

# strengthening families

## georgia: fostering meaningful partnerships

During the first Strengthening Families Leadership Summit in 2007, 21 participants came from Georgia, one of the largest teams from any participating state. The challenge was that they were not, in fact, a team. While each of the participants was actively engaged in Strengthening Families work within the state, few knew of the others' involvement in the initiative, and there was little coordination or shared work across the existing Strengthening Families stakeholders. Meeting their fellow Georgia representatives and learning about their engagement with the Strengthening Families work provided an important catalyst for the creation of a true statewide leadership team that could create synergy across each of these pre-existing pieces of work. Since then, the Strengthening Families efforts have gone through a transition of leadership. Bright From the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (the state agency responsible for pre-k and child care) took on a leadership role with funding from the Governor's Office for Children and Families. However, the deep commitment across the diverse set of stakeholders that make up the leadership team has remained constant.

### EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS-BUILDING

With over 75 stakeholders participating, including a number of parent representatives, Georgia has one of the largest Strengthening Families leadership teams. The participating stakeholders cross not only systems but levels of work. The leadership team has active participation from direct service programs that are implementing Strengthening Families, as well as State departments of education and child welfare. The inclusion of stakeholders from multiple systems on the leadership team has created widespread buy-in from many child- and family-serving organizations and agencies while facilitating opportunities for coordination and collaboration among them.

This creates a structure for the Strengthening Families work in Georgia that is multi-layered, involving not only the child abuse and neglect prevention community, but also early childhood and child welfare. Participants speak enthusiastically about the level of engagement and willingness to share information and resources across the leadership team.

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### GOVERNANCE

The lead agency convenes a group of over 75 stakeholders, representing 47 public and private organizations, to make up the state's Strengthening Families Strategic Planning Group. 12 members make up a Leadership Advisory Board, which reviews the strategic planning work, provides recommendations to further the planning, gives input regarding future (cont'd)

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direction of the work, and assists in carrying out the mission of Strengthening Families Georgia by promoting the framework of protective factors and strategies in all areas of related work.

Six workgroups—including an evaluation workgroup, based on the Levers for Change, address specific issues within the larger initiative.

## BUILDING STRENGTHENING FAMILIES PRACTICE ON THE GROUND

In keeping with how the Strengthening Families work in Georgia developed independently from a number of sources, programmatic practice is being supported through a number of mechanisms.

As the governmental body responsible for child care and early education, Bright from the Start (BFTS) has been able to infuse Strengthening Families concepts throughout many components of the early childhood system in the state. For example:

- Georgia is one of few states to fund universal Pre-K, meaning it is available to any child regardless of income. A primary mechanism used to include families is the Resource Coordinator program. The program consists of over 500 Resource Coordinators (RCs) serving more than 50,000 four year olds in approximately 1,000 Pre-K locations. RCs use Strengthening Families as a framework for providing support services. Specifically, RCs utilize the five Protective Factors that research demonstrates increase family stability, enhance child development, reduce child abuse and neglect, and promote school readiness and success. All RCs attend annual training that focuses on the implementation of these protective factors. The assessment used to evaluate individual RC programs was created using the Strengthening Families Self Assessment. This RC program assessment evaluates a program's ability to integrate the Strengthening Families approach into the services provided for Georgia's Pre-K children and families.
- Strengthening Families is a part of the licensing system for child care programs, administered by BFTS. Child Care Consultants, who license and monitor child care programs, have been trained in Strengthening Families and are able to support providers and encourage them to include Strengthening Families in their work with children and families. This is part of an effort on the part of BFTS to transform their system from one of only inspection and compliance-monitoring to one that includes support and technical assistance.
- Bright from the Start has identified a group of nine early care and education programs with a high level of Strengthening Families exemplary practice. These sites have received additional training in Strengthening Families and will serve as mentors to other programs around the state who have expressed interest in implementing Strengthening Families. These programs make up the Georgia Strengthening Families Network.

“people see themselves and their work in the language and the approach,  
but when people come together, they really see the power of it.”

In addition to the training, the mentor programs receive support from BFTS in the form of a small stipend, technical assistance, coaching and site visits.

- Sheltering Arms, one of the original 21 exemplary programs studied to develop the Strengthening Families Self Assessment, has continued to develop its Strengthening Families practice. Sheltering Arms operates a network of 17 centers in the state for which they provide training, tools, and materials to support consistency of practice. Sheltering Arms operates the Georgia Training Institute (GTI), a resource for training in the early childhood sector throughout the state. As an exemplary program, Sheltering Arms was already doing strong family strengthening practice prior to their engagement with the initiative, but enthusiastically embraced the Protective Factors and made them an integral part of their program’s approach. Sheltering Arms has developed a number of important tools to support the program implementation of the Strengthening Families approach that are being used by the 17 Sheltering Arms programs, and other programs that they mentor. These include:
  - Training materials and tools for early childhood teachers
  - A Strengthening Families planning guide that helps program staff design activities year round that build protective factors
  - An assessment and evaluation tool that helps family support staff work with families to develop and monitor a family development plan built around Protective Factors.

