

**Remarks presented to the SCLC/W.O.M.E.N.'s Conference  
April 2, 2005**

Good morning. My charge this morning is to provide you with a brief overview of abuse and neglect in the metropolitan Atlanta and to highlight ways that community members can address these problems.

I'd like to start by introducing you to some Atlanta children. These stories are not easy to hear, particularly on a beautiful Saturday morning, but they are important to know about. These are our children and we need to know how they are doing.

First is Shawn, a curious two-year old with sparkling eyes. When his mother is around he is like most other two-year-olds... following his big brother around, playing with trucks, watching Sesame Street. But when his mother is not home, Shawn's life is a nightmare. His stepfather Joe doesn't like children, especially those who aren't his. Joe doesn't have a job so he is responsible for providing child care while Shawn's mother serves as an enlisted soldier in the US Army. When Joe is arrested for allegedly beating Shawn with his fists and a belt, Shawn's mother bails Joe out of jail. She is told of the bruises and burns on Shawn—on his legs, genitals, buttocks—and of the tortuous punishments Joe creates for the little boy. She promises DFCS that she won't leave the boys alone with Joe again, but when she goes away for a few weeks to Army training, she leaves the boys with Joe. While she is away, Joe beats Shawn to death. Joe is serving a life sentence for that murder and Shawn's mother is still awaiting trial on felony murder and cruelty to children.

Next is Kim, a bright six-year-old who seems much older than her years. She supervises dinner for her three- and four-year-old brothers while carrying her infant sister on her hip. Kim's mother didn't come home again after going out the night before so Kim is serving Frosted Flakes and milk for dinner. Kim is thankful there is milk tonight, as the baby seems especially hungry. After dinner Kim and her siblings watch TV for a while. Without any hot water, they don't want to take baths. Around midnight, after waiting for their mom to come home, the children fall asleep on mattresses on the floor, among the bugs, soiled diapers and garbage that fill the one bedroom apartment. The next morning Kim's neighbor, Ms. Willis comes by. She has been keeping an eye on the house and the children for weeks and has decided to get involved. She feeds the children a hot breakfast and gives them all baths. She puts ointment on the baby's diaper rash and washes the children's clothes. She reports the children to Department of Family and Children Services and she contacts her women's group at her church. The women's group organizes a 'mothering' program for Kim's mother through which they help her clean the house, take her food shopping, enroll the children in child care at the church daycare center and get her hot water turned on. The Court Appointed Special Advocate assigned to the case identifies additional supports and recommends that it would be traumatic to the children to be separated from each other or their mother. It is unlikely that a foster home would be located where all 4 children could remain together. With these supports and Kim's eagerness to succeed in an outpatient drug treatment program,

Kim and the children remain together. Kim's mother is now drug-free, has a job and stable day-care arrangements, and is a nurturing mother to her four children.

Then meet Amy, a cheerful three-year-old girl with Down's Syndrome. During Amy's first few years she was cared for by friends and relatives of her mother's. While her home situation wasn't always stable and Amy and her mom often spent nights on the couch of friend's homes, Amy was always well-cared for. Amy's mom decided to make a new life for herself and her daughter and left her family and friends in New Jersey for the allure of Atlanta. Being a single mother with a child with special needs in a new big city is not an easy endeavor. One day in July, when Amy's daycare arrangements fell through, her mother had to decide between losing her job for having another absence or taking Amy to work. She decided to leave Amy in the car for the day. To ensure that no one would see Amy and report her, the mother parked the car in a far corner on the top of the parking deck. What Amy's mother didn't know was how quickly temperatures rise in a closed car in the sun in Atlanta. Amy died in the 120 degree heat of the car. Her mother was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and child deprivation.

Finally, meet Kevin, an active eight-year-old boy who loves school but doesn't know how to read yet. He looks forward to the days he gets to go to school, even when the other kids make fun of him because his clothes don't fit and they smell dirty. Most days, though, Kevin spends watching music videos and R-rated movies with his fourteen-year-old brother Mark while managing various younger siblings and cousins. If no one wakes Kevin up in time, he misses the bus for school and there is no way for him to get to school other than the bus. He wishes he could wake up every day in time. Some days his mother or auntie tells him he has to help with the younger children so it doesn't matter what time he gets up on those days. The thing he hates the most about staying home are the friends that Mark has started bringing by the house. They drink and smoke and scare the little ones. One even showed off a gun one day and Kevin didn't think there should be guns around babies. After Kevin missed 45 days in the fall semester, the school social worker filed a truancy case in juvenile court. The GAL assigned to Kevin visited the home and the school and realized that Kevin was not missing school on his own. The case was changed to an educational neglect case and Kevin was found to be a deprived child. Because of his age and the circumstances of him missing school, his mother was found to be responsible rather than Kevin. Kevin's family was connected to the Truancy Intervention Project which provided tutoring for Kevin to help him learn to read, a washing machine for the apartment so Kevin's mother could regularly do laundry, an alarm clock for Kevin so he could get himself up for school without depending on others, and limited child care assistance for Kevin's younger siblings. During the investigation, the GAL learned that Mark had missed even more school than Kevin.

