



## *House of Representatives Rural Development Council*

### **2023 Overview and Recommendations**

**Co-chairman Gerald Greene**  
Representative, 154<sup>th</sup> District

**Co-chairman Mack Jackson**  
Representative, 128<sup>th</sup> District

Vice-Chairman John Corbett  
Representative, 174<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Rick Jasperse  
Representative, 11<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Darlene Taylor  
Representative, 173<sup>rd</sup> District

The Honorable Leesa Hagan  
Representative, 156<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Patty Marie Stinson  
Representative, 150<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Clay Pirkle  
Representative, 169<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Steven Meeks  
Representative, 178<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Jason Ridley  
Representative, 6<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Steven Tarvin  
Representative, 2<sup>nd</sup> District

The Honorable Bill Werkheiser  
Representative, 157<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Noel Williams  
Representative, 148<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Al Williams  
Representative, 168<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Bill Yearta  
Representative, 152<sup>nd</sup> District

**Ex-officio Members:**

The Honorable Shaw Blackmon  
Representative, 146<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Kasey Carpenter  
Representative, 4<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Robert Dickey  
Representative, 145<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Matt Hatchett  
Representative, 155<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Penny Houston  
Representative, 170<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Butch Parrish  
Representative, 158<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Alan Powell  
Representative, 33<sup>rd</sup> District

The Honorable Trey Rhodes  
Representative, 124<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Lynn Smith  
Representative, 70<sup>th</sup> District

The Honorable Ron Stephens  
Representative, 164<sup>th</sup> District

Prepared by Leonel Chancey, Senior Policy Analyst  
House Budget and Research Office

## Introduction

The House Rural Development Council (RDC) was created in 2017 to work with rural communities to find ways to encourage economic growth and job creation. Speaker David Ralston created the initiative to improve rural Georgia with a thorough and systematic study of these communities' surrounding issues. During the 2023 Legislative Session, the council was renewed for the current term through the unanimous adoption of [House Resolution 488](#). Since the creation of the RDC, more than \$245 million has been appropriated to initiatives to improve rural communities as a direct result of RDC budget and policy recommendations, including \$62 million for agriculture, \$86 million for rural economic development, \$40 million for rural healthcare, \$35 million for rural transportation, and \$12 million for rural broadband. Governor Brian Kemp has signed 27 legislative acts produced by House Rural members into law since the RDC's inception, including using existing easements to provide or expand access to broadband services, creating the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation, and establishing the Rural Center for Health Care Innovation and Sustainability.

In 2023, the House Rural Development Council held four meetings in Macon, Statesboro, Athens, and Atlanta on the campus of Georgia Farm Bureau, Georgia Southern University, the University of Georgia, and the State Capitol to hear from local officials and policy experts. This report serves as the identified challenges, solutions, and recommendations developed from the House Rural Development Council meetings. For more information about the House Rural Development Council or to find the presentations given, please visit the following link: <https://www.house.ga.gov/Committees/en-US/HouseRuralDevelopmentCouncil.aspx>

## **Identified Challenges and Solutions**

Georgia's prosperity and well-being fundamentally link to rural Georgia's ability to thrive in the new Post-pandemic global economy, build and attract an educated and diverse workforce, and use the abundant natural resources to provide food, fiber, forest products, energy, and recreation. The following are identified challenges and solutions presented to the House Rural members:

### **DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES – ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

**DIVISION (EPD)** The challenges facing solar installations are the massive scale of the solar sites and the inaccessibility to maintenance once solar panels are installed. The only options for maintaining or controlling sediment erosion are either by hand or by uninstalling the solar panels completely. Failure to properly design, install, and maintain best management practices is causing significant sediment release which impacts state waters. Best management practices are the measures put in place to protect water quality. Some examples include erosion control blankets, straw rolls, seeding, and straw.

In most cases, no more than 400 acres should be disturbed any time and specific design components are now available for responsible solar installation. Disturbance should be segmented using naturally existing land characteristics or drainage basins. Additional vegetation before solar panel installation would help reduce sediment erosion. The solar construction schedule must be developed to ensure the completion of all land disturbance (including trenching, foundation installation, and superstructure installation) and the establishment of, at minimum, temporary stabilization on all disturbed acreage before installing solar panels.

The department identified additional challenges moving forward for Georgia's solar panel industry. The federal 'Inflation Reduction Act' will incentivize 30% on taxes until 2032. This tax break has offered solar companies a big incentive to expedite solar siting. An increased number of out-of-state/country contractors unfamiliar with Georgia's regulations and various ecosystems can cause more complications for soil erosion. The total number of acres disturbed for solar development in the next five years is estimated to be between 50,000 and 100,000. EPD does not

have enough staff to keep up with the projected increased workload to ensure compliance at these sites.

The ‘Georgia Water Quality Control Act’ (‘Water Quality Act’) became effective on July 1, 2003, with the passage of House Bill 285. An \$80 per acre fee associated with construction activities as defined by the ‘Erosion and Sedimentation Act of 1975’ was initiated. The funds provided by these fees are for erosion and sediment control programs on both the state and local levels. Under the ‘Water Quality Act’, in areas with a Local Issuing Authority (LIA), half of these fees (\$40/acre) are paid directly to the local authority.

For at least the next five years, the State of Georgia should see an increase of \$600,000 to \$1.2 million in revenue generated from these fees (10,000-20,000 acres per year at \$60/acre). Local governments should see an increase of \$200,000 to \$400,000 annually (taking 10,000-20,000 acres annually at \$20/acre). This money transfers into the Georgia General Fund to be appropriated by the legislature. The agency requests that the General Assembly appropriate the funds to EPD so that the division can hire the additional staff necessary to keep up with the surge of solar farm development that is coming.

#### *Frost Protection Permitting*

EPD will evaluate the feasibility and impact of frost protection permitting in stressed areas and solicit information about interest in frost protection permits. Farmers interested in frost protection permits should submit a letter of interest to the EPD Tifton Office. Surface water should not be used for frost protection permits. However, EPD understands that some landowners in the Flint River Basin are hydrogeological challenged concerning groundwater availability. In areas of known challenges, EPD will consider proposed well-to-pond frost protection systems on a case-by-case basis.