From 2007-2008 in Metropolitan Atlanta, the Georgia Chapter of the Black Child Development Institute, with funding from the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, worked with a network of 14 relatively small early care and education program to support them in building Protective Factors with families. Programs were provided initial training in Strengthening Families key concepts, supported in completing the Self Assessment, and networked as they worked on implementing the action plans they developed from their Self Assessments.

Georgia is also home to the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta,<sup>i</sup> one of six local United Ways around the nation working to weave Strengthening Families concepts throughout all early childhood activities taking place at the sites. Metropolitan Atlanta’s chapter is exploring methods for embedding Strengthening Families not only in its services, but also in its internal policies and protocols. Successful strategies piloted in the United Way of America’s Strengthening Families project will also eventually be disseminated to all United Way chapters with early childhood activities.

## BUILDING PARENT PARTNERSHIPS

Creating meaningful partnerships with parents and family members has been a priority of Strengthening Families Georgia’s work since it began. Five parent representatives sit on the Strategic Planning Group, and one also sits on the Leadership Advisory Board. Three parent organizations are engaged in the state’s Strengthening Families efforts.

Four parent representatives, along with several other strategic planning group members, make up the Parent Partnerships Workgroup, which is currently developing strategies to increase parent leadership in the state and involve more parent organizations in the initiative. The group has recommended that the Protective Factors always be stated both as they are written in Strengthening Families materials *and* in family-friendly language.<sup>ii</sup>

## CREATING FAMILY-STRENGTHENING CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

Bright from the Start, the lead agency on Strengthening Families Georgia, has developed a partnership with the state Department of Human Services (DHS), which includes the Division of Family and Children's Services (DFCS), to align departmental priorities to prevent maltreatment and promote optimal development of all children. For nearly two years, the assistant commissioners of BTFS and DHS have been working to make sure that children getting subsidized child care and children in foster care are enrolled in high quality early care and education programs.

When DHS selected SafeCare<sup>®</sup>, an evidence-based parent-training curriculum for parents who are at-risk or have been reported for child maltreatment, as its home visiting program, BTFS was able to ensure that a mentor early childhood program (see above) was identified in each of the counties where SafeCare<sup>®</sup> is available. Staff in each SafeCare<sup>®</sup> county is aware of the mentor program and work to ensure that when families complete the 18-21 week SafeCare<sup>®</sup> program, they have the option to enroll their children in early education programs that are familiar with Strengthening Families concepts and attuned to their needs.

Goals outlined in the Strengthening Families strategic plan include ensuring that young children in foster care are enrolled in quality early care and education programs, providing continuity of educational placements for children involved in the foster care system, embedding Strengthening Families into child welfare practices and policies, and training caseworkers, supervisors, and foster parents in the Strengthening Families approach.

## ENRICHING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Strengthening Families Georgia has also included in its strategic plan the goal of embedding Strengthening Families in the professional development, training, and technical assistance systems for child and family serving professionals. In 2009 when trainers from Idaho trained the mentor programs on their Strengthening Families curriculum, trainers from across agencies attended as well. Those participating in the training included trainers from the Bright from the Start technical assistance unit (involved in training the state child care consultants and child care providers), quality initiatives team, and Pre K division (responsible for training resource coordinators within state pre-K programs). This training of trainers will not only build the overall Strengthening Families training capacity in the state, but also help to assure consistency of Strengthening Families practice across various venues.

## EVALUATING STRENGTHENING FAMILIES IN GEORGIA

The development of a strategic plan for Strengthening Families in Georgia provides a roadmap for evaluation in the coming years. An evaluation workgroup is currently using the plan to create an evaluation strategy to track and measure the impact of Strengthening Families in the state.

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<sup>1</sup> Visit <http://www.unitedwayatlanta.org/> for more about United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta.

<sup>ii</sup> Different family-friendly phrasings of the Protective Factors have been developed by Strengthening Families Illinois ([www.strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org](http://www.strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org)), the Parent Partnership Council of the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds ([www.ctfalliance.org](http://www.ctfalliance.org)), and Strengthening Families Idaho (<http://idahochildrenstrustfund.state.id.us/>).