The Courts Are Under-Resourced Too

The earlier papers in this series are about structure: no public registry of guardians ad litem, no training floor, no oversight home. This paper is about something more basic, and it cuts in the courts' favor as much as against anyone. Georgia's family courts decide the most consequential questions in a child's life — where the child lives, who the child sees, whether the child goes home — with too few court reporters to make the record, too few judges for the caseload, courtrooms full of families with no lawyer, and, for custody cases, no rule that says how soon a case must be heard at all. A court that cannot record what happened cannot be reviewed; a court that cannot hear a case for a year cannot protect a childhood that will not wait a year. Under-resourcing and unaccountability are not two separate failures. They compound each other, and funding the record — and the clock — is itself an accountability reform.

What this paper is — and is not

This is a systems paper from a grassroots project, written anonymously by design. It names no family, describes no individual case, and accuses no judge, clerk, reporter, or official of misconduct; the people who staff Georgia's courts are working inside a shortage they did not create. Every factual claim rests on a published source the project opened and read, each listed in the Sources. Where a figure could not be verified from a source actually read, it is not used; the method note lists what was excluded and why.

1 · The record-keepers are missing

An appeal is only as good as the record beneath it. In Georgia family cases, the record begins with a person: a certified court reporter taking down what is said. That person is increasingly not there. Georgia's Chief Justice told the General Assembly so, in terms, on January 28, 2025. Recounting the shortage of court reporters "across our state," Chief Justice Michael P. Boggs reported that the Judicial Council's Standing Committee on Court Reporting Matters had spent the year on "the growing crisis," that the shortage "is felt nationwide and has only gotten worse in Georgia," and that its consequences are concrete: "delayed hearings in trial courts, delayed appeals to our appellate courts, and delayed closure for victims of crime." The judiciary's proposed remedy was modest — a bill giving trial judges the *option* of digital recording for many, but not all, proceedings — offered because "court reporters remain a vital part of court processes" and the system needs a way "to keep the wheels of justice moving without unnecessary delay."

What the shortage looks like in a single family's case is documented by a court's own published calendar. The Superior Court of Gwinnett County, Division 10, in its published non-jury domestic relations trial calendar for October 28, 2026, tells litigants:

> *"Given the critical shortage of court reporters and the court's duty to provide take-down for criminal cases, as well as strict criminal transcript filing deadlines, the courts can no longer guarantee that an official court reporter will be available for takedown in all civil/domestic matters."*

The calendar states that the court's official reporter "will NOT BE PRESENT for this calendar." A family that wants its hearing recorded must arrange and pay for a reporter itself: take-down runs approximately $43.31 per hour (about $21.50 per hour if the parties share), and a transcript is a separate, prepaid service at approximately $4.00 per page. The calendar then states the consequence plainly: "Failure to have an OCR take down your case may affect any appeal from an

adverse ruling by the court." Read that sentence as a parent would: the hearing that decides where your child lives may happen with no official record at all — unless you can pay, in advance and by the hour, to create one. The statewide fee schedule tells the same story in smaller print: transcripts are priced per page, and attendance by the hour. In a shortage, the record of a custody case is a purchased item.

The shortage is not a failure of effort by the reporters who remain; it is a pipeline problem written into the structure. Georgia law permits no one to practice verbatim court reporting without a certificate of competency from the Board of Court Reporting or a temporary permit (O.C.G.A. § 15-14-28); reporters are officers of the court, examined and annually renewed under the Georgia Court Reporting Act. That floor protects the record's integrity — and it also means a court cannot hire its way out of a shortage on short notice. The national picture matches: a 2025 survey of state courts summarized by the National Center for State Courts found more than 70 percent of respondents reporting staffing shortages in the last year, 61 percent expecting them to continue, and the gaps "hitting every level — from courtroom clerks to interpreters to court reporters."