In recent years, various types of citrus, blueberries, and other berry crops have emerged as attractive commodities for some farmers in southwest Georgia. These crops cannot be successfully cultivated without frost protection, requiring water directly onto plants to protect them during

freezing temperatures. Water withdrawal permits are needed for large amounts of water (100,000 gallons per day or more). Frost protection permits are not currently an option for farmers in the lower Flint River Basin because of the permitting suspension implemented in July 2012.

### **DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AFFAIRS**

The OneGeorgia Authority allows local communities to apply for financial assistance on development projects funded through appropriations. The department provides technical assistance to interested applicants as applications are thoroughly reviewed on a quarterly cycle. OneGeorgia provides reimbursement only for eligible activities, as awarded funds are monitored for compliance.

Grants are reimbursement based, and a credit team underwrites loans. Performance expectations monitor awards. Local leadership capacity correlates with project success, and early engagement with DCA technical assistance is vital to efficiency. Delinquent audits and reporting issues must be resolved to be eligible as financial standing indicates community commitment and ultimate success for grants or loans.

### **DEPARTMENT OF AUDITS AND ACCOUNTS (DOAA)**

The Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts presentation focused on emerging issues hindering local government access to state funds or grants. State Auditor Greg Griffin shared that some local governments fail to submit required audited financial information to the department on time or at all due to local management or financial staff turnover. Local governments must submit audited financial information to the department annually, and noncompliance relates to the receipt of state funds.

Georgia code requires local governments to submit financial reports annually within 180 days of year-end. The number of local governments that fail to submit is increasing each year. In 2018, only 52% of cities met the statutory deadline. As of 2022, roughly 33% of cities filed their audits on time. Over the past five years, cities that file late or do not file at all do so for a variety of reasons, such as:

- Difficulty in obtaining an audit, not being prepared for an audit;

- Difficulty hiring an auditor;
- Turnover of city management or financial staff;
- Lack of experience that creates challenges; and
- Major illness problems amplified by COVID-19.

*Solutions Identified by the Department*

- Update laws to allow for simplified reporting, easing the burden on local governments, and allowing for timelier, accurate financial information;
- Create an early warning system through fiscal health dashboards made public on the DOAA website to highlight issues for legislators and other public officials; and
- Create standardized steps for early remediation to avoid potential fiscal hardships and other issues.

**DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

Agriculture Commissioner Tyler Harper informed members that the department's law enforcement unit is operational and trying to secure safe products in the state. Georgia's farmers markets have seen increased criminal activity due to poor upkeep and disregard of rules and regulations. The Department of Agriculture's law enforcement unit has made significant improvements to ensure safe and clean markets by holding tenants accountable for stricter sanitary compliance. In addition, through grant funding, the department can now hire a human trafficking position.

Georgia's hemp industry is growing, but illegal hemp products are entering the market with packaging similar to candy products. These unlawful products target minors, but the department does not have the same authority found in nearby states such as Florida, where law enforcement can investigate cannabis products with more than 100 enforcement officers. Georgia is restricted in some capacities for investigating hemp products due to lack of officers. The Department of Agriculture reported finding some hemp products containing as much as 24% THC; the legal limit for hemp is .3%.

Criminal activity and drug trafficking still pose a significant threat to the state agriculture industry. Low resistance or law enforcement protections make things difficult for Georgia farmers, as Commissioner Harper reported that 40 kilos of cocaine were found in a shipment of peppers

coming into the state. Drug trafficking through agriculture products undercuts produce sold as criminals have no prerogative to sell fruits or vegetables, but the drugs smuggled inside. Food safety remains a top priority as the Department of Agriculture looks to continue to find solutions and collaborative efforts from the state, including salary adjustments for department employees.

Workforce labor and retention continue to be the biggest issues for the department. There are currently 60 funded, but unfilled, positions in the Department of Agriculture, with some open for more than a year. Low starting salaries for these positions are the primary reason for the department's workforce issues. Many candidates have turned down employment for other positions offering \$20,000-\$30,000 more. Commissioner Harper informed the House Rural Development Council that human resource reports indicate the number one reason for staff loss is better pay elsewhere or to another state agency.

### **DEPARTMENT OF LABOR**

Georgia needs more jobs that do not require a four-year degree. On-the-job training from apprenticeships to short-term, moderate, and long-term on-the-job training programs exist for occupations including electricians, plumbers, pipefitters, steamfitters, and carpenters. Short-term occupational training includes retail sales/cashiers, laborers, freight workers, stock and material movers, and heavy tractor-trailer truck drivers. Moderate occupational training includes accounting, bookkeeping, auditing clerks, maintenance/repair workers, and welders. Long-term occupational training includes industrial machinery mechanics, HVAC mechanics and installers, claims adjusters, examiners, and investigators.

The Georgia Department of Labor identified economic barriers in rural Georgia, including a declining workforce, population loss, lack of trained workforce, uncertainty of health care, and lack of access to capital. Literacy rates and educational attainment correlate to poverty and access to professional, scientific, and technical service jobs in Georgia. In August 2023, Georgia's poverty rate was 14%, with 66 counties over 20%. Georgia's median household income is \$62,800, but 58 counties are under \$45,000.



In 2018, the state launched the Georgia Broadband Deployment Initiative (GBDI). The initiative calls for promoting and deploying broadband services throughout the state to unserved areas. Expanding broadband availability and free public Wi-Fi throughout the state will help improve literacy and job access. Outreach to the younger workforce must include mentoring young people in soft, life, job, and trade skills. By 2030, the United States, for the first time, will have more 65-and-older residents than 18 and younger, as one-fifth of the total population will have reached the traditional retirement age of 65. Career pathway alignment must focus on partnerships between education institutions, economic developers, and employers/business community.

### **CENTER FOR RURAL PROSPERITY AND INNOVATION**

Director David C. Bridges, Georgia's Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation, presented various actions that are needed to alleviate rural communities' problems or challenges. Among those common challenges are the following:

- Long-standing population decline;
- Slow recovery after economic downturns;
- Comparatively low per capita income and high poverty rates;
- Lack of non-agricultural employment opportunities;
- Narrowing and erosion of tax bases stressing public services and education;
- Declining access to quality public education;
- Loss of manufacturing capacity and the jobs associated with it;
- Limited new economic investment; and
- Declining access to primary healthcare and hospital services.

