



# **2023 Community Child Protection Team**

## **Annual Report**

## Community Child Protection Team 2023 Annual Report

### Overview

The Community Child Protection Team (CCPT) is an interdisciplinary group of community representatives who meet regularly to promote a community-wide approach to the problem of child abuse and neglect (NCGS 7B-1406). CCPTs are North Carolina's response to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) requirement to have "citizen review panels." CAPTA charges citizen review panels with the responsibility to 1) review Child Protective Services (CPS) practices, policies, and procedures; 2) make public comment on the impact of CPS procedures and practices; and 3) recommend improvements to state and local CPS agencies.



Every county in NC has a local CCPT, many of which are merged with the local Child Fatality Prevention Team. The Chatham County CCPT and CFPT merged in 2018 and meet jointly every quarter on the first Friday of the month. The primary goals of

the meetings in 2023 were to review complex CPS cases and to work toward addressing the priority areas identified in the 2022 CCPT Annual Report. Any team member may recommend a case to be reviewed by CCPT, regardless of CPS involvement.

### Members

NCGS mandates that certain individuals serve on the CCPT. Additionally, the County Board of Commissioners has appointed five additional members to serve on the CCPT. The following individuals served on the Chatham CCPT in 2023 with double asterisks denoting the state-mandated members and single asterisks denoting members appointed by the Board of Commissioners:

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Jennie Kristiansen, Director, Chatham County Department of Social Services, Co-Chair of combined team**	Rodney West, Chatham County Sheriff's Office **
Michael Zelek, Director, Chatham County Public Health Department, Co-Chair of combined team**	Anne Chapman, Coordinator, Chatham County Child Victim Services*
Lynn, Kelly, Assistant District Attorney**	Shirille Lee, Communities in Schools Chatham County*
Marcella Trageser, Assistant District Attorney**	Deborah Flowers, UNC Beacon Program*
Tracy Fowler, Director of Student Services, Chatham County Schools**	Natasha Elliott, Central Piedmont Community Action Agency **
Thomas Droke, Chatham County Board of Social Services** (resigned in July 2023 and replaced by Memory Dossenbach)	Carissa Brown, Center Director, Daymark Recovery Services*
Nickie Siler, Guardian ad Litem Supervisor, Guardian ad Litem Program District 15-B**	Dr. Luke Smith, El Futuro*
Dr. Susan Pitts, Pediatrician, Piedmont Health, Moncure Health Clinic**	Marison Mondragon, Telamon Head Start**
Rebecca Madden, Chatham County Sheriff's Office**	Jenny Ritchea, First Health
Nicholas Victorino, Medical Examiner	Laura Sharpe, Vaya Health**
Theresa Buchanan, Vital Records Deputy Registrar/Processing Assistant, Chatham County Public Health Department	Caitlin Howison, CPS Supervisor, CCDSS
Alicia Doran, Public Health Social Worker, Chatham County Public Health Department	Cim Brailer, Deputy Director, CCDSS

## Demographics of Children and Families in Chatham County

Given the CCPT's charge to promote a community wide approach to child abuse and neglect, information is included on factors that affect the well-being of children and

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families including county demographics, child protection, and access to behavioral healthcare.

Chatham County is a large, rural county with an estimated population of nearly 80,000 residents (United States Census Bureau, 2022), representing 31,131 households.

Population estimates in 2022 found children under the age of 18 represented just under 19% of Chatham County residents. Race data for age demographics are updated with each census report. In 2020, white children represented the largest population at 55%, with Hispanic or Latino children at 25%, Black or African American and children identified as two more races each at 9%, while collectively American Indian and Asian and Pacific Islanders at nearly 2% (OSBM, 2020).

In the 2021 Chatham County Community Assessment, which was released in July 2022, three strategic priority areas were identified: mental health & substance use, transportation, and employment. The report noted concerning trends in youth mental health metrics, along with growing overdose rates across all ages, in prioritizing mental health and substance use. Issues with transportation were highlighted as a barrier to accessing needed services, and a shortage of local employment options affected economic resilience of residents (Chatham County, 2022).

Children are faring better in Chatham County with regard to poverty in 2022, according to US Census data. The median household income increased from \$76,791 in 2021 to \$84,222 in 2022. According to the Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates Program 2022 report, 11% of children in Chatham County live in poverty, a decrease from 16.7% in 2021. This represents a percentage decrease of 34% from 2021. (SAIPE, 2022).

Per the Massachusetts Institute of Technology “Living Wage Calculator” (2023), a household with two working adults with one child residing in Chatham County would need to gross at least \$84,887 annually for a livable wage, with each adult making at least \$20 per hour/40 hours per week before taxes to support the household.

Comparatively, a single working head of household with two children would need to gross at least \$98,411, just over \$47 per hour/40 hours per week.

