



The Front Porch

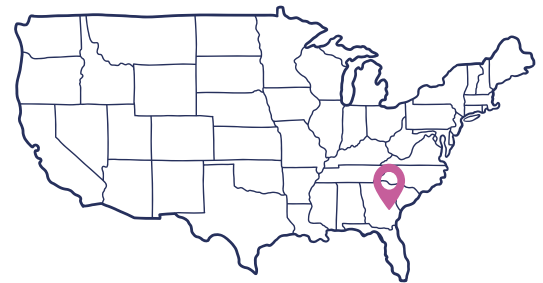
City of Savannah & Chatham County, Georgia

Preventing youth from entering the justice system through a Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC) and early intervention approach

I. Overview

With the highest rate of juvenile court referrals in the state of Georgia, leaders in the City of Savannah and Chatham County knew they needed to improve outcomes for youth in their community. In 2015, collaborative talks among the Chatham County Juvenile Courts, Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools, and the Savannah-Chatham County Police Department began. Supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, these talks led to a number of innovative youth diversion programs,¹ including the Front Porch. The Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC) opened its doors in October 2018² and has continued operations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Front Porch is an early intervention program designed to prevent youth from cycling through the juvenile justice system.³ Inspired by the success of multi-agency resource centers in other states,⁴ the Front Porch brings together multiple service providers in a single location, bridging silos and creating a "one-stop shop" where local youth and their families are connected to wraparound support. These services include mental and behavioral health support, academic support, mentoring, and even free clothing.



The program's goal is to provide services to address the problems children in the region face before they become delinquent. Early intervention diverts youth from the courts and deeper justice-system involvement.⁵ By providing at-risk youth—who are disproportionately poor and from communities of color—with access to supportive services that help them to avoid the school-to-prison pipeline and the justice system, the Front Porch contributes to the well-being, mobility, and economic success of youth. The program's impact has been dramatic: In its first year of operation, referrals from Savannah-Chatham schools to the County Juvenile Court declined by 85%.

1. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2019). In Georgia, a School District Reduces Its Reliance on Juvenile Courts. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/in-georgia-a-school-district-reduces-its-reliance-on-juvenile-courts>
2. Skutch, J. (2018). Juvenile Court Methods Change to Help Kids, Chatham County. <https://www.onlineathens.com/news/20181207/juvenile-court-methods-change-to-help-kids-chatham-county>
3. Chatham County. (n.d.). Eastern Judicial Circuit of Georgia - Juvenile Court In-House Programs. <https://courts.chathamcountyga.gov/Juvenile/Programs>
4. Velazquez, B., Fratello, J., Salsich, A., and Lau, V (VERA Institute of Justice). (2014). Outcome Evaluation of Calcasieu Parish's Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC). <https://www.calcasieuparish.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/3584/636064246813170000>

County/City Demographic Profile

	Chatham County, GA	Savannah, GA
Size (square miles)	433	104
Total Population	289,430	144,457
Population Density	668/sq. mile	1,390/sq. mile
Race & Ethnicity		
Asian	2.9%	2.6%
Black or African American	41.2%	53.9%
Hispanic	6.7%	5.8%
White	53%	38.9%
Other	2.8%	3.2%
Workforce & Economic Indicators		
Unemployment Rate	3.8%	4.2%
Poverty Rate (persons below poverty line)	14%	19.4%
Child Poverty Rate (<18 below poverty line)	20%	29%
Median Household Income	\$57,611	\$45,533

City/County Governance

The City of Savannah has a council/manager form of government. The City Council, which consists of the Mayor and eight Aldermen, levies taxes, passes ordinances, adopts the annual budget, and appoints the City Manager. The City Manager is responsible for carrying out policies and programs established by the Council and recommending the annual budget. Chatham County is governed by a Board of Commissioners and an appointed County Manager.

5. Robertson, N. (2020). *The Front Porch Celebrates Two Years of Assisting Chatham County's At-Risk Youths and Families*. <https://www.onlineathens.com/story/news/2020/10/19/front-porch-celebrates-2-years-of-assisting-chatham-countys-at-risk-youths-and-families/114773860/>

II. Need for Collaboration/The Challenge

High rates of juvenile justice system involvement

Justice system involvement can have long-standing negative impacts on the quality of life and economic mobility of individuals. For many years, Chatham County has had especially high levels of juvenile delinquency compared to other parts of the state, pointing to a critical need for reform.⁶ For example, in 2018:

- Chatham County had the highest number of court-involved youth in Georgia, with nearly twice the number of court-involved youth as any other county in the state.
- Chatham County incarcerated the second-highest number of youth in the state.

