



GEORGIA  
— CENTER FOR —  
OPPORTUNITY

# 2023 ANNUAL REPORT



# PRESIDENT'S LETTER



It seems like everywhere you go these days, people are struggling. You can see it on street corners, in grocery stores, in news headlines, and—most heartbreaking of all—in the eyes of the people who have lost hope and can no longer imagine a future better than the present.

The Georgia Center for Opportunity (GCO) is positioned squarely at this crossroads of hope and despair. Our job is to help create the conditions in which people believe they've got a fighting chance to build a future better than the present. If we want to turn despair into hope and poverty into flourishing, individuals and families need better opportunities close to home—in the places where everyday lives are lived. In 2023, that's exactly where we focused our impact.

GCO celebrated big wins in four key areas for community transformation: public safety, jobs, education, and family formation.

Thanks to our public safety research, state policymakers and city leaders in Georgia now have a proven set of solutions for reducing crime—especially in low-income communities. Nationally, our recommendations were well received in Dallas and Louisville, and they captured the attention of millions of Americans in outlets like *The Wall Street Journal* and *Newsweek*, where we showed that rising crime and policy decisions go hand-in-hand.

Our BETTER WORK program grew local networks of employers, nonprofits, and community partners to help more Georgians find local jobs. At the same time, we advanced tools and reform ideas to fix benefits cliffs and other barriers in the safety net system that discourage work and family formation. Our safety net work

has opened doors to reform in Georgia and beyond—in Utah, Arkansas, Missouri, and even within the federal government.

In education, our work to expand choice gave nearly 300,000 Georgia kids access to a schooling option that best fits their needs. And we led efforts to advance a groundbreaking school choice bill through the Georgia Senate.

Perhaps one of the biggest highlights of 2023 was kicking off our Raising Highly Capable Kids (RHCK) program, which teaches parents how to raise responsible, caring kids. By reaching into homes, schools, and faith-based groups to support local families, we are turning communities into nurturing places where healthy families empower future generations to escape poverty.

You'll see even more uplifting successes in the following pages. Each win builds on the foundation we've laid to help our neighbors enjoy meaningful, productive lives in safe communities where work, education, and family are valued.

We're proud of our impact in 2023, and it's a joy to share these accomplishments with you. None of this is possible without the support of people like you who share our vision to see communities transformed so that everyone can achieve their potential. Thank you for your generosity in 2023, and we look forward to continuing to partner with you to advance common-sense solutions that lift more people from poverty.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Randy Hicks', written in a cursive style.

**Randy Hicks**

President & Chief Executive Officer



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	President's Letter
3	Our Vision, Mission, and Initiatives
6	2023 Financials
7	Public Safety: Breaking the Interconnected Cycles of Violence and Poverty
11	Safety Net Reform: Creating a System That Rewards Work and Stability
15	BETTER WORK: Making Employment a Community Priority
19	Family & Relationships: Raising Highly Capable Kids
23	Education: Expanding Opportunity for Every Georgia Kid
25	GCO in the News
26	GCO in the Community
27	Staff and Board of Directors



## OUR VISION

We empower vibrant communities where everyone can achieve their potential.

### OUR MISSION

We remove barriers so that every person—no matter their race, past mistakes, or the circumstances of their birth—has access to a quality education, fulfilling work, and a healthy family life.

### HOW WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Government intervention aims to make poverty a survivable condition. We aim to make it truly and permanently escapable by:

- ▶ Designing and advocating for policy reforms because some laws, though well-intentioned, limit opportunity.
- ▶ Cultivating partnerships because addressing poverty and opportunity isn't a solo endeavor. It requires cooperation from people who can meet needs where it matters most—in neighborhoods and communities.
- ▶ Developing replicable community-based programs and tools so that leaders and communities in Georgia and beyond have effective, collaborative methods of helping people move from dependency to self-sufficiency.

# OUR INITIATIVES

**What happens in homes and communities is most important and most consequential to the outcomes of each person's life.** It's in families and neighborhoods that people learn to love and to trust, to live in community and sacrifice for others. These beliefs are reflected deeply in our policy priorities and community programs.

