



August 31, 2006

An Open Letter to Our Providers from Commissioner B.J. Walker, Georgia
Department of Human Resources (DHR)

One of the hardest jobs I have as Commissioner of DHR is managing communication, both inside and outside the agency. Anytime you are involved in making changes, communication gets more difficult and rumors abound. Sometimes the rumors are true and sometimes they are not. I want to take this opportunity to clarify where we are on a number of issues affecting you as a provider. This will not take the place of the face-to-face and teleconferencing we are already doing to keep information flowing and to solicit as much feedback from you as we can.

RE: LOC Placements and DFCS' policies and procedures. First, I believe that we need a full array of programs and services for children and adolescents. There will always be a need for therapeutic residential services and some children will need periodic hospitalization and crisis stabilization. We need to make sure those services are available statewide. In addition, we must do everything we can to make sure that there are always enough opportunities for children in our care and custody to live with families, in homes and family-like settings, which may include group homes or campuses, when appropriate. The key for us is making sure all children have committed caring adults in their lives that will be there for them over the long haul.

We, therefore, have an obligation to make sure that we pursue what is best for every child and that we act responsibly in that pursuit:

- We will, first and foremost, be doing a diligent and aggressive search for relatives at the front door of the foster care system. We have not always done that work and we will be holding ourselves accountable going forward to do it and do it well.
- We will also look at children who have spent many months in foster care and determine if there are relatives who are willing to take permanent responsibility for them. Some will argue that we should have done that a long time ago and they are right. But that does not mean that we should not do the right work now. But we will also do the right work, the right way. That means preparing the child and the relatives for the change and working to make sure transition is accomplished in a way that is sensible and responsive to the needs of the child as well as the adults involved.
- We will also follow these rules anytime we move a child from one placement to another one – no matter what kind of placement it is. At DHR, we want to be held accountable when we do not adhere to these standards.

- Finally, we will also make sure children are transitioned out of residential, therapeutic services when they no longer need them. We need you, as providers, to work closely with us on this. No child should continue in a highly structured, therapeutic, residential setting if their needs can be effectively met in a home and family setting. This is not about money; it is about evaluating what is best for each individual child. That is our shared responsibility.

RE: Unbundling of the LOC Rates (Changes to TRIS). Most of you have been very involved in the meetings we have had on this issue. The changes are being driven by the federal Medicaid agency, CMS. CMS is requiring that Georgia un-bundle its current per diem rate to separate “shelter and watchful oversight” costs from “therapeutic, medically necessary” costs. As we have discussed, this will take place over a one year transition period that will end June 30, 2007. We fully recognize that you, as providers, will need to change how you conduct your business as this change is made. In fact, at DHR, we also will need to make changes in how we do business. The consolidation of behavioral health services in the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Addictive Diseases will allow us to run one therapeutic system for children. At DFCS, we still need to create a new rate for reimbursing room, board, and watchful oversight. That is ongoing work that we have to do with providers as well as with the Kenny A Rate Reimbursement Task Force. Therefore, we will continue to hold the monthly meetings and to post the meeting minutes and other information on our website (www.apsero.com). It is our intent, and our commitment, to continue working with you in a transparent way. None of us asked for this but, in the end, I believe we can re-build the system in a way that will serve children and their families well for years to come.

RE: EMBRACE, Georgia’s new foster family foundation: For the last eight to ten months, a public-private taskforce and the First Lady’s Children’s Cabinet has been working on a design for a foster family foundation. EMBRACE is that foundation. EMBRACE will contract with community organizations for the recruitment, preparation (training) and support of foster families. The goal is to increase the number of Georgia’s foster families and make sure those families are well supported by their local communities. Currently, foster families are recruited and trained by either DFCS staff or by Child Placing Agencies (CPAs). EMBRACE will be taking over the work with foster parents currently done by DFCS staff. A recent RFP in five counties will pilot the foundation’s business model. That pilot is expected to last six to eight months as a new Executive Director for EMBRACE builds a Board of Directors and launches the foundation statewide.

Why are we doing this? First, we desperately need more foster parents because the number of foster parents in Georgia has not increased over the last few years. Second, recruiting, training and supporting foster parents are not the best use of our DFCS staff. Staff time must be focused on investigating child abuse and neglect, working with at-risk families, and finding permanent, loving homes for children in foster care.

Some CPAs may be worried that this foundation will change what they are doing. It is our expectation that CPAs will continue to recruit their own families for children placed with them and that their contracts with DFCS will continue. What might change is that some CPAs may decide to apply to be contractors with EMBRACE, which will mean that they will also recruit, prepare and support foster families for the foundation. These families will then be available for placement of children whose cases are being managed by DFCS case managers. We already know that community groups do an excellent job now of finding and working with foster families. We want to give them more of that work to do, not take work away from them. The more foster parents we have, the better placements we can make for children, an outcome I know we all value.

Please know that we look forward to working closely with you over the coming months to get this work done. It will not always be easy nor will we always agree. However, I know that we are all committed to serving children and strengthening their families. Everything else is just details. Thanks for all you do. Please do not hesitate to let me know what we can do to help. My door is always open.