The General Assembly has begun to respond. House Bill 179 (2025), effective January 1, 2026, authorizes digital recording of certain proceedings under rules of the Supreme Court — the option the Chief Justice requested. But the same legislation keeps a certified human being responsible for the words: under new O.C.G.A. § 15-14-5(b), when a proceeding is digitally recorded, a transcript, if requested or required, "shall be prepared by a certified court reporter," who must transcribe it completely and accurately and certify it. A recording no one transcribes is a record no appellate court can use. The honest summary of this section is the one the Gwinnett calendar gives: in civil and domestic matters, Georgia courts can no longer guarantee the record. Everything else in this paper happens downstream of that sentence.

2 · The wider strain: judges, lawyers, data, and the people who speak for children

Too few judges for the docket. The Judicial Council's 2025 Superior Court Workload Assessment — the Administrative Office of the Courts' own annual accounting — counts 227 authorized superior court judgeships across 51 circuits, carrying a statewide average of 1,495 cases per judge on a three-year average, and a statewide judicial-need workload value of 1.09. A value above 1.0 means the work exceeds what the existing judgeships can carry. The same assessment shows what fills the docket: the statewide three-year average for domestic relations cases, 2,231 per circuit, is nearly double the average for general civil cases, 1,229.

Courtrooms full of families with no lawyer. The Judicial Council's *Georgia Civil Access to Justice* report (December 2023) counts self-represented litigants in domestic civil cases filed in Superior Courts: 39,153 in 2019, 30,700 in 2020, 38,636 in 2021, and 45,413 in 2022 — and warns the counts are likely understated, because data were missing from dozens of counties in the pandemic years. Its conclusion is structural, not personal: "more than 30,000 Georgians are unrepresented by counsel each year in domestic civil cases," and the lack of counsel "results in more continuances and less efficiency in court, delays in awards of child support, and greater demands on state resources." Every such case still requires a judge's time, a clerk's time, and — if anyone appeals — a reporter's record. Self-representation does not reduce the court's work; it increases it, per case, while the families least able to pay must also buy the take-down described in Section 1.

Legal deserts and fragmented records. The Chief Justice's 2025 address names the geographic edge of the problem: seven Georgia counties — all rural — have no licensed attorneys at all, "leaving more than 30,000 Georgians without access to legal representation in their home counties" for

"divorce, eviction, child support and custody disputes, adoptions and the like." The same address reports that trial-court case data are "siloed in more than 159 individual and disparate case management systems" lacking common functionality, definitional standards, and information-sharing. Fragmentation matters here in particular: a system that cannot count its cases consistently cannot measure how long they take — a point Section 3 returns to. Interpreter access shows the same pattern in miniature: the Judicial Council's bench materials require a diligent effort to appoint a properly credentialed interpreter and warn that failure to do so can result in reversible error on appeal — a safeguard that depends on a scarce professional being available when the calendar is called.

The people appointed to speak for children are stretched the same way. This project's earlier papers document the guardian ad litem side: no public registry of who serves, no statewide training floor with continuing education in custody cases, no oversight home other than the appointing judge. Read alongside this paper, those are capacity findings as much as accountability findings: a system that cannot say how many GALs it has cannot know whether it has enough, or where the gaps are. The volunteer side shows the arithmetic openly: Georgia CASA reports 14,406 children coming through the foster care system in fiscal year 2025, while its volunteers — 2,541 in fiscal year 2026 — served 7,831 children. Coverage of every county exists on paper; coverage of every child does not. None of this is an accusation against the judges, clerks, reporters, interpreters, GALs, or volunteers doing the work. It is a description of the load they carry.

3 · Time: the second shortage

A court can be short of people and short of time in two different ways. The first is the subject of Sections 1 and 2: not enough hands. The second is quieter: no rule that says how long a child's case may wait. This section asks the question the project is asked most often — *are there rules about how long this is allowed to take?* — and answers it from the texts themselves. The answer divides sharply by case type: where the state has taken a child into its own custody, the clocks are detailed and demanding; where two parents are litigating custody between themselves, Georgia has essentially no clock at all — while other states have written one.