GCO's initiatives are intentionally crafted to strengthen the fundamental pillars of stable, prosperous communities and lives. Research has shown that people who experience personal safety, get a quality education, find meaningful work, and have healthy, committed relationships only have a two percent chance of falling into poverty. And for those already in poverty, these opportunities are the way out.

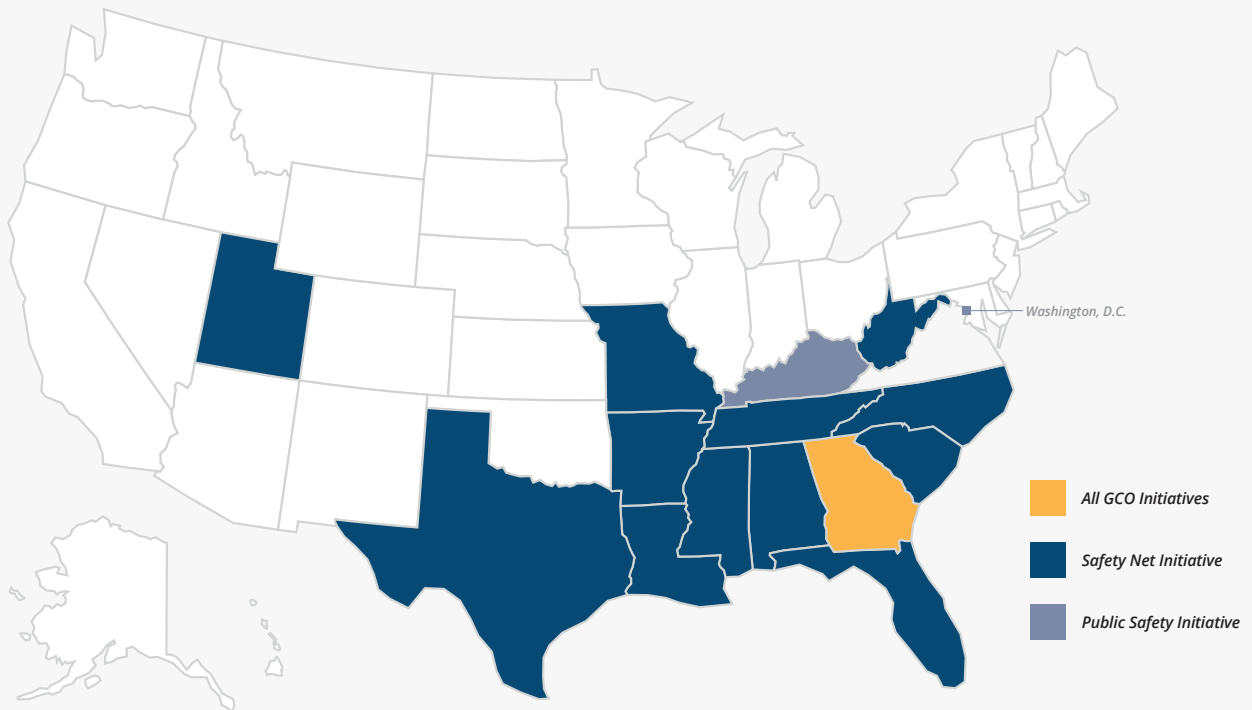
Through the combination of our priority initiatives, we are putting work, dignity, and opportunity back at the heart of government systems and civil society so that both serve as true and trusted pathways out of poverty.

GCO INITIATIVE	OUR GOAL
<b>Public Safety</b>	Equip cities in Georgia, Kentucky, and beyond to lower crime, reduce fear, and improve economic mobility in America's high-crime neighborhoods.
<b>Safety Net Reform</b>	Redesign the safety net system to empower Americans to exit welfare programs sooner, attain employment faster, and find a sustainable path to self-sufficiency.
<b>BETTER WORK</b>	Empower civil society to meet the needs of those in poverty through better community support systems that prepare people for work and help them find and keep steady jobs.
<b>Family &amp; Relationships</b>	Minimize the need for government dependence later by equipping parents and communities with skills and confidence to raise healthy, responsible, caring kids.
<b>Education</b>	Give every child in Georgia access to quality education without restrictions of income, race, circumstances of birth, or zip code.

