

Decidedly DECAL

Highlighting the Events That Shape Who We Are



State Employee Recognition Week Is May 3-9

State Employee Recognition Week is May 3-9, 2020, and State Employees Appreciation Day is May 6. This is a special time to recognize and show appreciation for state employees' dedication and service to Georgians. Thanks for all that you do!



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Second Quarter 2020 - In This Issue

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Commissioner's Corner

by Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs



Dear Fellow DECAL Staff,

With less commuting, fewer physical meetings, fewer phone calls, not going to the office where I see so many of you day in and day out, I've had more time to think about DECAL - not the organization, but about us, the people, the team who actually constitute DECAL and make it the incredible organization that effectively serves Georgia's children, families, and early care and education industry.

I miss you. I miss the connections, the relationships that make us who we are and make DECAL the department it is. This virus-induced distancing is making me appreciate each of you in ways I never imagined, and I look forward to the day when we all can safely return to our offices, to our work, and to the daily personal, face-to-face interactions that energize and encourage us.

Thank you for your resilience and commitment to the children and providers you serve...and to DECAL...during these days.

Thank you for faithfully *walking the tightrope* as you balance your DECAL job AND the other work you've had to do at home...teaching your children, entertaining your families, keeping them and yourself safe.

I thank your family members for their patience and support as your kitchen, living room, den, etc. has become your office and their class room, gym, home theater, etc.

Thank you for not just performing your duties...but as far as I can tell and from what I've heard from your leaders...for doing your jobs SUCCESSFULLY and COMPETENTLY...as much as possible during conditions that are less than optimal.

Thank you for inspiring me to keep going against difficult odds.

I believe that families, organizations, and state agencies can emerge from challenging times closer, stronger, and more confident than ever. I hope that will be the case with your family, with DECAL, with Georgia, and with our country. I believe it will.

With immeasurable appreciation and gratitude,

New Hire Orientation Goes Online During COVID-19

By Brianna Green

Now more than ever we are relying on technology to help us adapt during these unprecedented times. We never realized how much we rely on our daily social practices to get things done. In the mix of all of these changes DECAL staff has created a Virtual New Hire Orientation to help on board new employees. We got the scoop on this new program from HR Director Robin Stevens and HR Operations Supervisor Sabrina Henry, to give us some insight on how this all works.

By the Numbers

1,764 - Licensed Georgia child care currently open
2,505 - Licensed Georgia child care currently closed
348 - SFSP Emergency Feeding Sites during COVID-19
367,582 - SFSP Emergency Meals served in March
2,210 - Quality Rated child care programs
3,854 - Georgia's Pre-K Program classrooms
1,636 - Participants in April 29 COVID-19 Webinar 4 for child care providers

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On the next ...

DECAL
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New Episodes Every Wednesday!

This Week's Guests



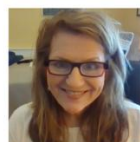
Faith Duncan
Director of Pre-K
Field Operations



Allison Morrison
Pre-K Specialist



Devon Porter
Pre-K Specialist



Jill Vandenbos
Pre-K Specialist

This Week's Topic : Georgia's Pre-K at Home

Federal Funds Available for Licensed Georgia Child Care Providers

Beginning May 1, 2020, all licensed Georgia child care providers are invited to apply for Short Term Assistance Benefit for Licensed Entities (STABLE) payments from DECAL. The STABLE program is the first phase DECAL will use to administer a total of \$144 million in federal funding Georgia received under the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs said STABLE payments may be used to pay for salaries and benefits for lead teachers, assistant teachers, and other employees; substitute teachers; tuition relief for families; lease or mortgage payments; utilities; cleaning supplies; classroom materials and supplies; unreimbursed food; and additional supplies required by CDC guidelines.

"We know that family child care learning homes and child care learning centers in Georgia are seriously hurting as a result of COVID-19," said Commissioner Jacobs. "We are developing a simple application that allows providers to describe how they will use the funds. The amount of providers' stabilization payments will be based on their attendance prior to COVID-19 and their open or closed status. This is only the first phase in administering a total of \$144 million in CARES funding received by Georgia."

Providers will apply for STABLE through May 15, 2020, using DECAL's KOALA portal for child care providers.