Since TIP provides services to the whole family, Mark was connected with a special program through the Boys and Girls Club and was assigned an adult mentor. These services kept him from being held in detention when Mark was arrested for burglary a few weeks later. The mentor and the Boys and Girls Club director agreed to work with Mark and a probation officer to provide intensive supervision. A local church agreed that if Mark maintained a decent school attendance record through the year and had no more

juvenile court charges, they would send him to a special six-week summer program for teen boys at Morehouse College.

Each of these children, Shawn, Kim, Amy, and Kevin, represent thousands of children in the metropolitan Atlanta area. Shawn and Amy are two of the more than 75 children who are murdered each year in Georgia by their parents or primary caretakers. The state office of child fatality review confirmed that 82 child deaths in 2003 were caused by abuse or neglect. That office found that another 79 cases were caused by suspected abuse or neglect.

Kim and Kevin are two of the 10% of the metro-Atlanta population living below the poverty threshold, which is an annual income of \$17,029 for a family of four. This 10% does not show the full picture of poverty in our city because two of our metro area counties, Gwinnett and Cobb, had the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> highest median household incomes in the country in 2003. Let me restate that. Two of our five metro area counties are among the top 10 wealthiest counties in the country in terms of household income, and yet in the greater metropolitan Atlanta area we still have 10% of our people living below the poverty threshold.

All four of these children, Sean, Kim, Amy, and Kevin, are among the 96,000 reported cases of abuse or neglect in Georgia in 2004. In metropolitan Atlanta, there were 19,000 reported cases of abuse or neglect in 2004 among the 290,000 children under age 18. In 2001 there were 12,705 reported cases, and in 1999 there were 13,837 reported cases. In 2004, in the metro area, 15% of the reports were screened out, meaning they were not investigated. In Fulton County only 7% were screened out and in Cobb County 34% were screened out. Of the cases investigated, about 38% were substantiated. In Fulton County, 47% were substantiated and in Cobb County 36% were substantiated. Statewide in 2004, about a third of the reported cases were substantiated.

There are some important things to note about these numbers. First, they come from the state Division of Family and Children Services. The DFCS numbers count cases rather than individual children and they differ from numbers collected by Prevent Child Abuse Georgia, Georgia Family Connection, and other organizations. Cases often include more than one child. For example, Kim's family has four children but it may only be counted as one case in her county. As a community, it is important for us to know what we do not know. We do not have exact data on how many children in our community are being harmed by parents and caretakers. The data we do have on reported cases varies by source, and we know that many cases of abuse are never reported.

Kim and Kevin represent thousands of children whose lives are turned around by people like you. Concerned neighbors, teachers, babysitters, scout leaders, church families and community volunteers are all essential to protecting our children. Every person in this audience can take steps to better protect our children. It may be that you start talking to the children playing in the street during the school day to find out why they aren't in school. It may be that you sign up to be a Court Appointed Special Advocate to represent the best interests of abused children in court. It may be that you organize your church to

adopt a DFCS case manager and provide support and services to the families on his or her caseload. Maybe you'll become a foster parent. Maybe you'll start a reading club for the children in your neighborhood. Maybe you will encourage your mosque to celebrate the Children's Defense Fund Children's Sabbath and commit to becoming a Faith Community to Leave No Child Behind. Maybe you'll go to your neighbor's house or call DFCS the next time little children are left alone at night.

Before I close, I'd like to share a few more numbers with you. On September 30, 2004, there were over 14,400 children in foster care in Georgia. In the metro area, there were over 4,060. For the 14,000 or more children in care statewide, there are approximately 3600 family foster homes in the state.

Regarding the types of harms our children are suffering, it is hard to tell from the data. Neglect is far and away the most common reason for a substantiated case of abuse or neglect. However, it is hard to tell which cases are only neglect and in which cases neglect co-exists with physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. On average, approximately 60-70% of abuse cases are due to neglect, 10-20% are due to physical abuse, and 10% or less are due to sexual abuse, although in most cases, there are multiple causes for the abuse. Research in developmental psychology is beginning to indicate that neglect is the most damaging form of abuse from a long-term perspective. The negative effects from neglect tend to have a pervasive negative impact on the lives of people who suffer from the neglect, even moreso than physical and sexual abuse.

Finally, on a national scale, 12.4 out of every 1000 children are victims of reported abuse or neglect.

For those of you who want to learn more about this area, the Barton Clinic web site at [www.childwelfare.net](http://www.childwelfare.net) has a fairly comprehensive listing of child abuse related organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, as well as a list of ways that you can get involved. Voices for Georgia's Children also has a comprehensive listing of organizations related to children's issues.

I thank you for your time and look forward to your discussion.