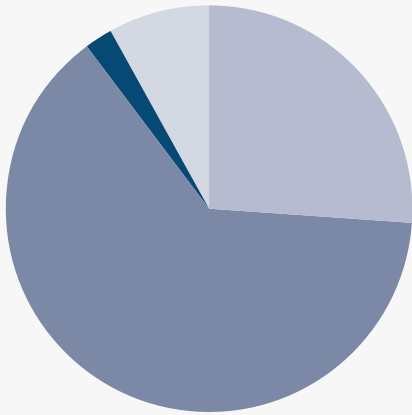
# OUR REACH

Even when we're working on state-level policies, we do so with an eye toward how they affect people on a local level. Georgia continues to be our home base for impact, but increasingly, we have found ourselves working alongside leaders in other states. Why is that?

- ▶ As our work has gained traction and attention, **we have been asked to assist leaders in the government, business, and nonprofit sectors in other states** who have a shared desire to improve opportunities for individuals and families.
- ▶ Some of **our bigger state level efforts—such as safety net reform—require federal involvement**, and as one of the country's leading state-based organizations dealing with poverty and human suffering, we often need to weigh in and drive relevant policies on Capitol Hill.
- ▶ Much of our work requires that we develop a critical mass of leaders, organizations, and voices speaking loudly and clearly about policies that need to change and ideas that need to be implemented. **Driving change requires increasing the numbers of leaders demanding it.** In addition to Georgia, our work now encompasses states like Kentucky, Arkansas, Utah, Missouri, North Carolina, and South Carolina—and we will continue adding to that list.



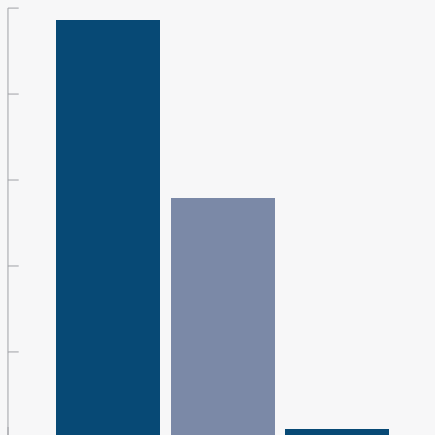
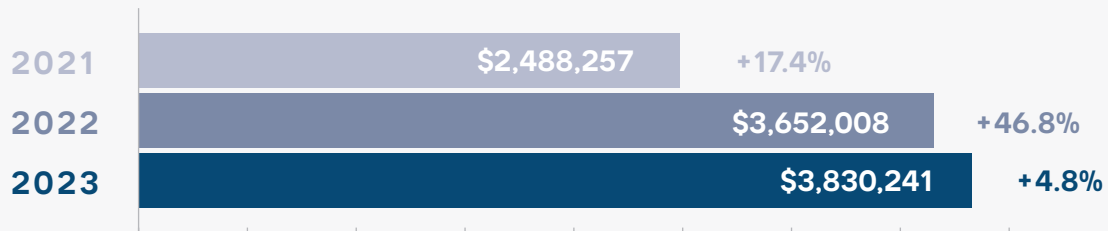
# 2023 FINANCIALS



## TOTAL REVENUE

●	Individuals	\$1,009,551
●	Foundations	\$2,430,193
●	Corporations	\$86,961
●	Other	\$303,534
	<b>TOTAL REVENUE</b>	<b>\$3,830,240</b>

## YEARLY REVENUE COMPARISON



## TOTAL EXPENSES

●	Program	\$2,430,448
●	General & Admin	\$1,390,660
●	Fundraising	\$50,786
	<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>\$3,871,894</b>