Prosperity in rural Georgia highly depends on attracting more people, especially young families, to rural communities. Providing essential economic opportunity and access to quality education and healthcare can connect rural, urban, and suburban communities to bring prosperity to all people of the State of Georgia. However, state agencies often focus on program priorities and are intransigent in their applications, metrics, and operational frameworks. Rural leadership is often limited, and those responsible are overstrained with existing commitments. Many rural communities have a minimal workforce, and many organizations in rural Georgia must further collaborate with local leadership.

Rural population decline overall, but also the decline in persons under 18, is contributing to the aging of rural counties. The brain drain continues as some 18-year-olds leave for school, jobs, and better opportunities. Tax digest and taxes have stagnated or declined, and the gap between county revenue and infrastructure maintenance or construction costs continues to widen. Educational attainment continues to decline nationwide and in Georgia. Access to healthcare is becoming more limited as six to 10 hospitals are at risk of closing, leaving more communities without primary healthcare and OB/GYN services. The workforce is a significant issue and is getting worse, as hiring is becoming more challenging due to the lack of education, lack of skill, lack of work ethic, and lack of desire to have a job. As a result, political power is diminishing in rural areas as population decline is driven.

Rural communities should provide services to assess capacity and condition and prepare improvement plans that include the necessary engineering documentation, specifications for bid preparation, and project management—planning for growth and opportunities. Strained local government financial ability is due to a narrow tax base; cost of maintaining infrastructure; lack of county government will to raise property taxes; and workforce issues in quality, quantity, and reliability.

The Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation provided recommendations on supporting rural development projects as their suggestions include five key factors:

- Collaborate with the private sector;
- Help existing small business despite the fact that established metrics are often not applicable;
- Get the beneficiary on board first and then try to leverage development authorities;
- Focus on completing the project rather than assisting it; and
- Infrastructure planning.

### **GEORGIA HEALTH INITIATIVES**

Three in five rural counties rank in the bottom half for health outcomes and factors. Of the 120 identified rural counties in Georgia, 74 were in the bottom half of counties for health factors (62%).

These health indicators are fostered by:

- Life Expectancy;
- Uninsured Adults;
- Uninsured Children;
- Diabetes Prevalence;
- HIV Prevalence;
- Cancer Incidence/Cancer Mortality; and
- Health Professional Workforce.

All rural counties are Health Professional Shortage Areas for mental health, and most are for primary and dental care. Nine counties in Georgia (all rural) have no physician: Chattahoochee, Echols, Montgomery, Schley, Talbot, Taliaferro, Treutlen, Turner, and Webster. Statewide, there are 232 physicians per 100,000 residents. The average ratio in rural counties is 73 physicians per 100,000 residents. There are 217 physicians per 100,000 residents in non-rural counties.

### **DEPARTMENT OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES**

The Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) is collaborating with sheriffs in 30 southwest and central Georgia counties for a transportation study assessing the impact of mental health transports on local law enforcement, particularly in rural areas. This initiative aims to explore alternatives to the current process where individuals in a mental health crisis, mandated for evaluation by a physician or probate judge, are transported by the local sheriff's department.

#### *Office of Children, Young Adults and Families*

The Office of Children, Young Adults and Families focuses on supporting Georgia's System of Care for uninsured children and young adults, or those with Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Medicaid, and their families accessing the public behavioral health system. This is accomplished through developing and supporting Georgia's behavioral health infrastructure for children, adolescents, and transition-age young adults (18-26) and non-traditional treatment options for youth and families that align with the traditional array of services available through Medicaid.

### *Georgia Apex Program (School-based Mental Health)*

The Georgia Apex Program aims to enhance the accessibility of mental health services for school-aged youth from Pre-Kindergarten to 12th grade across the state. This statewide initiative fosters collaboration between community mental health providers and schools, focusing on delivering school-based services and support. The program offers a range of services and activities, such as individual therapy, targeted screening, crisis intervention, skills training, mental health awareness, and anti-bullying campaigns.

### *Youth Clubhouses*

Clubhouses were developed to provide intensive individual and family services to at-risk youth in high-need areas. Currently, DBHDD operates four distinct types of Clubhouses:

1. **Prevention Clubhouses:** Offer peer mentoring, evidence-based prevention curriculums, and interactive, engaging youth activities to build coping decision-making, and life skills. Three operational locations serve approximately 180 youth per year.
2. **Youth Mental Health:** Youth-guided, family-driven interventions that provide creative and non-traditional techniques to build skills, tap into and nurture leadership qualities, and create relationships and support systems among peers. Fifteen operational locations serve approximately 1,064 youth per year.
3. **Youth Addiction Recovery:** Designed to provide support to youth as they strive to improve their life and wellness while decreasing or abstaining from alcohol and substance use. Eight operational locations serve approximately 220 youth per year.
4. **Grief Support:** Kate's Club strives to empower children and teens, their families, and young adults facing life after the death of a parent, sibling, caregiver or someone important to them. One operational location.

### **RURAL HOSPITAL TAX CREDIT UPDATE**

The Georgia Hospital Association has close working relationships with other state hospital associations nationwide. Several other states have asked for information recently to learn more about Georgia's innovative Rural Hospital Tax Credit Program. The Georgia Rural Hospital Tax Credit program fosters community engagement in rural areas for hospitals that need additional support. When individuals and local businesses invest in their hospitals, they become a part of the

community's health. Legislation was filed, but not passed, during the 2023 Session to extend the sunset for the rural hospital tax credit. The 55 rural hospitals that benefit from the program support the following revisions contained in HB 363.

HB 363 would extend the statutory sunset to 2029, currently set for 2024. HB 363 revises the definition of "rural hospital organization" to ensure that hospitals that convert to Rural Emergency Hospitals will not lose access to the Rural Hospital Tax Credit (RHTC) Program. Rural Emergency Hospitals are a new provider type established by Congress in 2021 that allow existing acute care hospitals to discontinue inpatient services while continuing to offer emergency services. Most Georgia hospitals eligible to convert to this new facility type are RHTC participants.