Anti-Black racism

Savannah and Chatham County have a history as a seat of slavery and anti-Black policies. These long-standing structural injustices have led to the disenfranchisement of Black Georgians, who are disproportionately represented among the justice-involved population. This structural bias is visible in the rates of juvenile justice system involvement of Black youth in the County:⁷

- Between 2014 and 2016, 2,554 Savannah youth aged 18 and under were arrested. Of those arrested, 80% were Black and 72% were boys.
- In 2018, 1,191 youth were referred to juvenile court as delinquents; 65% were Black males from high-poverty neighborhoods and schools.
- In 2018, Black boys were more than six times more likely to be referred to court for delinquency than white boys.
- Among all Georgia counties, Chatham County experienced the highest frequency of disproportionate contact between Black youth and the juvenile justice system between 2006 and 2014.⁸

Deep-rooted school-to-prison pipeline⁹

- After the police department, the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System (SCCPSS) was the second main source of juvenile court referrals in the County.
- SCCPSS students of color comprised 85.2% of court referrals (with Black students specifically representing 81.2% of referrals), while they represent 71.8% of enrollment (Black students totaling 57.4%).
- According to preliminary 2017-2018 data submitted by the SCCPSS, Black students were more than eight times as likely as white peers to be referred to a law enforcement agency.

6. Deep Center (2019). *Our Stories Are the Evidence: Youth-Powered Policy Recommendations for a More Equitable Savannah* [Policy Brief]. <https://theseap.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-Deep-Policy-Brief.pdf>

7. Deep Center (2019). *Our Stories Are the Evidence: Youth-Powered Policy Recommendations for a More Equitable Savannah*. <https://theseap.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-Deep-Policy-Brief.pdf>

8. Georgia Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. (2018). *Disproportionate Minority Contact in Georgia's Juvenile Justice System: A Three Prong Approach to Analyzing DMC in Georgia*. <https://cjc.georgia.gov/document/disproportionate-minority-contact-georgias-juvenile-justice-system-three-prong-approach/download>

9. Deep Center (2019). *Our Stories Are the Evidence: Youth-Powered Policy Recommendations for a More Equitable Savannah*. <https://theseap.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-Deep-Policy-Brief.pdf>

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Evidence shows that increased access to wraparound support services can divert youth from the criminal justice system. However, it is difficult for most families to navigate the complex web of public and nonprofit service providers in the Chatham County region. Centralizing services through collaboration between public agencies and nonprofit service providers can increase access to needed services and reduce justice involvement, court involvement, arrest, and recidivism.

As one 2019 policy brief put it:

“Chatham County’s extraordinarily high number of court-involved youth is indicative not of the character of Savannah’s young people but of our propensity to sentence youth—especially boys and girls of color—when we should be serving them.”¹⁰



10. Deep Center (2019).

III. The Partners

A cross-agency group came together initially to share information and identify solutions in the City and County. This group included:

- Savannah Police Chief Joseph Lumpkin
- Chatham County
- City of Savannah
- County judges (LeRoy Burke and Lisa Colbert)
- SCCPSS Superintendent
- Annie E. Casey Foundation (technical assistance)

This group identified three priority goals, one of which was to create a joint resource center – The Front Porch. The agencies that helped plan, develop, and operate the Front Porch resource center include:¹¹

- Chatham County Juvenile Court
- Chatham County Commission
- City of Savannah
- SCCPSS
- Chatham County District Attorney's office
- Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council
- Healthy Savannah Inc.
- State of Georgia Division of Family and Children Services
- Gateway Community Service Board
- Coastal Georgia Indicators Coalition
- St. Joseph's/Candler
- Mediation Center of the Coastal Empire, Inc.
- Coastal Georgia Indicators Coalition (CGIC)
- Invest Health Collaborative
- Annie E. Casey Foundation (technical assistance)

Evidence shows that increased access to wraparound support services can divert youth from the criminal justice system. However, it is difficult for most families to navigate the complex web of public and nonprofit service providers in the Chatham County region.

11. Skutch, J. (2018). Juvenile Court Methods Change to Help Kids, Chatham County. <https://www.onlineathens.com/news/20181207/juvenile-court-methods-change-to-help-kids-chatham-county>

IV. The Shared Goal

The cross-agency collaborative identified three goals they wanted to focus on to address the high rates of juvenile justice system involvement and anti-Black racism. These included:



The third goal led to the creation of the Front Porch, which seeks to decrease the number of youth (under the age of 18) who come in contact with the juvenile court system in Chatham County and disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Its goals are twofold:

1. Better serve youth and families so that all youth are empowered to heal, grow, and thrive despite the systemic barriers to their well-being.
2. Reduce crime and increase public safety in the region.