# PUBLIC SAFETY

## Breaking the Interconnected Cycles of Violence and Poverty

**Across the country, homicide and violent crime rates remain well above their 2014 lows. In Georgia alone, violent crime increased 17.4% in a single year (2019-2020)—a trend the state has struggled to reverse.**

We know that people who get a quality education, find meaningful work, and have healthy, committed relationships are more likely to escape poverty. But those opportunities only make a difference if a community's environment allows them to take root. When crime tightens its grip on communities, entire neighborhoods are plunged into cycles of economic, social, and relational suffering. And a disproportionate amount of that suffering is borne by our poorest and most vulnerable communities.

**Of all the barriers to opportunity, violence is one of the most vicious because it single-handedly erodes family stability, work opportunities, and educational pathways needed to break out of poverty.**

As long as crime is increasing, communities will be driven to depend on government intervention to simply survive poverty instead of relying on government to fulfill its most fundamental responsibility: providing the safety and security that empowers every person to achieve their potential.

The public and many elected officials know crime is a problem but have no idea how to fix it. **So, through your support in 2023, we established public safety as a key GCO initiative under the leadership of Josh Crawford, our Director of Criminal Justice Initiatives.** Our aim is to equip cities in

Georgia, Kentucky, and beyond to lower crime, reduce fear, and improve economic mobility in high-crime neighborhoods. And we are well on the way: In a single year, GCO changed the national conversation on crime and became a leading, trusted source for solutions among state policymakers, city leaders, and law enforcement.

***“GCO understands the holistic nature of prosperity and a life well-lived. True prosperity isn’t just about financial security. It also comes from community, family, and the ability to help one’s children lead better lives than the generation before them. We owe it to our most vulnerable residents to provide a safe and secure environment.”***

**– Josh Crawford, Director of Criminal Justice Initiatives**

# COMMUNITY IMPACT IN 2023

## LOUISVILLE, KY

### REDUCING GUN VIOLENCE

Despite being one of the most challenging public safety environments in the country, Louisville finished 2023 with a four percent reduction in fatal shootings and an eight percent reduction in nonfatal shootings—the lowest totals in both categories in four years. This progress comes from policy reforms, increased police funding, and new programs rooted in GCO's analysis and recommendations. Through our continued engagement with Louisville's Group Violence Initiative, we can expect these numbers to keep going down.

## COLUMBUS, GA

### REMOVING CRIME AS A BARRIER TO JOB GROWTH



Through our Columbus BETTER WORK chapter, we learned that crime has become a serious impediment to attracting new residents and jobs. With a poverty rate nearly twice the national average, growing opportunity in Columbus depends on bringing the crime rate down.

To help the community find practical solutions, we evaluated Columbus's public safety infrastructure and discovered that a small population was responsible for most of the city's crime. With the right solutions, Columbus could feasibly reduce the impact of these high offenders.

We presented these solutions at a community discussion in October 2023, which launched the Columbus Empowerment Network, a local collaboration of GCO's BETTER WORK chapter, elected officials, and business and community leaders. They are now using GCO's recommendations to shape the city's crime-fighting and job growth agenda.

## GCO IN ACTION



Scan the code to watch the recap of the Columbus Empowerment Network Kick-Off

*"This is enabling us to provide an entire suite of services to help people out of these impoverished situations so they can have a quality of life they deserve and want."*

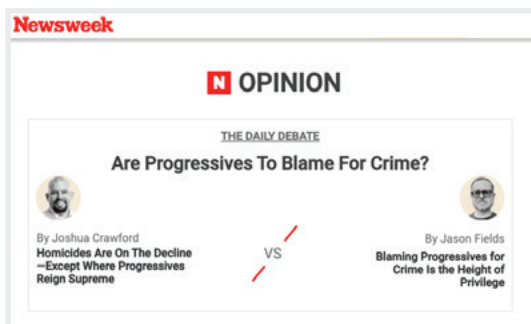
**– Skip Henderson,  
Mayor of Columbus**

# MEDIA IMPACT IN 2023

## SHAPING THE CONVERSATION ON CRIME

In 2023, GCO reached millions with a bold message: Rising crime is a policy decision. By driving big conversations in local and national outlets, we began credibly convincing elected officials and other major influencers of the nature of local crime problems and effective solutions. As our presence has grown, so have our connections to leaders and communities who want our help.