The program could increase the tax credit limit of pass-through owners from \$10,000 to \$25,000 with the passage of HB 363, accelerating the cash flow to participating hospitals. HB 363 increases the statutory cap to \$100 million. The cap is currently set at \$75 million. Hospitals can receive up to \$4 million in donations annually as the Department of Revenue could issue proportional credits to the donor equal to the amount remaining under the hospital's annual limit. Furthermore, donors may request credits above that hospital's limit.

Due to this deadline, between \$500,000 and \$1.5 million in donations are lost annually. Revisions to the program also include a set deadline of 180 days, or October 31, for collecting contributions to allow time for the unused credits to be used. Contributions not funded by the deadline of December 31 can be added back to the cap. This deadline does not allow time for any unfunded contribution pledges to be reclaimed by potential donors on a waitlist.

The Georgia HEART Tax Credit has been vital in keeping rural hospitals operational. Georgia HEART funds have allowed purchases of ventilators to support ventilator/trach insufficient services. Without the Georgia HEART Tax Credit, support during financial hardships would have been unavailable to afford and implement this successful service line. Georgia HEART funds have also helped maintain hospitals while keeping up with the rising supply costs. Many hospitals are utilizing HEART funds to purchase much-needed new equipment.

These new machines provide incredible precision, accuracy, image quality, and efficiency. The Georgia HEART Hospital Program helps rural patients receive accurate diagnoses, and their

overall well-being during this diagnostic procedure is a top priority. Without the support of the Georgia HEART Hospital Program, patients would drive 50+ miles to obtain an adequate level of care. Satisfying the healthcare needs of patients and communities close to home is a benefit of the program.

The Rural Hospital Tax Credit is instrumental in Radiation Oncology services for cancer patients to bridge the gap over 35 miles between the next closest treatment center, with some patients in Georgia having to commute 200+ miles for radiation treatment throughout a standard 30-treatment radiation regimen. Many patients are not able to finish treatment. The funding has helped offset the cost of a new facility and the latest linear accelerator technology/software. In just 30 months, over 4,000 treatments have been provided to over 200 rural Georgia residents.

### **THE MEDICAL COLLEGE OF GEORGIA AT AUGUSTA UNIVERSITY**

According to the Medical College of Georgia at Augusta University, Georgia ranks 40<sup>th</sup> in the number of active physicians and 40<sup>th</sup> in the number of primary care physicians. Eighty-nine of Georgia's 159 counties are designated Primary Care Health Professional Shortage Areas:

- 90 counties have no psychiatrists.
- 82 counties have no OB/GYN.
- 80 counties have no general surgeon.
- 73 counties have no emergency medicine physician.
- 65 counties have no pediatrician.
- 40 counties have no internists.
- 18 counties have no family medicine physician.
- Nine counties have no doctor at all.

MCG aims to leverage healthcare connectivity technology to address Georgia's healthcare disparities by connecting patients and providers to academic healthcare resources through MCG's statewide educational campus and Georgia's academic health center through research, education, clinical service, community engagement, philanthropy, and advocacy. Wellstar MCG Health has developed a "virtual" network of hospitals and clinical sites that are a launching pad to strengthen statewide presence.

## **GEORGIA COUNCIL ON AGING (CO-AGE)**

The proportion of Georgia's 60+ population in rural areas will multiply in the next 20 years. In 2040, the proportion of individuals in Georgia aged 65 years and older is predicted to witness significant growth, projecting an increase of 34.3% compared to the statistics 2020. A 47.1% growth is expected among those 75 years and over. The Georgia Healthcare Workforce Commission reports that 20% of the rural healthcare workforce is 55+ and likely to retire in the next 10 years. According to the Georgia Healthcare Workforce Commission, Georgia loses 3.7% of healthcare workers yearly (retirement, moving out of state, etc.) and retains 58% of its healthcare graduates. The Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, a medical school in Moultrie, Georgia, reports that only 8% of the state's practicing physicians serve rural Georgia.

### *2024 CO-AGE Recommendations*

- Georgia should prioritize keeping seniors in their homes rather than prematurely moving to more costly nursing homes.
- Teams of law enforcement, social workers, mental health services, housing resources, Area Agencies on Aging, and others work together to identify and resolve local elder abuse cases. The law does not make these teams mandatory in all 11 circuits. CO-AGE supports mandatory teams in all circuits.
- Allowing self-administered Medical Aid in Dying (MAID) exists in other states. CO-AGE supports a legislative study committee to discuss MAID laws. Many older adults receive terminal diagnoses that presage a long, painful, and expensive process before death ensues.
- Georgia assisted living requires that a facility with over 25 beds cannot provide Medicaid services. This closes out assisted living access to low-income seniors who can no longer live at home if smaller personal care homes with Medicaid have wait lists. CO-AGE supports changes to Georgia's laws to open Medicaid access for all eligible seniors.
- Due to Georgia having unique laws and rules about assisted living by prohibiting Medicaid if a facility has over 25 beds, assisted living access for low-income seniors is limited. They need more services than smaller Medicaid personal care homes, especially Memory Care services. Other states use Medicaid to fund supportive services in assisted living, including in Memory Care units. CO-AGE supports changes to Georgia's laws to open Medicaid access for all eligible seniors regardless of where they live.

## **KAISER PERMANENTE MILITARY MEDICS AND CORPSMEN PROGRAM**

Kaiser Permanente's goal for Virginia military veterans is to "offer career and credentialing pathways for veterans and military spouses seeking employment in Virginia's healthcare system." In Virginia, the Military Medics and Corpsmen (MMAC) program requires individuals to be honorably/generally discharged as medics, corpsmen, or medical technicians in order to be eligible. Scope of practice skills must have been performed within 12 months to apply. Virginia allows military medics, corpsmen, and medical technicians to utilize general-scope-of-practice skills without civilian credentials. If an individual falls outside the 12-month window, that individual is eligible for the No Veteran Left Behind program that focuses on non-clinical roles.

Healthcare employers work together with the state to identify the general scope of practice for providers needed to fill workforce shortages. Resumes and general scope of practice can be shared with the human resources point of contact at healthcare entities. In Virginia, veteran services do the initial vetting of the individual and assist in establishing the scope of practice. Virginia first hired retired military members in February 2017. From February 2017 to April 2023, 564 veterans have been hired. Healthcare Positions include:

- Emergency care techs;
- Clinical care techs;
- Intermediate care techs;
- Certified nurse assistant;
- Medical assistants;
- Pharmacy techs;
- Phlebotomists;
- Medical HR; and
- Medical coding and billing.

