers.

I remembered when my children started school: Charlie (now 16) was a little apprehensive about his first day; Laine (now 12) was eager to get started. Their dad and I were excited for them to get started even if there were a few tears. If you are a parent, I KNOW you remember when your child went off to school for the first time.

Educator Dr. Harry Wong said, *"The most important day of a person's education is the first day of school, not graduation day."* Millennia before Dr. Wong, Plato wrote, *"The beginning is the most important part of the work."* And not surprisingly, Dr. Seuss said the following to young learners beginning their academic journeys: *"You're off to great places! Today is your day. Your mountain is waiting. So...get on your way!"*

What an honor...and a solemn responsibility...we have as we oversee the physical and academic environments into which Georgia's youngest learners will enter in the coming weeks; as we assure families that their children will be kept safe and healthy while they learn; and as we support the early care and education providers who will be caring for this enthusiastic, fresh class of Georgia's next generation.

I continue to feel honored to work with you in impacting the future of children and their families and, by doing so, the future of our state and country. I hope this next school year will be one of the best ever for Georgia's learners from birth to age 5 and for DECAL.

Gratefully yours,





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ALONE IN A VEHICLE

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## Happy Helpings Fills the Hunger Gap During the Summer

The first day of school is just around the corner for students in Georgia, which means the summer meals season is ending.

During the summer, many children lose critical access to meals when school is out. To fill this gap, Happy Helpings, Georgia's Summer Food Service Program, ensures children 18 and under have the nutrition they

need. Approved sponsoring organizations operate summer meal sites providing free nutritious meals and snacks.

At an **open site**, kids and teens visit a location in their community, typically at a school, park, or neighborhood gathering place. During the scheduled meal time (in many cases breakfast and lunch), kids receive free nutritious meals or snacks. Identification and proof of income are not required. **Closed**

## Third Cohort of the Georgia 2Gen Academy Graduates

The third cohort of the Georgia 2Gen Academy graduated in early June marking another milestone in the state's commitment to fostering holistic support for children and families.

This year's distinguished graduates include DECALers Quandra Obi, Bridget Ratajczak, Amanda Tarpley, and Jill Taylor.

"Participating in the 2Gen Academy has been an invaluable experience," said Taylor, DECAL's Director of Community Partnerships and 2Gen Outreach. "It's given me an invaluable opportunity to connect with other state and community leaders who are equally committed to supporting children and families."

CAPS Provider Relations Director, Amanda Tarpley, also has high praise. "Participating transformed the way I lead—teaching me to design systems with empathy, center the voices of those we serve, and approach every challenge through the lens of the whole family. True impact begins when we see people, not just problems."

Participants engaged in a dynamic curriculum that addressed the multifaceted needs of families across Georgia. They collaborated on projects that emphasized the importance of integrating services, breaking down barriers, and fostering equity.

Taylor said her capstone project, *From Feedback to Action: Growing Rural Support Networks Across Georgia*, was a particularly rewarding experience. "It's given me the chance to collaborate with an amazing team dedicated to listening to community partners and gathering meaningful feedback about their experiences with Georgia Gateway."

Bridget Ratajczak, Child and Family Development Supervisor, Practice and Support Services, said, "The 2GEN Academy and the capstone project helped me to better understand and be able to express to others the "WHY" of my work. I've always known that family voice is important, but through the academy and capstone project I've been able to see what it truly means, how to do it in an authentic manner, and why it is critical to our work supporting young children and their families."

Quandra Obi, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, also commented on her experience. "Participating in the 2Gen Academy was a true honor. I had the opportunity to learn from statewide leaders and experts about a range of 2Gen strategies. My greatest takeaway: 2Gen is, primarily, a mindset—one rooted in creating opportunities for children and their families to thrive together, both educationally and economically."

"Each of us has a role to play in advancing intergenerational prosperity," Obi continued. "By adopting this mindset, we can more intentionally embed it into the systems, policies, and practices that shape our work and impact."