3.1 Children experience time differently

The reason children's cases get clocks, where they get them, is not administrative tidiness. It is developmental. The foundational statement is Goldstein, Freud, and Solnit's *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child* (1973): placement decisions should reflect the child's sense of time, because children "cannot wait beyond their developmental tolerances — which gradually increase as a child gets older — without their well-being and future development being placed at risk." Current professional standards carry the same principle: the AFCC's model competencies for child protection mediators, endorsed by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, require awareness "that a child's sense of time is not the same as that of adults" and knowledge of the state and federal timelines for permanence. A year is a manageable fraction of an adult's life; for a four-year-old it is a quarter of everything the child has lived. Temporary arrangements do not feel temporary to the child living under them; they are simply the child's life, proceeding. Delay in family court has to be measured in the child's units, not the docket's.

3.2 Where the clocks exist: dependency

Georgia's Juvenile Code puts dependency cases — where DFCS has taken a child into foster care — on a detailed statutory clock. It is worth reading what the General Assembly wrote when it decided a child's case could not drift:

- **Preliminary protective hearing:** "held promptly and not later than 72 hours after such child is placed in foster care" (O.C.G.A. §§ 15-11-102(a), 15-11-145(a)), with the next court day substituted if the 72 hours expire on a weekend or holiday.
- **Petition:** if the child is not released, a dependency petition must be filed within five days of that hearing (§ 15-11-102(c)(1)).
- **Adjudication:** no later than ten days after the petition if the child remains in foster care; no later than 60 days after filing if not (§§ 15-11-102(b)(3), (c)(3); § 15-11-181(a)) — and § 15-11-181(a) adds a consequence: if adjudication is not completed within 60 days of the child's being taken into protective custody, the petition "may be dismissed without prejudice."
- **Disposition:** within 30 days after adjudication, if not held together with it (§ 15-11-102(b)(4), (c)(5)).
- **Review and permanency:** an initial periodic review within 75 days of removal and another within four months (§ 15-11-102(d)); permanency plan hearings no later than nine months after a child under seven enters foster care, or twelve months for a child seven or older, and every six months thereafter (§ 15-11-102(e)).

Federal law runs behind the state clock. Under the Adoption and Safe Families Act, a state's case review system must assure each child in foster care a permanency hearing "no later than 12 months after the date the child is considered to have entered foster care," and at least every 12 months thereafter (42 U.S.C. § 675(5)(C)); and at 15 of the most recent 22 months in foster care, the state "shall file a petition to terminate the parental rights" of the parents, subject to stated exceptions including relative placement and a documented compelling reason (42 U.S.C. § 675(5)(E)). These deadlines are the hard kind: statutory, keyed to dates any party can compute, with consequences — dismissal exposure, federal funding conditions — attached. They exist because legislatures accepted the premise of Section 3.1: in a child's case, delay is not neutral. It is an outcome.

3.3 The model and the neighbors: standards for family cases generally

Between a hard statutory deadline and no rule at all sits a third instrument: the case-processing time standard — a published benchmark, adopted by a supreme court or judicial council, against which courts measure themselves. The reference frame is the National Center for State Courts' *Model Time Standards for State Trial Courts* (2011), adopted by the Conference of Chief Justices and the Conference of State Court Administrators. For family cases — dissolution, divorce, and allocation of parental responsibility — the Model Standards say 75 percent of cases should be resolved within 120 days, 90 percent within 180 days, and 98 percent within 365 days, excluding statutory waiting periods. These numbers are goals — a yardstick for measuring court performance, as the NCSC's later survey work puts it — not deadlines whose breach voids a judgment. Most states have adopted some version of them — and even the model is ambitious in practice: the Family Justice Initiative's study of 147,436 domestic relations cases in eleven large urban courts (2016–17) found the 75th percentile for time to disposition was 263 days, about eight and a half months (national data, used here only to show the gap between benchmark and ordinary experience). Three state examples, each read from the court's own publication, show the range:

- **North Carolina — goals, in detail, including custody.** The North Carolina Family Court Time Standards, adopted in 1999 and amended in 2025, state on their face that the frames "represent maximum time limits that are 'goals.'" For custody: temporary orders in 100 percent of cases within 90 days of filing; permanent orders in 90 percent within 180 days and 100 percent within 360 days; orders filed within 30 days after a hearing. For child support, the standards incorporate a genuinely hard rule: N.C.G.S. § 50-32 requires support cases, paternity excepted, to be completed within 60

days of filing, extendable by 30 days in limited circumstances.