In addition, Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services, or CAPS

Things are pretty much business as usual here at DECAL - Robin and her team are still in the process of recruiting potential employees and finding creative ways to conduct one-on-one interviews.

"Our hiring managers have worked diligently to conduct interviews via phone, Skype, Facetime and Zoom to ensure that the recruitment process has continued in spite of the office closure and with respect to the prevalent statewide Shelter at Home order," Robin explained.

The team is taking advantage of all avenues of communication operating with scanned documents, phone calls, and emailing contacts. Another important piece of the hiring process is the background checks, which involved some help from our legal team.

"Our Legal team, specifically the Criminal Records Check unit, has continued to process background checks that are coordinated between HR staff and the selected candidates," Robin said. "Of course, with fewer fingerprinting sites available, sourcing those businesses that are open and convenient to our candidates throughout the state has been challenging, but in some instances, mobile units have been identified which proved to be a successful alternative to the traditional UPS storefront."

Of course, we cannot forget to mention our amazing IT team that has been here to help us all during this transitional time. Not only have they been here to help all employees in working remotely, but also working with HR on virtual orientation. "Our IT staff also worked with HR to ensure that the residential connectivity of each hire was tested and that our delivery of the Skype meeting was both rehearsed in advance and satisfactorily executed once we went live," said Sabrina Henry, HR Operations Supervisor, who hosted the orientation.

According to Robin, the virtual orientation lasted two days just as the regular in-office format does and the IT portion of the orientation was handled in the beginning to mitigate any issues with laptops or mobile devices. The program was launched on April 16, 2020, with seven new hires participating. Sabrina handled the traditional HR portions of the program, as well as those portions typically presented by our Communications, Legal, and Finance representatives, who provided PowerPoint slides in advance.

We are all anxious to get back to the office and return to normal, but we are so grateful for all our DECAL staff for being able to adapt and do the best with what we have. Robin added, "We anticipate returning to the in-person delivery of the New Hire Orientation program, as we miss the connectivity and personal interaction that is traditionally experienced with our incoming employees. Though the virtual process was challenging to plan, innovative to conduct, rewarding to have successfully executed, and apparently well-received by our new hires, it's certainly not optimum given the absence of that human interaction and will, hopefully, be utilized on an exceptional basis."

Keeping Kids Fed in Georgia during COVID-19

By Cindy Kicklighter

When schools closed around Georgia in response to COVID-19, thousands of children who rely on free or reduced price meals at school were at risk of going hungry. Fortunately, 36 of DECAL's Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsoring organizations stepped in to provide free meals at more than 300 locations across the state. Their commitment ensures that kids 18 and under are getting the nutrition they need during the pandemic.

Sponsoring organizations were also granted flexibilities by the USDA to serve meals in creative ways making it easier for children and individuals with disabilities to get food during the national emergency.

In April, Burke County Schools served 15,000 meals per day, including breakfast, lunch and dinner, to children living in one of the largest rural counties in Georgia. They operated 34 different bus routes, covering 836 square miles and a grab-and-go meal site at one of the local schools.

Violas Gift Incorporated served more than 1,400 free meals each day including breakfast and lunch at six different emergency feeding meal sites in Fulton, Cobb, and Fayette Counties. Meals were also delivered in Valdosta by Valdosta City School bus drivers and volunteers through a partnership with Second Harvest of South Georgia. At one stop, the kids cheered as the bus arrived and notes of appreciation from the children were presented to the volunteers who distributed the food.

Families can find a current list of emergency feeding meal sites listed by county on the COVID-19 resource page located on dec.al.ga.gov, and the "Meals for Kids" interactive map which directs people to local sites where kids can get free meals is available in both English and Spanish at www.fns.usda.gov/meals4kids.



Program, continues to provide scholarships to help with the cost of child care so parents can work or attend school. DECAL recently added a new priority group to the CAPS program for Essential Services Workforce on the frontlines fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. Medical personnel, first responders, child care personnel, and others that meet eligibility criteria can get help finding open child care and apply for assistance paying for child care by visiting www.qualityrated.org.

"Emergency child care scholarships will be issued for three months and will be extended as long as the current state of emergency continues," said Elisabetta Kasfir, Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's CAPS Program. "This is a new priority group created by CAPS to support certain members of Georgia's workforce during this public health emergency."