Only in Virginia can these individuals continue to practice clinical skills without required civilian healthcare credentials – while they work to get those credentials. No Veteran Left Behind program transitions non-clinical retired military into non-clinical healthcare positions. This program also helps retired military members find jobs outside the healthcare industry in Virginia. Healthcare leadership paths exist for honorably/generally discharged military members with command or



senior leadership roles. These individuals have clinical operations or management experience and advanced degrees.

## **DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES**

The 'Families First Act' reduces congregate care for youth in foster care and diverts federal money to preventative services. A reduction in new congregate care providers being approved and post-pandemic workforce issues combined have facilities unable to find staff to stay within required 1:6 staffing ratios. Most difficulty is found specifically for staff during less desirable shifts (evenings, weekends, etc.) Post-pandemic providers have been slow to increase pay rates. As of the summer of 2022, many providers reported they paid direct care staff \$13-\$15 per hour.

Rural foster care needs increased mental health services for adults and youth. Inpatient and outpatient drug rehabilitation facilities need services for parents who struggle with addiction. Furthermore, increased accessibility to resources is needed to provide intensive support to youth who experience mental health crises that cannot be managed through outpatient services. There is always a need for more foster parents – particularly for teens and complex kids.

Characteristics of youth with no placement typically include youth with extensive criminal histories, violent offenses such as designated felons, sexual crimes, and juvenile and adult charges. Youth with placement restrictions cannot receive placement with other kids due to complex medical needs such as diabetes and seizures combined with behavioral and mental health challenges. Kids under these conditions often entered care without agency-initiated actions.

In July 2023, Deputy Commissioner Mary Havick required executive-level leadership approval for any youth to be hoteled, a written summary to be included, and engagement of all state office units to address the youth's need for placement. A requirement for providers that give less than a 14-day notice must self-report that notice to the child's county director. The department has emphasized system accountability for youth without placement and the need to stop the "churning" of youth with complex needs. Geography does not change a youth's behavior – they must stay put to address their therapeutic needs. Executive-level leadership always requires involvement when providers contracted to care for complex care youth are denied placements despite having bed space available.

## **GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE**

Rural facilities face challenges in staffing, with juvenile correctional officers (JCOs) – direct care staff – having the highest vacancy rate. Other challenges facing rural Georgia are access to services and support for youth returning to their community from the detention centers. Many facilities need public transportation for staff and youth since many professional staff do not live in rural communities. Service staff such as food service, maintenance, administrative, financial, and personal vulnerabilities are desperately in need. The department reports the following:

### *Youth and Families Challenges*

- Access to health and behavioral health services;
- Dependent on parent/guardian’s insurance;
- Transportation;
- Lack of positive youth development activities; and
- Employment and support for parents/caregivers.

### *What is working well Rural Communities?*

- Community that values collaboration, engagement, and inclusion;
- View justice-involved youth as “our youth,” not DJJ youth;
- Afterschool and positive youth development activities;
- Active advisory council (facilities);
- Family Connections inclusion of justice-involved youth;
- The school system is inclusive; and
- Communities in Schools.

When services and supports are unavailable, children are pushed deeper into the juvenile justice system to access services or supervision. Positive supports noted above enhance protective factors such as prosocial involvement, strong social support, firm attachments and bonds, and a solid commitment to school counter risk factors. Adolescents transition successfully to adulthood and the workforce when their physical, emotional, and social development is supported in the context of their family and community.

## **THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE ON MENTAL ILLNESS**

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) informed the council members on EmPATH, the acronym for Emergency Psychiatric Assessment, Treatment, and Healing. EmPATH units are physical environments designed for acute psychiatric patients to receive assessment and treatment and to begin the process of healing. Rapid evaluation and comprehensive treatment planning by a psychiatrist or psychiatric prescribing provider allows for:

- Constant observation and re-evaluation;
- Ligature safe;
- Open nursing station with intermingling of staff and clients to facilitate socialization, discussion, interaction, and therapy; and
- Voluntary calming rooms with the elimination of locked seclusion rooms or restraints.

EmPATH units provide a calm and comforting environment for patients, allowing movement and, more importantly, human interaction that is vital in the first 24 hours of treatment, something often not available in the emergency department. EmPATH units streamline emergency department assessment of mental health. Approximately one in seven of all emergency department (ED) visits nationwide are mental health related. At least 7-8 million emergency psychiatric assessments are made each year in the U.S. Treatment at an EmPATH unit is initiated within one hour of arrival. Most psychiatric emergencies, like other medical emergencies, can be resolved in less than 24 hours with prompt, appropriate intervention. Patients typically get better within 14–18 hours as the goal of an EmPATH unit is to keep stays shorter than 24 hours.

South Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services (SCDHHS) identified the state's lack of behavioral health crisis stabilization services as a clear area of need. To address this need, SCDHHS created a \$35 million grant opportunity to increase crisis stabilization services in hospitals across the state—the 2023 grant program funded 13 EmPATH units. Inpatient psychiatric admissions dropped from 57% of patients in the psych ED to 27% of patients in the EmPATH unit, significantly reducing demand for inpatient beds and overall costs. The 30-day rate of psych patients returning to the ED dropped by 25%, and outpatient follow-up of patients improved by 60%, from 39% to 63%.

EmPATH Goals are:

- Prevent unnecessary admissions — frees up inpatient beds for those most in need and, in turn, reduces payer denials.
- Provide more care that is compassionate — though these units serve high-risk populations, less than 1% of patients require restraint, sedation, or other coercive treatments.
- Improve emergency department throughput — reduces boarding for participating hospitals, freeing up beds to improve throughput and reduce the number of left-without-being-seen patients.
- Increase patient and provider satisfaction — caring for patients in a supportive setting apart from the emergency department speeds recovery. It reduces the likelihood of aggressive behavior toward staff.