## Status of Child Welfare in Chatham County

### *Child Protective Services*

In FY 23, Chatham County Child Protective Services accepted 312 reports for child abuse, neglect and/or dependency, representing 591 unique children, compared to 300 reports and 523 unique children reported in the 2022 CCPT report. Injurious environment allegations represented nearly 42% of reports, with domestic/family violence reflecting 16%. Substance use represented 12% of reports with improper supervision accounting for 9% of reports. Of note, the overall number of CPS reports

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accepted for abuse has almost tripled between FY21 and the end of calendar year 2023, increasing from 10.22% to 27.27%.

Seventeen children were born substance affected and referred for plans of safe care during the year, an increase from 13 during the previous fiscal year. (Datawarehouse; CWIS, 2023).

### *Foster Care*

During SFY 23, 128 children and young adults received foster care services in the county compared to 137 the prior year. Of the children receiving foster care services, 66% were classified as White. Black or African American children represented 27% and biracial children represented 6% of the foster care population. 11% of children in foster care were identified as having some Hispanic or Latino heritage.

51 children and young adults exited foster care during FY23:

- 17 were reunified with their parents,
- 13 were adopted,
- 7 were placed in guardianship with a relative or other court approved caretaker,
- 3 were placed in the custody of the non-removal parent,
- 2 were transferred to another agency,
- 1 was placed in the custody of a relative,
- 1 emancipated from care at age 18, and
- 7 exited out of the Foster Care 18-21 program, NC's extended foster care program.

### **2023 Community Child Protection Team Summary**

In 2023, the CCPT-CFPT met quarterly, with two meetings held virtually and two in-person meetings. The team reviewed eight active child welfare cases involving fourteen children. Seven families reviewed had children in foster care, and two families were able to utilize kin or relatives for placement (although one child had to be transitioned to a Therapeutic Foster Home due to behavior health needs). Children's behavioral health needs as well as parental substance use, domestic violence, and medical neglect were the primary reasons for removal of the children from the custody of their parents. There was one review that involved a "near fatality" of a child. Children who were reviewed needed ongoing mental health treatment, educational support, services for exposure to domestic violence, medical care, and language assistance. Parents also demonstrated many of the same needs, in addition to substance use treatment. Lack of engagement in substance use disorder and mental health treatment, trauma exposure (parents and children), barriers to stable employment, and criminal justice system involvement were complicating factors in the children being reunified with parents. Six of the eight families reviewed had a parent with current, serious justice involvement



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including domestic violence, drug trafficking, or assault. Several parents were incarcerated.

Top recommendations made for improving child welfare services and supporting local teams:

- Expand/fast track prevention services both for foster care prevention as well as broader child abuse and neglect efforts.
- Fast track solutions for children who are struggling with unmet mental health needs including children with violent/assaultive behaviors. Parents should not be reported to child protection because they cannot locate appropriate behavioral health treatment for their children, or they are afraid for the safety of their other children (or themselves). Emergency Departments should not be the holding place for these children/youth. Ensure that Medicaid standard plans are supporting families when these situations arise.
- Fund kinship support programming, specifically for kin who are caring for children with higher behavioral health needs so that they can remain with family.

In addition to case reviews, the team heard presentations and participated in discussions on the following topics:

- Chatham County Youth Risk Behavior Survey results (Rob Schooley)
- Driver Safety (Natalie O'Brien)
- Parents Bill of Rights (Tracy Fowler)
- CFPT refresher (Kerri Young)

## Successes in 2023

### *Medicaid Expansion*

NC expanded Medicaid during 2023, providing much needed healthcare insurance for Chatham County residents. It is anticipated that over 4,000 residents will be eligible for Medicaid coverage. Medicaid expansion will provide additional reimbursements to both physical and behavioral healthcare providers.

### *Equity*

Work on the *EMBRACe* project (Equity for Moms and Babies Realized Across Chatham) continued with the beginning of *Building our EMBRACe Village* gatherings, which focus on collective action to address birth disparities in the county. The goal of *EMBRACe* is to achieve equitable birth outcomes for women and infants in the county through system and service alignment across the grants' four partners: CCPHD, DSS, Chatham Hospital, and Piedmont Health Services. The initiative's development aligned with the

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return of labor and delivery services to Chatham Hospital, the first time these services have been available in the county for nearly 30 years. The Maternity Care Center, which faced uncertainty due to staffing challenges and low volume, has returned to 24/7 operations, leading to a significant increase in deliveries. Led by the Public Health Department, new and expanded wraparound services, including newborn-postpartum home visits, have been ramping up. In addition, the Public Health Department started offering childbirth classes to expecting parents in fall 2023, which include a tour of the Maternity Care Center at Chatham Hospital.