### VIRAL GCO OP-ED HIGHLIGHTS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRIME AND POLICY DECISIONS



One of Josh’s most influential pieces was a *Newsweek* op-ed entitled “Homicides Are On the Decline— Except Where Progressives Reign Supreme.” It landed top billing on Newsweek’s opinion page banner, reaching 28.7 million people. The piece then spread to MSN.com’s homepage where it reached 143 million people, and another news aggregator distributed it to 24.1 million people.

### GCO CALLS OUT MEDIA’S FAULTY CRIME NARRATIVE IN THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



In October 2023, the FBI reported that murders had gone down in 2022, but violent crimes like carjackings and robberies were up. While the media was busy spinning a narrative that crime was finally backing off its pandemic surge, Josh noticed something that escaped everyone else’s attention: 2019 didn’t represent the last significant low in national homicide or violent crime rates—2014 did. He put this finding in the national spotlight with a November 2023 op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*, which ran under a headline of “Covid Becomes an Excuse for Crime.”

## ADDITIONAL MEDIA INFLUENCE IN 2023

TOTAL REACH	KEY APPEARANCES
8 public-safety op-eds	<i>The Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, the Washington Times, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the Memphis Commercial Appeal, Real Clear Policy</i>
13 television interviews	Fox 5 DC's "City Under Siege" series about violent crime in Washington, D.C.
17 radio and podcast interviews	Long-form interview on the National FOP's "The Blue View" podcast, Congressman Dan Crenshaw's "We Hold These Truths" podcast, several nationally syndicated programs, and local talk radio in six different states.
5 interviews for print and digital media stories	Daily Caller News Foundation story on our violent juvenile offender work
13 speaking engagements at events sponsored by business leaders, think tanks, advocacy groups and universities	Annual Public Safety Convening at CPAC, an American Legislative Exchange Council panel, and events with law enforcement leaders in Dallas, TX and Miami, FL, where our work will expand in 2024.

## RESEARCH AND POLICY REFORMS:

- ▶ **Addressing Juvenile Violence in Kentucky:** In 2023, GCO authored and advanced Kentucky's House Bill 3, a comprehensive violent juvenile offender accountability and services bill. It passed with bipartisan support and the governor's signature. The reform has garnered significant attention and become a framework for similar efforts across the country.
- ▶ **Producing City-Level Solutions:** We released technical reports evaluating crime and the public safety infrastructure of two Georgia cities: Atlanta and Columbus. This work generated a crime-reduction roadmap for Atlanta and a set of local solutions being used by city and law enforcement leaders in Columbus, GA.
- ▶ **Educating Elected Officials:** We met with 33 legislators across four states and the U.S. Congress, three city mayors, and two state attorneys general to introduce them to GCO and discuss specific public safety policies.

# SAFETY NET REFORM

## Creating a System That Rewards Work and Stability

**Nationwide, 129 million Americans relied on safety net programs as of 2022. In Georgia alone, over 1.6 million people participate in the food stamp program, and nearly three million are enrolled in Medicaid. Those numbers put Georgia in the top ten states with the most welfare recipients—a group that also includes states like California, New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois.**

As an organization passionate about improving lives by reducing government dependency, we can't ignore what this data reveals. More government intervention isn't making poverty better—in Georgia or anywhere else—because it relies on systems whose purpose is to make poverty a tolerable way of life.

Our safety net functions more like a snare net, trapping people in a complex web of formulas and programs that make employment, family formation, and self-sufficiency difficult to achieve.