Key features of the grant program include:

- One-time funding to establish EmPATH units in hospitals in return for hospitals' agreement to operate the EmPATH units for at least three years.
- Operate as a "No Wrong Door" facility.
- Provide psychiatric evaluation, diagnosis, and initiation of treatment, including assessment, stabilization, treatment, and referral for substance use disorder/chemical dependence.
- Provide crisis stabilization, intervention, and mental health counseling.
- Provide peer support as part of the EmPATH services.
- Coordinate with community providers to ensure the continuation of care after leaving the unit.

## Recommendations

Georgia's rural workforce continues to be challenged with record economic development success, and more job openings than job seekers are available. From 2020 to 2023, over 120,000 jobs have been announced, with manufacturing, automotive, and logistics/distribution being the top three industry sectors. However, agribusiness is near the bottom, with roughly 1,374 jobs announced. The workforce participation rate in rural Georgia now ranges from 59.9%-69.9%. Most working-age Georgians have a job, but long-term demographic shifts will influence the future of rural workforce obtainability. By promoting a more efficient infrastructure, workforce development is one of Rural Georgia's solutions.

Georgia has a robust educational pipeline, but indicators show that more work on literacy, post-graduation planning, and technical skills is required. Numerous factors, like workforce housing and quality childcare, influence workforce availability. One barrier to housing access for Georgia workers is the availability of homes for sale. Georgia's monthly supply of the number of homes currently listed for sale has declined over the past decade. The pandemic expedited this trend, with 2021 and 2022 seeing only one month's one-month supply of inventory available for purchase. Childcare continues to be a barrier to work in the state due to expense and lack of availability, with 2,685 total childcare establishments in 2022. Half of Georgians aged 25-64 who are not in the labor force have a child in their home. The pandemic caused a significant shift in flexible working locations as nearly 20% of working Georgians work from home.

The House Rural Development Council has shown interest in further developing rural Georgia. It firmly believes that the Georgia General Assembly should encourage state programs and services to assist our state, local, and regional partners in efficient decision-making and implementation. To best promote the development of rural Georgia, we must continue on our path to provide a pro-business climate with low taxes and minimal regulation. We should continue our efforts to develop a highly skilled, educated workforce and provide adequate funding to state agencies, facilities, and research laboratories for staffing needs. These steps will show the developers and businesses that rural Georgia should be their destination.

The House Rural Development Council applauds the groundbreaking work and persistence of the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation and the Rural Health Innovation Center. The employees of these centers, created by the direction of the RDC, work tirelessly to better the lives of all Georgians, particularly those citizens affected by the unique circumstances in rural areas. Moreover, the council appreciates the work of all the public servants who work with the RDC and other entities to continue increasing opportunities in rural Georgia. At this time, these are the steps recommended by this council:

1. Legislation to address financial reporting requirements communities. In consultation with Mr. Greg Griffin, the Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts, legislative counsel, and other appropriate officials, consider legislation that can reduce the accounting and audit burden on municipalities, counties, and certain authorities whose total expenditures fall below a to-be-established threshold. The council has requested the Department of Audits to form a working group of individuals selected by the State Auditor, Mr. Greg Griffin. The purpose of this group is to provide recommendations for the 2025 session or earlier implementation. The group is expected to include Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and auditing firms that will be tasked with providing critical insights and suggestions. Taking such proactive steps ensures accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness in delivering quality services to rural communities.

- a. Benefits that could accrue from such changes include increasing the number of entities that are compliant with state accounting and audit requirements included in, but not limited to § 36-60-8, § 36-81-3, and § 36-81-7.
- b. Risks should be minimal, depending on the threshold value established and with careful monitoring of future reporting under the new state requirement.

2. Rural infrastructure study. Authorize and fund a two-phase statewide assessment of conditions, capacity, and deferred maintenance related to municipal water and sewer systems in the state's 53 counties with a 2020 U.S. Census population of less than 15,000. A 2023 study by the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation showed that the gap between revenue and cost to maintain infrastructure widened from 1991 to 2021. Because of hyperinflation over the past 24 to 36 months, these communities are severely challenged to maintain and upgrade infrastructure. State investment is required if these communities are to remain viable.

Phase I would consist of communities self-reporting data on parameters (to be established by those conducting the study) that would allow for an initial assemblage of the accrued need in these counties. The work product from Phase I will be a report that provides a rubric for scoring, ranking, and establishing priorities to conduct Phase II, which would contract professional services (engineers) to determine the potential costs for maintenance.

a. Benefits that will accrue from the study will be information that is critical to state investment in infrastructure in rural communities. The study will identify crises, which can be used to direct investment to communities that are likely candidates for future economic expansion and provide much-needed information on how to best deal with the infrastructure reaching the end of its life cycle.

b. Risks of financial failure, inability to sustain existing business, and inability to support future economic growth will occur without state investment. Without such a study, state investment will result in ineffective and inefficient use of resources, which will not likely lead to the desired economic impact on the recipient communities.

3. Sewer/water pilot project. Authorize the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation to undertake a pilot or proof-of-concept project to bundle state/federal resources across county lines (thus communities) to improve efficiency and effectiveness and achieve economy of scale.

a. Benefits will accrue by bundling several small grants into a single award that can be managed, engineered, bid on, and performed in aggregate. This project will overcome inadequacies of personnel and professional services in tiny communities. A cross-county study may also reveal the benefits of working across county lines, i.e., regional cooperation.

b. Failure to do so will mean that numerous small awards will continue, often too small to have a meaningful impact, which many communities inefficiently and ineffectively implement.

4. Rural Innovation Fund and/or other rural-specific funding. Undertake oversight, legislation, or other actions to clarify the purpose and use of funds held by the OneGeorgia Authority under the Rural Innovation Fund (RIF). These funds were appropriated during the 2021 session and are

available for expenditure during the FY 2023 budget and going forward. To date, there is a lack of information about the availability of funds, eligibility requirements, criteria for grants versus loans, and terms of awards. There is a lack of transparency regarding project proposals, projects awarded, and projects denied.

a. Benefits include ensuring that funds appropriated are used efficiently and effectively towards the intended purpose. Prior to legislative action and appropriation during the 2021 session, a January 2021 article by Capitol Beat reported that Governor Kemp stated the idea for a RIF came during the past year as he and his advisors thought about ways to reopen Georgia's economy amid the coronavirus pandemic safely. The Governor added that the state Department of Community Affairs provides loans and grants to help cities and counties across rural Georgia acquire land and build infrastructure that will help them attract new businesses or expand existing companies. However, Governor Kemp also stated that he wanted something new and different, and having a separate fund from what the Department of Community Affairs typically allocates provides some alternatives. Alternative funds will provide some flexibility. We share this sentiment but question whether the RIF has been used toward the stated goals. Clarification is needed.

b. Risks associated with not doing so include failure to spend these funds in a manner to meet critical needs in many rural communities.