The brainchild of DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs, the Georgia 2Gen Academy became possible when Georgia was selected as one of five states to receive the Parents and Children Thriving Together (PACTT) grant, which laid the groundwork for the state's two-generation (2Gen) approach to delivering services.



enrolled sites operate similarly, but the site serves meals only to enrolled children rather than the general public.

To help promote the availability of summer meals, Nutrition Services coordinated two kick-off events and a spike event. The kick-off events were held in Jesup in partnership with America's Second Harvest of Coastal Georgia and in Decatur with DeKalb County Recreation Department. The spike event, designed to spike attendance in July, was held in Blue Ridge with the Fannin County Recreation Department.

During these events, the kids received their meal, taste-tested local fruit and vegetables, stayed hydrated with a hydration station, and participated in physical activities to encourage movement.

In a few months, Nutrition Services will begin recruiting non-profit organizations interested in applying to become a sponsor for summer 2026. The first step is to complete the online form on the [Happy Helpings Website](#).

For more information about Happy Helpings, contact [Cindy.kicklighter@dec.al.ga.gov](mailto:Cindy.kicklighter@dec.al.ga.gov) or [Joann.Kilpatrick@dec.al.ga.gov](mailto:Joann.Kilpatrick@dec.al.ga.gov).



Happy  
Helpings

The 2025 cohort was composed of 27 participants representing 18 agencies, each bringing unique perspectives to the program. Through intensive training, collaborative learning, and strategic planning, participants gained the tools and insights needed to drive transformative changes in their respective fields.

## Introducing the QR Family Support Call Center!

DECAL now offers even more help to families looking for Quality Rated child care!

The Quality Rated Family Support Call Center is DECAL's response to the ever-present need to provide more integrated customer service to Georgia families. The 1-877-ALL-GA-KIDS child care search and referral service has been funded by DECAL for years but was implemented by a contractor. The referral service is now completely operated by DECAL with staff members from the Quality Innovations and Partnerships Division. The new QR Family Support Call Center Team is managed by Katrina Bernard and consists of Lead Specialist Anna Buchmann, and Referral Specialists Alejandra Emmanuelli, Briana Garcia, and Briana Thomas.

The referral specialists began answering calls on July 1. Their job: to promote the benefits of high quality child care, refer callers to Quality Rated providers, and help with the child care program enrollment process.

Also, a new service is to connect families to other DECAL colleagues who can help them access additional information and supports from DECAL. The QR Family Call Center's services are available in English, Spanish, and other languages.

"We created the QR Family Support Call Center to give families more comprehensive and streamlined help with their questions regarding child care," said Commissioner Amy Jacobs. "In addition to referrals to Quality Rated providers and enrollment help, families have access to all of DECAL's programs and supports at their fingertips, just by contacting our center specialists."

"Our goal is to make the Quality Rated child care search, the referral process, and access to DECAL services easier than ever for Georgia families," said Bentley Ponder, Deputy Commissioner of Quality Innovations and Partnerships. "With so many points of contact, we hope even more families will use the Call Center's services."

The call center operates during regular business hours, Monday–Friday, 8 a.m.–5 p.m., except state holidays. Families can also contact the Call Center team by email at [findqrcare@dec.al.ga.gov](mailto:findqrcare@dec.al.ga.gov), or by using the online child care search tool at <https://families.dec.al.ga.gov> and submitting a request for personalized help.



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*Call Center staff pictured above (L-R) are Anna Buchmann, lead specialist; Briana Thomas, referral specialist; Katrina Bernard, manager; Alejandra Emmanuelli, referral specialist; and Briana Garcia, referral specialist*

## **Meet the QR Family Support Call Center Staff**

### **Katrina Bernard, Manager**

For the past 10 years Katrina has worked in operations management with a focus on streamlining processes and improving efficiency. "I enjoy creating structure that helps teams deliver excellent customer service," she says. "I'm excited to be part of DECAL and to support families in finding high-quality early care and education options." Outside the office, she enjoys working out at the gym and making the most of sunny days at the beach.