• **Ohio — disposition guidelines by case type.** Ohio's Rules of Superintendence, Rule 5.21, publish disposition guidelines just revised effective January 1, 2026: dissolutions with children, 100 percent in 3 months; marriage terminations with children, 95 percent in 18 months; change of custody, 95 percent in 12 months; juvenile dependency, 95 percent in 3 months and 100 percent in 4.5 months; permanent custody motions, 100 percent in 6.7 months. They are labeled guidelines — benchmarks reported against, not jurisdictional deadlines — but they are public and specific to children's cases. Florida's Rule 2.250 goes a step further: a "presumptive reasonable time" for domestic relations cases of 90 days uncontested and 180 days contested — stronger than a goal, weaker than a deadline.

3.4 Georgia's custody cases: a duty to decide motions, and no clock to be heard

Now Georgia's side, stated as precisely as the texts allow. This project searched for a Georgia rule setting a time limit — hard, presumptive, or aspirational — by which a custody or domestic relations case must be *heard* or *disposed*, across the Code provisions governing superior court practice and the Juvenile Code, the Uniform Superior Court Rules (including Rules 6, 8, and 24), Judicial Council and AOC publications (including the 2025 Workload Assessment and the 2023 Civil Access to Justice report), and the Supreme Court's published rules and committee reports. Within that coverage, the finding is this:

• **What Georgia has is a duty to *decide motions*, not a deadline to *hear cases*.** O.C.G.A. § 15-6-21 provides that in counties over 100,000 inhabitants, "it shall be the duty of the judge" to decide "promptly, within 90 days after the same have been argued before him or submitted to him without argument, all motions for new trials, injunctions, demurrers, and all other motions of any nature"; in smaller counties the period is 30 days. Three limits must be stated honestly. First, the clock runs from argument or submission — it governs the wait *after* a hearing, not the wait *for* one; a motion can wait unargued while the 90 days never begin. Second, it covers motions, not the scheduling of trials or final hearings. Third, its stated sanction is impeachment for persistent refusal — a constitutional remedy, not a self-executing consequence, with no automatic relief when the period passes. It is a real duty, and litigants invoke it. It is not a case-processing time standard.

• **The continuance rule regulates *how* a set case leaves the calendar, not *when* it gets on one.** Uniform Superior Court Rule 8.5 provides that continuances "will not be granted merely by agreement of counsel" and that cases leave a published trial calendar only by court direction. Nothing in Rule 8.5 — or elsewhere in the Uniform Rules located in this search — sets an outer time by which a domestic relations case must first be called.

• **Georgia publishes workload, not timeliness.** The AOC's annual assessment reports cases per judge and judicial-need values by circuit; it does not publish time-to-disposition for domestic relations cases, and no Georgia adoption of the NCSC Model Time Standards, or of any state case-processing time standard for domestic relations, was located in the publications searched. The contrast with Section 3.2 is the point: dependency cases carry a five-step statutory clock with a dismissal consequence, because the state is a party and federal money is conditioned on it. Custody cases between parents carry none — not a deadline, not a presumption, not a published goal. Temporary orders, entered early and meant to be brief, govern a child's school, home, and parenting time for as long as the final hearing waits, and nothing in Georgia's rules says how long that wait may be.

The project states this negative finding only to the extent of the coverage described above; if a Georgia court, circuit, or council has adopted a domestic-relations time standard that does not appear in the statewide sources searched, the project will publish it gladly. The statewide picture, on the sources read, is clear enough: the clock exists where the state took the child. Between parents, the calendar is the only clock there is.