5. Joint Office of Rural Affairs. State government agencies and House and Senate committees are organized thematically - suggested by policy and function. As such, both executive branch agencies and legislative committees typically function in response to internal and external forces related to their area of responsibility. Furthermore, by nature, they often become operationally focused rather than strategically focused. The challenges that face rural Georgia cut across these functional areas, specifically why Speaker David Ralston created the House Rural Development Council (HRDC). He assumed that by creating a council that included representatives from across rural Georgia and the chairpersons of key Georgia House committees, the Council could address rural Georgia's needs more holistically.

Among the conclusions reached by the HRDC in 2017 was that the State needed to focus on issues facing rural Georgia. Among the HRDC's resolutions and recommendations for the 2018 session



was the passage of legislation to create an entity that could focus its attention on rural Georgia. Hence, the passage of HB 951 that created the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation called for a position in the Department of Economic Development to focus on rural Georgia and called for cooperation among agencies with the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation to benefit the State.

Finally, the primary purpose of the Rural Caucus is to bring focused attention to the needs of rural Georgia. Rural Georgia faces unique challenges politically, financially, and educationally. More importantly, rural Georgia is home to agriculture and forestry. Agriculture is the number one business in Georgia, and Georgia is the number one forestry state in the union. The State of Georgia desperately needs agencies, committees, and initiatives focused on the sustainability of rural Georgia, but the State of Georgia desperately needs legislative focus on these matters. Engendering executive branch agencies and legislative committees to work collectively with purpose on behalf of rural Georgia has proven very challenging.

Proposal. The accomplishments of the Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation over the past five years point to the potential when mission, strategy, tactics, and effort are directed at outcome. Programs are essential tools of government, but they often become tools of bureaucracy, focusing on program operation and lack of focus on outcome. As effective as the Center has been, its accomplishments are inhibited by a limited budget, a situation within the USG, and a lack of access to funding and cooperation with agencies. Increasing the Center's budget will allow it to accomplish much more, but what is needed is a new focus on rural Georgia.

Use the House Rural Development Council and the knowledge and findings that have emerged from its work over the past seven years as a vehicle to establish a Joint Legislative Office of Rural Affairs that can work with and under the direction of the House, the Senate, and a Joint House/Senate Rural Caucus. A Joint Legislative Office of Rural Affairs could assist both House and Senate leadership in focusing their efforts on legislation, policy, appropriations, and agency oversight that could drive change.

6. Rural Hospitals. Rural hospitals across the state are suffering. Payor mixes, recruitment/retention challenges, low population densities, aged or aging facilities, and post-pandemic effects will continue to cause operational challenges, including additional hospital closures. The HRDC should strongly advocate for legislation, agency policy, tax credits, and appropriations to improve the financial position of rural hospitals. Changes to make the Georgia Rural Hospital Tax Credit program more effective and increase the cap should be encouraged. Any legislative actions that encourage reviewing and reconsidering funding for the Rural Hospital Stabilization Program, including creating a Rural Hospital Stabilization Commission, should be favorably considered.

7. Georgia Sustainable Forest Incentive Program. Today, timber prices paid to forest landowners have declined over 40% (pine saw-timber) since their peak around 2006. Equally, reforestation for forest landowners, including the costs of seedlings, labor, and fuel, have all increased. Recurring costs such as ad valorem taxes on forestland and timber revenues have also increased. Costs to implement prescribed burning practices have also increased due to labor, fuel costs, and insurance premiums. Rising expenses make it difficult for consultant foresters, private contractors, and landowners to implement sound forest management. In 2022, Forestry contributed 42 billion dollars to Georgia's economy and provided 140,787 jobs in Georgia.

Purpose: The Georgia Sustainable Forests Incentive Program aims to promote reforestation and prescribed burning to ensure a sustainable forest supply for Georgia's forest economy. Proper forest stand establishment often has the most significant influence on future stand productivity; therefore, an incentive for landowners to properly establish new timber stands after a final harvest is essential to Georgia's sustainability mission. A cost-share program provided to eligible landowners to help offset the high costs of site preparation and tree planting will ensure that harvested forests are replanted with quality native tree species.

Prescribed burning is an important forest management tool that helps reduce fuel loads in our forest while promoting forest health. A cost-share program to help offset prescribed burning costs will promote this valuable tool and help landowners accomplish their objectives on their property while reducing the threat of wildfire. Benefits of this program include ensuring sustainable timber supply

for the forest products sector, forest health, water and air quality, wildlife habitat, soil stability, economic impact, and carbon storage to mitigate climate change. Investing in forests can be a powerful supplement to ensure we are tackling climate change and safeguarding rural communities that rely on growing timber for forest products.

Cost-share opportunities are currently available from multiple agencies for forestry and agricultural practices. Demand far exceeds the supply of reforestation and prescribed burning cost share funds, resulting in many landowners being turned down and unable to accomplish their forest management objectives. Due to a lack of funding, landowners are adversely impacted through their time and forestry investment, ultimately affecting forest management decisions and Georgia's forest health. The Georgia Forestry Commission (GFC) estimates that 15-30% of private landowners are generally approved for currently available incentive opportunities.

Proposal: The average annual harvest volume in Georgia is 35 million green tons of pine, which is 4.8% of the total gross volume of standing pine timber harvested annually in Georgia. As a result, substantial acreage must be replanted. This program aims to provide sufficient funding to cover the reforestation or prescribe burning of at least 20,000 acres annually. The proposal includes five million in annual funding, a maximum of \$15,000 per landowner, and a 10-acre minimum area to be planted or prescribed burned.