### **Anna Buchmann, Lead Specialist**

Anna is a proud graduate of Mount St. Mary's University in Los Angeles.

She has dedicated the past 19 years to supporting families in their search for quality child care in the non-profit sector. "I began my career as a Bilingual Referral Specialist and steadily advanced through the roles of Call Center Manager, Assistant Director, and Director of Parent Services," she says. "I am passionate about empowering families with information and resources to help make high-quality child care accessible to all." When not advocating for children and families, one of Anna's favorite pastimes is rocking out in the middle of a mosh pit at a concert!

### **Alejandra Emmanuelli, Referral Specialist**

Born and raised on the beautiful island of Puerto Rico, Alejandra moved to Georgia five years ago. "I'm an artist at heart," she told us. "I enjoy spending my free time painting, drawing, and exploring museums and antique malls. I'm excited to be part of this new call center team and look forward to helping families find the resources they need."

### **Briana Garcia, Referral Specialist**

A Georgia native, Briana enjoys practicing nail art and catching up on her favorite shows with her cat and her boyfriend. "It's been such a great experience being part of the Quality Rated Family Support Call Center, and I'm excited to keep helping parents across Georgia find Quality Rated child care."

### **Briana Thomas, Referral Specialist**

An intern for Laura Wagner in the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning from July 2023 to May 2024, Briana is an MBA candidate at Kennesaw State University. Outside of work, the New Orleans native enjoys spending time with friends and family. "It has been a pleasure to be



a part of the new Quality Rated Family Support Call Center operation,” she says. “I look forward to continuing to assist Georgia families in finding quality early childhood education!”

## Employee Suggestion Program

ideas?

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474747**

## Faces of DECAL

*DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) Tangela Tate, Aparna Sikha, Frank Asiedu, Jennifer Alex, and JoAnna Browning.*



## Advisory Councils Kick Off with Powerful Conversations and Shared Vision

The CAPS Provider and Family Advisory Councils have officially launched, and their first meetings successfully resulted in what CAPS leaders hoped: honest dialogue, shared experiences, and a collective commitment to improving the CAPS program.

In May and June, members from across Georgia gathered for the inaugural meetings of the two councils. These sessions marked the beginning of a new chapter in CAPS' commitment to listening, learning, and evolving alongside the families and providers it serves.

### Provider Voices: Collaboration in Action

The Provider Advisory Council focused on the operational side of CAPS: what's working, what's not, and where clarity and consistency are most needed. Providers shared stories of navigating policies, managing paperwork, and supporting families through the process. Feedback from the meeting was positive, with many comments echoing the following sentiment, *"It was a great experience to be in partnership with BFTS, working together for the betterment of the children of Georgia."*

### Family Perspectives: Real Experiences, Real Impact

Meanwhile, the Family Advisory Council shed light on the lived experiences of parents and caregivers. From application hurdles to communication gaps, members offered candid feedback and practical suggestions for making CAPS more accessible and family friendly. One council member expressed, *"I loved how collaborative the meeting was and how willing everyone was to contribute and be involved in the meeting."*

One common thread across both councils: a desire for clearer communication, simplified processes, and stronger relationships between CAPS and the communities it serves.

### Looking Ahead: Building on Momentum

These early conversations are already shaping internal discussions and informing future improvements. Council members will continue to meet throughout the year, building on this momentum and diving deeper into specific topics.

Deputy Commissioner for Federal Programs, Elisabetta Kasfir, shared her thoughts on the direction of future meetings: *"My hope is that everyone leaves the meetings feeling heard and that their comments were valued and taken seriously."*

### What's Next?

In the coming months, council members will help prioritize key areas for improvement and begin developing recommendations. We'll share highlights, stories, and updates as their work continues.

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