V. How Partners Collaborated



Impetus & Levers for the Collaboration

- **Embarrassing and sobering data:** According to its own court data, Chatham County had the highest rate of juvenile court involvement in the entire state. This fact catalyzed the community to seek solutions that reduce the number of youth entering the court system. It also mobilized judges who did not want to be a part of a broken judicial system.
- **An urgent need:** Escalating violence in the community and specific violent events pushed leaders to address juvenile delinquency.
- **External interest and support:** The Annie E. Casey Foundation approached the City and County after completing its own analysis identifying Chatham as the Georgia county with the highest rate of juvenile justice system involvement.
- **State incentive and prioritization:** In 2013, Governor Nathan Deal passed a landmark measure to overhaul the juvenile justice system in Georgia (H.B. 242).¹² Thus, at the time the Collaboration in Chatham County was beginning (in 2015), the state government was providing dedicated state funding to support community-based juvenile justice reform and diversion programs.



What Partners Did

In light of data showing Savannah as the leader in youth incarceration in Georgia, the collaborative was formed. Representatives from the Annie E. Casey Foundation then began convening stakeholders and sparking conversations about what could be done. Activities included:

- **Learning journeys:** Partners visited innovative programs to see how other jurisdictions were diverting youth from the system and coordinating to increase impact.
 - » Visited Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles
 - » Visited a parish in Louisiana with an existing Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC) program
- **Data sharing:** Data from the juvenile court system, police department, and school systems was shared among stakeholders for the first time. Prior to this, each stakeholder had information but held it close.¹³ Sharing data enabled partners to identify opportunities to help young people in Savannah.
- **High-profile advocates for change:** Influential County judges Burke and Colbert made presentations at County/City meetings to galvanize the movement; Police Chief Lumpkin and the school superintendent would join them. As a unified front, these officials visibly elevated the issue and kept it in the minds of City Council and the Board of Commissioners. The judges convinced the City and County to engage and be part of a solution. To build momentum, they also conducted presentations and data-sharing events across the County to galvanize others.
- **Community conversations:** In 2017, the juvenile court, the police department, and the school system hosted a series of Community Safety Forums to increase awareness about the need for an innovative intervention program, including a MARC. These sessions were attended by more than 200 community members and built support for their efforts.¹⁴

Judges, police chiefs, school superintendents, nonprofit leaders, and other key public and private stakeholders eventually came together to plan and launch the Front Porch in Savannah.

12. Pew Charitable Trusts (n.d.) Georgia's 2013 Juvenile Justice Reform. https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs/content-level_pages/reports/georgia20201320juvenile20justice20reform20summary20briefjuly2013pdf.pdf

13. Skutch, J. (2018). Juvenile Court Methods Change to Help Kids, Chatham County. <https://www.onlineathens.com/news/20181207/juvenile-court-methods-change-to-help-kids-chatham-county>

14. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2017). One Georgia County Reimagines Its Response to Juvenile Delinquency. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/one-georgia-county-reimagines-its-response-to-juvenile-delinquency>



Structure of the Collaboration

The coordinated approach began as an informal convening of stakeholders brought together by the foundation, which was already doing justice reform work in Georgia. The effort was then institutionalized as Front Porch.

- **Regular stakeholder meetings:** The partners had meetings every four to six weeks. Smaller work groups also met around the three goals they set. The foundation provided program support for meetings, facilitation, and support with scheduling.
- **Juvenile court:** A March 2018 Juvenile Court Order created the Front Porch program as a means of bringing together all relevant community resources through a MARC. The agreement named the Juvenile Court as the lead to coordinate program efforts.¹⁵



Funding Sources

- The initial collaboration and planning process that led to the development of the Front Porch was largely supported by philanthropic dollars. Funders included the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Invest Health, and Georgetown University Center for Juvenile Justice Reform.¹⁶
- The Front Porch itself was created and funded through the pooling of resources from the City, County, and the police department. Their contributions resulted in a funding strategy that ensured the long-term sustainability of the Front Porch.
- **Specific contributions:**
 - » The City provided a building where the Front Porch could be housed in; the building is leased from the City by Chatham County for a nominal sum.
 - » The Chatham County Commission handles operational costs through the juvenile court.
 - » The County earmarked a portion of its general fund for the program (\$100,250 in FY20 and \$190,027 in FY21).¹⁷
 - » Partners shared staff across existing agencies, organizations, and programs.