4 · How the two failures compound

Put Sections 1 through 3 together and the compounding is mechanical, not rhetorical. A custody case waits behind a docket the judiciary's own workload value says exceeds the bench's capacity — and no rule is breached by the wait, because no rule governs it. If the family could not pay for take-down, the hearing that finally happens leaves no official record, and an appeal from an unrecorded hearing is an appeal in name only. If the case involves a guardian ad litem, there is no registry against which to check the appointment, no published training floor against which to measure the work, and no oversight home other than the appointing judge — a judge carrying some 1,495 cases a year. Each shortage hides the next: no time standard means delay is invisible in the data; no common data system means the delay cannot be counted; no record means the delay, and everything else, cannot be reviewed. No actor in that chain needs to act in bad faith for a child to spend a developmental era under a "temporary" order; the system produces that result by default, on the resources and rules it currently has. Accountability talk that ignores capacity is incomplete, and capacity talk that ignores accountability is an excuse. Each makes the other possible.

5 · What would help

- **Fund the record first — and guarantee it where reporters cannot be.** Stabilize the court-reporter pipeline — compensation and retention sufficient to keep certified reporters in public courtrooms, and training and examination capacity sufficient to replace them — so an official reporter on civil and domestic calendars is the norm again; and carry HB 179's digital-recording option through with uniform standards (recording in every courtroom, secure preservation, prompt transcription by a certified reporter on request at the regulated fee), so no family's appeal depends on whether it could prepay for take-down.
- **Count time, by case type, in public.** Complete the statewide case-management system the Chief Justice described, and publish time-to-disposition for domestic relations and custody cases alongside the workload numbers Georgia already publishes.
- **Give children's cases a clock.** Adopt case-processing time standards for domestic relations cases — the NCSC Model Standards are the ready-made frame — with published goals for temporary orders and final disposition in cases involving children, on the North Carolina and Ohio pattern: honestly labeled as goals or presumptions, reported against annually, so a wait that harms a child is visible as a wait that broke the standard.
- **The GAL slice of the same fix.** The project's three standing asks belong here because they are capacity instruments as much as accountability ones: a public registry, a training floor with continuing education, and an oversight home that is not the appointing judge — so the system can count the professionals it has, spend scarce appointment hours on people prepared for them, and stop making an overextended bench its own complaint desk.

Help build the record

The Georgia GAL Accountability Project is a grassroots effort to document how guardians ad litem work across Georgia — and to press for a system that is accountable and fair. Two kinds of help matter most: **answer a survey** (anonymous surveys run separately for parents who have had a GAL

and for professionals who work alongside GALs; no child's name or case details are asked for), and **share an experience through the surveys** — the only place experiences are collected; the surveys ask for no name, no email address, and nothing that identifies a child.

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Project email only. This paper was published anonymously by the project; no individual is named as its author, and no family's case is described in it.

A note on method — and on limits

All sources were opened and read by the project on November 5, 2026, in full or in the relevant part, and are listed below. The Georgia Code provisions cited were read in current republications of the Code text, cross-checked across two republications, which agree. The negative finding in Section 3.4 is stated only over the coverage described there — a finding about the statewide published record, not a claim that no local practice exists. **Excluded as unverifiable, and not used anywhere in the text:** (1) national court-reporter workforce figures circulating in advocacy and vendor publications (including claims of a roughly 23,000-person national stenographer decline and steep reporting-school enrollment drops) — no primary source located and read; (2) any Georgia headcount of certified court reporters — no official count found; (3) reporter pay claims beyond the fee schedules and the Gwinnett calendar's stated rates, which are used; (4) any current Georgia statewide time-to-disposition figure for domestic relations cases — none is published in the AOC sources read, and 1980s Judicial Council figures were excluded as too dated; (5) any Georgia-specific interpreter-shortage statistic — the bench-card safeguard is described and no number is claimed; (6) DFCS caseworker caseload figures — none verified.

