

## A SHORT HISTORY OF ADVOCACY BY FAMILIES FIRST (and its Predecessors)

1. In 1892, when Dr. Kate Waller Barrett (founder of the Atlanta Florence Crittenton Home, the first maternity home in America) let it be known that she wanted to start a rescue mission for “fallen women,” the Atlanta City Council enacted an ordinance prohibiting any rescue mission from being located within the city limits. Dr. Barrett (who was the first woman to graduate from the Medical College of Georgia) took on a year-long process of advocacy to make the city council rescind this ordinance. She was successful and the rescue mission that was to become the Atlanta Florence Crittenton Home opened. Florence Crittenton merged into Families First in 1974.
2. From 1905 through 1914, another forerunner of Families First known as Associated Charities engaged in successful advocacy that led to the establishment of the first city playgrounds. Playgrounds nowadays are thought of as a neighborhood amenity, but in the early twentieth century playgrounds actually were viewed as a public health initiative to provide space for children to run and cleanse their lungs by breathing in relatively fresh air. This was seen as a preventative for tuberculosis, which was a common illness of that time.
3. During this same time period, Associated Charities organized the Prison Association of Georgia, which was a coalition of organizations opposed to the “prisoner lease” programs that were prevalent in Georgia (and in all the former Confederate states). The “prisoner lease” program refers to the practice by law enforcement of arresting Black men for vagrancy which carried a 30 day jail term, but by the time 30 days expired, the men “owed” fees to the prison system for room and board which they could not pay. The courts then “leased” the prisoners to private corporations for labor with the corporations paying “lease” fees to the courts. Later historians referred to this as “slavery by another name.”
4. Associated Charities also advocated successfully for enrollment of children in primary classes at a time (prior to 1925) when state law did not mandate school attendance before a child became eight years old. At that time, primary education was regarded as of little or no value by many in the community.
5. From 1937 until 1941, the Child Welfare Association (another forerunner of Families First) advocated for legislation to license the practice of adoption in Georgia. This was enacted in 1941 and the Child Welfare Association became the first licensed adoption agency in the state.
6. In 1970, Child Service and Family Counseling Center advocated with the State child welfare agency (predecessor of DFACS) to initiate the first year-round adoption services to focus on “special needs children,” primarily healthy children who were bi-racial. The state previously used to have a one-month-a-year effort to place “unadoptable” children. Families First demonstrated that bi-racial

children were not “unadoptable” and in fact that very word today has vanished from the vocabulary of DFACS.

7. In 1973-74, Child Service and Family Counseling advocated against the use of corporal punishment in public schools in Cobb County. While not entirely successful, the effort did result in written guidelines for use of corporal punishment which require notification of the parent among other common-sense safeguards to indiscriminate use of corporal punishment. These rules are now common practice in most of Georgia. For this effort, the agency was nationally recognized by the Family Service Association of America for its advocacy work.
8. In 1977, funding was obtained from the Whitehead Foundation for a two-year pilot program of advocacy focused on adoption related issues. A full-time staff member who was an attorney was employed. This effort resulted in two significant changes to Georgia law: a complete rewriting of Georgia’s adoption statute (the first in over 35 years) and the beginning of the legalization of sharing of information and mediating contact between birth parents and adult adoptees who were seeking one another. At the completion of this successful pilot, Families First continued to have legislative advocates work with the agency to effect social change that benefits Georgia’s families and children.
9. In the 1980’s, Families First offered family counseling in sign-language for the hearing impaired. Out of this we learned that clients could not apply for state assistance because there were only two state DFACS employees that knew sign-language. We helped hearing-impaired persons from the Georgia Association for the Deaf (GAD) to learn how to lobby for themselves, and GAD obtained funding from DHR for 20 sign-language interpreter positions, one each for the 20 regional DFACS offices across the state. Families First later relinquished our funding for sign-language family counseling to a new agency which was formed by hearing-impaired people and they created a one-stop human service Center for the Hearing Impaired in the metro area.
10. In the late 1980’s, Families First initiated the TAPP (Teen-Age Pregnancy and Parenting) program in DeKalb County and worked with high schools for referrals. The agency soon learned that pregnant teens routinely were “counseled out” of school by high school principals and guidance staff. Families First advocated with the state superintendent of schools to issue a policy stating that pregnant teens were entitled to a public education and that everything should be done by school personnel to retain them in school and accommodate their pregnancy related needs.
11. In the 1990’s, Families First advocated a streamlined, user-friendly public system of health care for children in Georgia who had no health insurance coverage. This program nationally is SCHIP, but each state can write its own rules and Families First played a key role in the design of “PeachCare,” which is one of the most successful programs in the nation providing health care to formerly uninsured

children. When you read about PeachCare's financial shortfall in Georgia, please remember that the federal legislation penalizes states that are successful in enrolling children because the federal funding formula is based on the number of uninsured children so the more children enrolled, the less funding is available to the state because it has fewer uninsured children.

12. In the 2000's, Families First successfully advocated for change in Georgia's laws to streamline legitimization for non-custodial fathers to be able to obtain visitation orders. This has proven to be a great motivator for paying child support regularly and over and above what the state requires. It has changed the lives of children in single-parent headed households throughout the state by funneling more money to support these children's needs and giving them direct involvement with fathers who love them but didn't always have access to be involved with them.

Every one of these Advocacy efforts grew out of our Advocacy Framework, which we call "From Case to Cause." We have annual staff input about public issues that they are seeing through working with their clients –whatever the service the client is receiving. Our casework direct-services provides the experiential knowledge that gives our advocacy work relevance to our client's needs, and the needs of thousands of others who we never will meet that are in the same situation as our clients find themselves.

Notes by Chris Valley, 5-22-08

END