### ***Strong Fathers Program***

DSS launched the Strong Fathers program (previously provided by Pathways to Change), a virtual intervention program for men who have used violence in the home. The program recognizes that past experiences, particularly childhood experiences, shape behavior and focuses on creating a welcoming environment for participants. Classes provide an opportunity to explore participants' childhoods, learn about child development and the importance of safety, and practice new ways of partnering, parenting, and ending the cycle of violence. Strong Fathers is available to anyone in the community.

### ***Enhancing Family Time and Visitation***

Chatham County DSS has been working on a multi-year effort to enhance family time (visitation) as it is associated with higher rates of reunification and helps children and parents maintain connections. In 2023, a series of trainings were provided to child welfare social workers on improving the quality of time with parents and children through pre-planning, educating parents on the purposes of family time, and providing meaningful feedback.

### ***Building a Kinship First Strategy***

Senate Bill 20 authorized funding for relative-kinship placement payments, with the goal of improving outcomes and encouraging more relatives to provide care for children in foster care. Kinship families do not have to seek foster care licensure to receive funding. Locally, Chatham County has supported kinship families for almost 20 years by offering payments when kinship (both relative and fictive kin) families are pursuing licensure, and this additional funding will reduce the county cost burden for the program. An additional foster home licensing position was funded in October 2023 with the goal to sustain the increased supports for kinship families by assigning each kinship placement a social worker, as well as to provide supports to Spanish speaking kinship families.

### ***Opioid Settlement***

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Along with counties across the state and country, Chatham has started to receive funding through the Opioid Settlement Fund. For the last several years, the Sheriff's Prevention Partnership for Controlled Substances (SPPCS) has met to coordinate efforts to address substance use issues, including opioid overdose prevention. In 2023, the county leveraged this funding to hire a full-time Overdose Prevention Coordinator to oversee collective action. The SPPCS worked on a number of initiatives, including community education and distribution of naloxone. More than three times as many naloxone kits were distributed in 2023 compared to 2022, thanks in large part to this funding and added capacity.

### *Housing*

Chatham County continues to increase investments in housing services with the launch of the Emergency Housing Assistance Program in June 2023.

### *Car Seat Safety and Safe Kids Chatham*

The Public Health Department, along with several other local organizations, continues to offer car seat safety checks in both its Siler City and Pittsboro locations. In 2023, the Department served 148 people through the program. In addition, Safe Kids Chatham presented to the DSS Child Welfare program and provided gun locks for distribution at DSS and other agencies. Safe Kids has also provided medication lock boxes and additional tools to prevent injury.

## Opportunities for 2024

### *Expanded Community-Based Services*

Building off the successes of 2023, the Public Health Department aims to expand childbirth classes by offering classes in Spanish, a significant need particularly in Siler City. In addition, the SPPCS aims to expand naloxone distribution, including a leave-behind program for first responders responding to an overdose. Furthermore, the Public Health Department recently received grant funds to purchase a car seat demo chair, which will be used to expand car seat safety education to community members.

### *Family First Prevention Services Act (Updated)*

The Family First Prevention Services Act took effect in October 2021 and provides federal funding for evidenced based prevention services in exchange for a reduction in funding for children and youth in residential placements. This legislation represents a significant shift in the availability prevention programs for foster care. The first evidenced-based service, Homebuilders, will be implemented in Chatham County in



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spring 2024. This program will initially be offered to families receiving in-home services and then be expanded to Child Protective Services assessments later.

### ***Mobile Outreach Response Engagement Services (MORES)***

In collaboration with Vaya Health, Monarch opened a clinic location in Pittsboro to offer additional behavioral health services, including MORES, a four-week, intensive service for children ages 3-20 who are experiencing escalating behavioral health needs.

### ***Child Welfare Workforce Study***

During 2023, NC Division of Social Services conducted the first workforce study in almost 20 years as a part of the five-year Child and Family Services Plan, required by the Children's Bureau. The study evaluated the impacts of the changing child welfare landscape on the workforce and assessed the types of activities that social workers perform and the amount of time needed to manage their responsibilities.

Recommendations included aligning caseloads with workloads, increasing the percentage of time that social workers are in contact with children and families, enhancing supports for staff, and continuing work on growing career pipelines.

## **Conclusion**

While many of the same challenges continue to impact the well-being of children and families in Chatham County year after year, significant investments in health and behavioral health will start to roll out in 2024 into 2025. In addition to expanding Medicaid, the 2024 state budget included \$312 million in FY 24 and \$498 million in FY 25 for behavioral health reimbursement increases, expansion of services, and workforce support. Funding was also included for the creation of a State Office of Child Fatality Prevention which aims to maximize effectiveness, improve data collection through participation in a national data system used by 48 other states, and streamline reviews. It will take time before the effects of these investments are seen locally; however, Chatham County is well-positioned to take advantage of the opportunities. Members of the CCPT-CFPT remain dedicated to serving the community and the contributions of members have been important in achieving the successes described in this report.