15. Skutch, J. (2018). Juvenile Court Methods Change to Help Kids, Chatham County. <https://www.onlineathens.com/news/20181207/juvenile-court-methods-change-to-help-kids-chatham-county>

16. City of Savannah. (2018). Invest Health Savannah & The MARC Collaborative. http://agenda.savannahga.gov/content/files/marc_update-cos-council-v05082018.pdf

17. Chatham County. (n.d.). Fiscal Year 2020-2021 Adopted Budget. <https://cccdn.blob.core.windows.net/cdn/Files/ChathamCounty/Finance/Adopted%20Budgets/2020-2021/FY2021AdoptedBudget.pdf>



VI. Keys to Success

- **Shared commitment and goals:** All partners working on the Front Porch project were committed to improving outcomes for local youth. This shared mission made it possible for individuals to overcome ego and turf issues. As Chatham County District Attorney Meg Heap said, "At the end of the day, what we all care about in this community are our kids. We want them safe, we want to get them the resources they need."¹⁸
- **Leveraging data to build buy-in:** Collaborators used sobering data about youth justice involvement to identify a challenge, build interest and consensus with the community, and spark action with key stakeholders.
- **Learning journeys showed what is possible:** Partners visited various programs across the U.S. to learn from other communities' intervention efforts. These trips allowed partners to truly imagine what was possible and buy into a vision for change. Front Porch was inspired by a similar MARC that partners saw on a trip to Louisiana.
- **Strong champions and leaders:** Development of the Front Porch was spearheaded by well-respected community leaders, including Judge Burke and Judge Colbert. Both judges had strong relationships with residents, elected officials, and local agency leaders. Police Chief Lumpkin and the school superintendent were also vocal leaders who helped garner support.
- **Human resources and staff support from a third-party convener:** The Annie E. Casey Foundation provided technical assistance and strategic planning support. The foundation convened key stakeholders, helped analyze data, and built momentum around the need to address juvenile court involvement. Although judges and other community leaders were the faces of the collaborative, the foundation played a major background support role, overseeing much of the administrative and operational work.

"At the end of the day, what we all care about in this community are our kids. We want them safe, we want to get them the resources they need."

**- Chatham County
District Attorney**

18. Evans, S. (2018). *The Front Porch Multi-Agency Resource Center Opens in Savannah*. <https://www.wtoc.com/2018/12/11/front-porch-multi-agency-resource-center-opens-savannah/>

VII. Challenges & Lessons Learned

- **Time-intensive nature of collaboration:** It took almost four years for talks to materialize into a resource center on the ground. The slow pace is a common challenge among these types of initiatives, yet the development of the Front Porch demonstrates that the investment in relationship-building, program exploration, and planning can be worthwhile.
- **Change of elected leadership:** The Front Porch was developed within the context of a larger state-level political atmosphere that prioritized youth services, specifically juvenile justice system reform. Changes in leadership at the state level may present a challenge in the future.

VIII. Collaboration Impact

Since opening its doors in 2018, the Front Porch has remained consistently in operation, serving hundreds of local youth and creating a measurable impact in the rates of juvenile court involvement in Chatham County.

- In the center's first 12 months of operation (2018–2019), referrals from Savannah–Chatham schools to the County Juvenile Court declined by 85%. During the 2018–2019 school year, only 52 students were referred to court from SCCPSS, compared to 345 students in the 2013–2014 school year.¹⁹
- The Front Porch has served more than 700 families over the past three years.²⁰

In addition to these outcomes, the Front Porch is creating a lasting impact as a model for progressive reform and systems change in the region. One local organization notes that the program exemplifies a: "shift from a dominant culture of punishment and discipline to one of healing, care, and transformation," and that through its holistic approach to serving youth in the community, the Front Porch has created "fertile ground" for ongoing work and regional transformation in Savannah and Chatham County.²¹

19. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2019). In Georgia, a School District Reduces Its Reliance on Juvenile Courts. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/in-georgia-a-school-district-reduces-its-reliance-on-juvenile-courts>

20. GlobGov (2021). The Front Porch. <https://www.globgov.com/US/Savannah/690127564740229/The-Front-Porch>

21. Deep Center (2019). Our Stories Are the Evidence: Youth-Powered Policy Recommendations for a More Equitable Savannah. <https://theseap.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-Deep-Policy-Brief.pdf>

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RESOURCES

Official Front Porch Facebook Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/TFPSavannah/>

Front Porch Public Brochure:

<https://spwww.sccpss.com/schools/wfes/Pages/The-Front-Porch.aspx>