"This support will help first responders and other essential workers pay for child care so they can help stop the spread of COVID-19 and support our communities with essential services," said DECAL Commissioner Amy M. Jacobs. "Families who qualify for the Essential Services Workforce Priority Group, and meet other CAPS eligibility requirements, will be eligible to receive child care subsidy for three months and potentially longer if the COVID-19 public health emergency continues."

Pandemic Praise: Executive Cabinet Says Thank You



Hey QIPers. Let me take this opportunity to let you know how grateful I am for each one of you and the work you do. I know how hard you are working to make sure that Georgia's children, families, and providers continue to have the support they need during this time of great uncertainty. I am continually amazed by myriad of things that we do in our division: Manage an Early

Head Start Grant, administer the fast growing Quality Rated, outreach to all DECAL regions, providers, and partners, and providing much needed data, research, and technical support.

Some of you know I use the phrase, "We do windows" to mean we QIPers pull together and do whatever it takes. A lot of windows have been getting done these past few weeks, and I'm proud of you. Many of you are shouldering more family responsibilities during this time. Some of you have health concerns for yourself or your loved ones. Some of you carried on as usual after a change in venue. Some of you are probably eager to resume site visits. However you're getting through this-as long as you're staying safe-it's all good. I believe we will emerge from this a stronger team.

Bentley Ponder

Deputy Commissioner, Quality Innovations and Partnerships



I want to send a special thank you out to my IT team for all the hard work that you have been doing. You have been working very hard for a year to move our applications to the cloud only be uprooted at the last minute with this pandemic.

But you all have been amazing. You have worked night and weekends to make sure everyone is able to work remote successfully and be productive.

With all the new regulations coming out daily you all have worked so diligently to help your coworkers, childcare providers, and parents and children of Georgia. I know they all appreciate what you are doing to help them keep their businesses going and to have a place to bring their children when this pandemic is over. Again, thanks to all the for being so productive at home and working behind the scenes to make it all happen.

Thanks,

Dennis Brice

Chief Information Officer

Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning Update

By Carrie Ashbee

While the days and months ahead may feel uncertain due to the public health crisis, the Georgia Foundation for Early Care + Learning has been inspired and heartened by the philanthropic funding it has received to support struggling child care providers and families in the essential workforce.



Carrie Ashbee

Recently, the Foundation received a \$250k grant from the United Way of Greater Atlanta in partnership with the Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta. On April 27, the Foundation launched the COVID-19 Relief and Recovery Fund Program and sent a grant application to every licensed child care provider in the 23-county Metro Atlanta area. It also intends to support families seeking CAPS scholarships through the new Essential Services Workforce Priority Group. The Foundation anticipates making investments to grantees mid-May and is aggressively seeking additional philanthropic funding to support providers statewide.

In addition to the COVID-19 grant funding, the Foundation was recently awarded \$225k by the Joseph B. Whitehead Foundation to support Quality Rated (QR). This funding will provide additional technical assistance to prepare providers as they aim to become QR. In order to assist hesitant providers and those needing additional supports to commit to the QR process, the funding will create a Critical Response Team that will work with the Case Management Team to identify the barriers for programs to become rated and provide the necessary critical response to ensure providers are able to earn a star rating. The Critical Response Team would work across CCR&R regions to align resources across all DECAL divisions. More information on the Critical Response Team will be forthcoming in the coming months.



DECAL produced a special edition of DECAL Download on April 16 to respond to questions about the public health emergency.



As I think about the CAPS Team, I have truly been impressed with their level of ingenuity, finding new ways to do their jobs, and their ability to be dynamic, overcoming the many challenges that have arisen. As many of them work from a kitchen table shared with children trying to complete online learning and, in some cases, a spouse also trying to work from home, I am truly in awe of all this team has been able to accomplish. They have not only adapted to new workstreams and changed processes, they have successfully completed the ongoing workload of CAPS. They have continued to advocate for the families we serve, and provide a high level of responsive customer service. It is a privilege to be able to work alongside such a fantastic team.