Eligibility: Non-industrial private forest landowners are eligible to apply. Non-industrial private forest landowners are defined as private individuals, groups, associations, corporations, Indian tribes or other native groups, or other private legal entities, excluding corporations whose stocks are publicly traded or legal entities principally engaged in the processing or manufacturing wood products. Reforestation and prescribed burning should be in support of forests for timber production.

Reforestation incentive: Landowners should apply to plant a minimum of 10 acres. At the time of application, the land should be considered non-forested, including crop, pasture, fallow land, or recently clear-cut land ("clear-cut" meaning the removal of all standing, merchantable timber).

Prescribe burning incentive: Landowners should apply to prescribe burning a minimum of 10-forested acres (no site prep or agriculture burning can be included). Stands can comprise southern yellow pine or mixed pine/hardwood.

Payment Rates: The following are the eligible practices and maximum payments (practices implemented below the maximum will be reimbursed at cost). Rates should be based upon 75% of average market pricing. Rates are subject to change based on future market pricing:

#### Site Preparation

- Chemical spraying - \$70 per acre
- Prescribe Burning (firebreaks included) - \$20 per acre
- Light Mechanical (disking, subsoiling/scalping) - \$75 per acre
- Heavy Mechanical (KG sheering, root raking, roller chopping) - \$160 per acre
- Bedding - \$50/acre

#### Planting

- Hand planting (with dibble bar, hoedad, or other tools) - \$60 per acre
- Machine planting (use of a tractor and tree planter) - \$80 per acre (not including seedlings)
- Longleaf/Hardwood seedlings (\$150 per 1,000 seedlings)
- Other southern yellow pine seedlings (\$60 per 1,000 seedlings)

#### Forest Understory Prescribe Burning

- Prescribe Burning (firebreaks included) - \$20 per acre

Commitment: Landowners should implement all eligible cost-share practices according to the resource management plan provided by the GFC management forester. Landowners must have a minimum of 400 properly planted trees per acre or 300 trees per acre surviving at the time of a fall survival check. Hardwood plantings will be subject to GFC foresters' standards in the resource management plan with a minimum survival rating of 150 trees per acre. In the event of a natural disaster or forest fire requiring the deployment of state and local resources, it is essential to maintain acreage to reduce the risk to state and local personnel or response assets.

Prescribe burning practices must be completed according to the forester resource management plan. Use burning techniques that minimize crown scorch. Areas with severe crown scorch will be deducted from the payment acreage at the time of the performance check. All practices must comply with Georgia Recommended Best Management Practices.

8. Rural Georgia's Film and Entertainment Industry.

1. **A 10% film tax credit to Georgia's Entertainment Industry Investment Act for rural areas of the state.** This tax credit is to help even the playing field for rural areas. Many factors make choosing a rural site for film production much more costly for small and large businesses, including but not limited to increased travel costs for importing crews and shipment of equipment and supplies.
2. **Funding for educational and training programs that teach film and entertainment career skills to support the Georgia Film Academy's expansion into rural communities.** Funding will help educational and training programs bridge the skills gap to meet the needs of rural Georgia's growing film and entertainment industry. It will also aid and support rural communities with their preparation of facilities to meet the requirements for partnership eligibility with the Georgia Film Academy, allowing GFA to establish a program in the community. This will result in more rural workforce development opportunities and boost enrollment at technical schools throughout rural Georgia.
3. **Adopt an incentive for other creative art productions and workforce development programs in the creative sector.** Graphic arts, music, and other forms of creative art provide job creation and economic growth opportunities. The [Texas Moving Image Industry Incentive Program \(TMIIP\)](#) is designed to build the economy through the moving image industry and create jobs in Texas. TMIIP provides qualifying film, television, commercial, animation, visual effects, videogame, extended reality (XR), and other moving image productions the opportunity to receive a cash grant based on a percentage of a project's eligible Texas expenditures, including eligible wages paid to Texas residents. Grants vary by budget levels and types of productions and are issued upon reviewing the

project's Texas expenditures. This incentive program is in addition to Texas's sales tax exemptions.

4. **Provide additional funding and support for the Georgia Film Commission and encourage the development of a rural division.** The rural division staff will serve the Camera-Ready County liaisons, focusing on operations in underserved areas outside Metro Atlanta. This initiative might also include regular reporting to the Georgia House Creative Arts Committee. Over 90% of Georgia's film projects happen in Metro Atlanta, so most of the Georgia Film Commission's resources are depleted before reaching the state's rural regions.
5. **Encourage local governments/municipalities to adopt their own entertainment industry investment incentives.** This will help provide parity with the Atlanta market in attracting investment and production to rural areas.

9. Rural Zone Recommendation. From 2018 to 2022, Rural Zones under the Department of Community Affairs created 970 new jobs. Approximately \$21 million has been invested in properties purchased, with \$5,228,221 distributed in Rural Zone tax credits. The Department of Community Affairs has also distributed \$4,521,396 in rehabilitation costs.

Proposal: Georgia should allow Rural Zone cities to extend the designation or boundaries within city limits for a set time upon documentation of continued or anticipated private sector participation in the program. Allowing communities the flexibility to adjust the local district footprints based on market demands and including historic residential housing as eligible for tax credits will add more benefits to supplementing the state's work in addressing the housing shortages in Georgia. Authorizing the Department of Community Affairs and the Georgia Department of Revenue to coordinate and share information on private sector participants in each designated Rural Zone community can foster more job creation in rural cities.

10. Georgia Heirs Property. The House Rural Development Council identifies heirs' property as a barrier to workforce housing, economic development, and natural disaster recovery in rural

Georgia. In a presentation by the Georgia Heirs Property Law Center, the Council learned that \$47 billion in probable heirs' property statewide is undermining Georgia's communities. Heirs property refers to property that passes through several generations without a legally designated owner, resulting in ownership divided among numerous individuals or entities as tenants in common. This unstable form of ownership limits a family's ability to build generational wealth, prevents farmers from accessing the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), financing, and conservation programs, thwarts the efforts of municipalities to revitalize neighborhoods, and prevents storm victims from accessing disaster relief assistance.

In partnership with the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, Georgia Forestry Commission, and Georgia Department of Agriculture, the Georgia Heirs Property Law Center increases generational wealth, economic value, and community stability by securing and preserving property rights of low- and moderate-income Georgians. The Council encourages continued state support for addressing heirs property.