Sources

• Chief Justice Michael P. Boggs, State of the Judiciary Address, January 28, 2025 (reporter shortage; legal deserts; 159+ case management systems): stateofthejudiciary.com/wp-content/uploads/GA-2025-SOJ-Michael-P-Boggs.pdf

• Superior Court of Gwinnett County, Division 10, Non-Jury Domestic Relations Trial Calendar, October 28, 2026 (reporter not present; take-down and transcript rates; appeal warning; USCR 8.5 practice): gwinnettcourts.com/calendars/superior/division%2010/domnjcal.pdf

• Judicial Council of Georgia / AOC, 2025 Superior Court Workload Assessment (227 judgeships; 1,495 cases per judge; workload value 1.09; domestic relations 2,231 vs. general civil 1,229): research.georgiacourts.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/final.publish-2025-workload-assessment.pdf

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• Georgia Court Reporting Act, O.C.G.A. § 15-14-20 et seq.; § 15-14-28 (certification required): ocp.georgiacourts.gov; Board of Court Reporting fee schedule, eff. January 1, 2015 (civil/juvenile transcript $3.78/page; attendance $43.31/hr): ocp.georgiacourts.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/BCR_Fees_for_Services_Criminal_and_Civil_Cases_2015_updated.pdf

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• National Center for State Courts, Preparing for Future Workforce Needs (August 2025), summarizing Thomson Reuters Institute's 2025 survey of state courts (70%+ staffing shortages;

61% expect continuation; 45% growing caseloads): ncsc.org/resources-courts/preparing-future-workforce-needs

• O.C.G.A. § 15-11-102 (dependency time frames), as republished: codes.findlaw.com/ga/title-15-courts/ga-code-sect-15-11-102/

• O.C.G.A. §§ 15-11-145(a), 15-11-181(a) (72-hour preliminary protective hearing; adjudication in 10 days in foster care / 60 days otherwise, dismissal without prejudice), as republished: law.justia.com/codes/georgia/2016/title-15/chapter-11/article-3/part-4/section-15-11-145/; law.justia.com/codes/georgia/title-15/chapter-11/article-3/part-8/section-15-11-181/

• O.C.G.A. § 15-6-21 (motions decided within 30/90 days after argument or submission; impeachment sanction), as republished: law.justia.com/codes/georgia/2023/title-15/chapter-6/article-1/section-15-6-21/

• Uniform Superior Court Rule 8.5 (continuances not by agreement alone), USCR text as republished.

• 42 U.S.C. § 675(5)(C), (E) (12-month permanency hearing; termination petition at 15 of 22 months), Legal Information Institute: law.cornell.edu

• Van Duizend, Steelman, and Suskin, Model Time Standards for State Trial Courts, NCSC (2011) (family: 75% in 120 days, 90% in 180, 98% in 365, excluding waiting periods), as reproduced in Indiana Family Law Taskforce Recommendations (March 2021), p. 14: in.gov/courts/oja/files/innovation-flt-report.pdf; standards as goals/yardsticks, per Judicature, Vol. 106 No. 3 (2022–23): judicature.duke.edu

• North Carolina Family Court Time Standards, adopted 1999, amended 2025 ("goals"; custody temporary orders 100% in 90 days; permanent orders 90% in 180, 100% in 360; N.C.G.S. § 50-32 support in 60 days): nccourts.gov/assets/inline-files/Family-Court-Time-Standards-revised-2025.pdf

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• Florida Rule of General Practice and Judicial Administration 2.250 (domestic relations: 90 days uncontested, 180 contested, presumptive), as stated in Eleventh Judicial Circuit Family Division procedures: jud11.flcourts.org

• Family Justice Initiative, Landscape Study (NCSC/IAALS/NCJFCJ) (147,436 domestic relations cases, eleven urban courts, 2016–17; 75th percentile disposition 263 days): iaals.du.edu/sites/default/files/documents/publications/fji-landscape-report.pdf

• Goldstein, Freud, and Solnit, Beyond the Best Interests of the Child (1973) (the child's sense of time), as summarized in Advokids, Placement and Permanency Planning: advokids.org/childhood-mental-health/placement-and-permanency-planning/

• AFCC, Child Protection Mediation Model Mediator Competencies (August 23, 2019), endorsed by NCJFCJ (a child's sense of time differs from adults'): afccnet.org

• Georgia CASA, Learn More / FY25 Year-End Statistical Report (14,406 children through foster care in FY2025; FY2026: 7,831 children, 2,541 volunteers): gacasa.org/learn-more/

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