Elisabetta Kasfir
Deputy Commissioner for CAPS Program



I want to thank each and every member of the Legal Unit for going above and beyond during these difficult times. Your teamwork and sense of mission has been an inspiration to me and to the whole department. You have given stellar support and advice to the department in matters that are new and unique to all of us. You have successfully found ways to keep critical functions of the department up and running without a hitch. I am proud to have each and everyone of you on the team and look forward to a time when we get back to the friendly confines of the 5th floor West Tower.

Ira Sudman
Chief Legal Officer



Maybe one of the most amazing things to come out of COVID-19 is the flexibility of the DECAL team under the most challenging of circumstances. When this situation began to take a turn for the worse back in March, you simply packed up your laptops, relocated to home offices, and kept working! When schools were closed and Pre-K shut down for the rest of the year, you shifted your efforts to continue online learning and posted amazing resources for families like Georgia's Pre-K At Home, Toddler Time At Home, and "Chat About Children." Behind the scenes, our IT team worked tirelessly to keep up with your ideas and make them available virtually on our website. My team kept posting to social media, and we saw a significant increase in LIKES, SHARES, followers, and podcast listeners. Thanks for everything you're doing and for proving once again how DECAL is simply the best!

Reg Griffin
Chief Communications Officer



CCS Team,

You are rock stars! During this crazy time, when there are a million distractions (homeschooling, keeping up with elderly relatives, finding toilet paper) as well as health concerns, you haven't missed a beat. You're on the front lines answering questions, finding information, giving guidance to literally thousands of child care providers and families. And for those of you who have made onsite visits, you're our heroes. You understand that no matter what is happening in the rest of the world, we have to make sure that children are safe, because for a family, their child is the whole world.

CCS is the foundation of the agency, and I'm so impressed with your dedication and your innovation. You're finding new ways to support providers while at the same time finding new ways to keep children healthy and safe. You're also taking care of each other through phone calls, zoom meetings, inspirational quotes, and funny memes. That's what makes us such a great team. Thank you, thank you, thank you for all you do!



The IT team equipped CAPS employees to work from home during COVID-19.



Zoom and Skype meetings have become part of our new normal at DECAL.

Take care of yourselves. Stay strong. Stay safe.
Pam Stevens
Deputy Commissioner for Child Care Services



I wanted to take a moment to thank each and every one of you for the adaptability and creativity you have shown during this difficult time. Each unit (Nutrition Services, HR, Finance, Audits and Compliance, Government Relations and Project Management) has truly gone above and beyond to find efficient and effective ways to serve their customers (whether internal or external) while remaining productive working remotely.

It really has been an honor and a pleasure watching all of you keep these different areas of the Department up and running without a hitch and adapting to this "new normal." I am proud to be able to work alongside all of you and look forward to being back in the office (hopefully soon) so I can see all of you again. Thanks for all you do!
Rian Ringsrud
Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration



I am always proud to call you my colleagues... and this difficult time has been no exception. It is a honor to work with professionals who have such an amazing drive and commitment to their work. Even in the face of incredible change and uncertainty, you have remained focused on the needs of children, families, teachers and early learning providers. You ensured that there were no gaps in support or service. Grant payments were made on time (even early!); and applications and invoices were processed. Calls and mail (both electronic and snail) were answered. Not surprisingly, you have also seen the opportunity in this time... and have been innovative and collaborative. Creating new resources including Toddler Time, Georgia Pre-K @ Home, and Chatting about Children. You have quickly turned face-to-face trainings to virtual trainings. You have learned to "ZOOM", "Skype" and "podcast" ... you have simply embraced the challenge and figured out a new way of working. You have continued to be the "gold standard" in state government... and have ensured that DECAL remains a great place to work even when the "place" has changed.

Thank you, thank you, thank you... and stay well.
Susan Adams
Deputy Commissioner for Georgia's Pre-K Program and Instructional Support

New Face of Child Care in Georgia



Powerful Pups



We will pull through
this together



Georgia Dept
of Early Care
and Learning

Employee Suggestion Program



**Visit the Virtual
Suggestion Box now!**

Let Us Hear
From You!



The Faces of DECAL

DECAL faces featured in the banner of this issue are (L-R) April Rogers, Aleah Slocum, Chris Linn, Donna Johnson, Kori Woodward-Dickens, Randy Hudgins, and Sonja Adams.

Board of Early Care and Learning

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