Thanks to GCO's research, we know this failure is happening because of two significant design flaws:

- ▶ **Safety net services are disconnected from work support.** In the current system, recipients are forced to navigate multiple, disconnected programs, eligibility requirements, and caseworkers—a maze that becomes a trap for welfare dependence instead of a secure path out of poverty.

- ▶ **Benefits cliffs within welfare programs discourage people from growing their income.** Even if a person on welfare gets a job, he or she eventually encounters a benefits cliff—a point where earning a higher income triggers a sudden, total loss of assistance for needs like childcare, healthcare, food, and housing. While most people don't want to depend on government assistance long-term, they end up having little choice because a typical pay raise or increase in income isn't enough to offset the loss in benefits.

*“The safety net is essential for catching those who are falling, but it isn't a destination. Although this truth is often politicized and used to advance a certain agenda, the vast majority of Americans recognize that work is the best way to escape poverty. It should be our goal to remove every barrier to a life of thriving, and that includes obstacles to work.”*

**– Buzz Brockway,  
Vice President of Policy**

Through our online benefits cliffs model, we have been able to visualize the extent of these problems and make the case for fixing the safety net so that it's a bridge, not a barrier, to opportunity.

In 2023, one of our key strategies was bringing policymakers, business owners, and nonprofits together to learn about the impact of safety net policies through data and personal stories. These conversations shed light on the depth and breadth of our safety

net's flaws and the extent to which inaction on reform hurts real people's opportunity and quality of life. As a result, doors to reform have opened: Federal legislation is active in Congress, which would give all 50 states flexibility to improve the structure of their safety nets. At the same time, four states, including Georgia, have begun pursuing their own reforms to minimize benefits cliffs and streamline welfare and workforce services.

## OUR IMPACT IN 2023

- ▶ **GCO-supported federal One Door legislation was introduced in the U.S. House by Rep. Burgess Owens (UT) and passed a key committee with near unanimous bipartisan support.**
- ▶ **Marked a first-of-a-kind reform with the Missouri legislature's passage of Senate Bill 82, which addresses benefit cliffs in SNAP and childcare.**
- ▶ **Expanded our benefits cliffs model to 13 states with the additions of Utah and West Virginia.**
- ▶ **Presented our benefits cliffs model and solutions more than 20 times, reaching 600+ legislative, philanthropic, nonprofit, and business leaders across 30+ states.**
- ▶ **Launched a research series on benefits cliffs solutions, beginning with recommendations for solving cliffs and long-term dependency in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.**

### **2023 PRESENTATIONS: GROWING AN AUDIENCE OF LEADERS FOR SAFETY NET REFORM**

- ▶ **Louisiana:** Presented to governor's staff and administration
- ▶ **Missouri:** Presented to all agency-level secretaries for the state
- ▶ **Utah:** Held events with business leaders and human resources managers from 30+ companies
- ▶ **South Carolina:** Presented to legislative and agency leaders, including the Department of Health and Human Services
- ▶ **Virginia:** Presented to key department secretaries



## ONE DOOR: DRIVING FEDERAL REFORM TO LINK THE SAFETY NET TO BETTER OPPORTUNITIES

There is a fix for our flawed safety net system. It's called the One Door policy, and it's been working in Utah since 1997. The solution is in the policy's name: Instead of requiring Americans to navigate multiple, disconnected programs, the One Door policy combines welfare and work support in a single state entity.

This design transforms recipients' experience with the safety net. They get one dedicated caseworker and a streamlined path to move from short-term assistance to long-term employment and self-sufficiency. The One Door model restores the true focus of the safety net, recentering it on the stability and humanity of recipients and not the growth of government intervention.

There's just one problem: Federal law doesn't allow states outside of Utah to implement this policy.

**At GCO, our mission is to remove barriers to opportunity—even when that barrier is federal law.** Thanks to GCO's efforts, federal law is on track to change and grant states the freedom to follow in Utah's footsteps. Through our partnership with the Texas Public Policy Foundation and the Pelican Institute (the Alliance for Opportunity), One Door legislation was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives and is now moving through the Congress under the leadership of our bill sponsor, Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT).

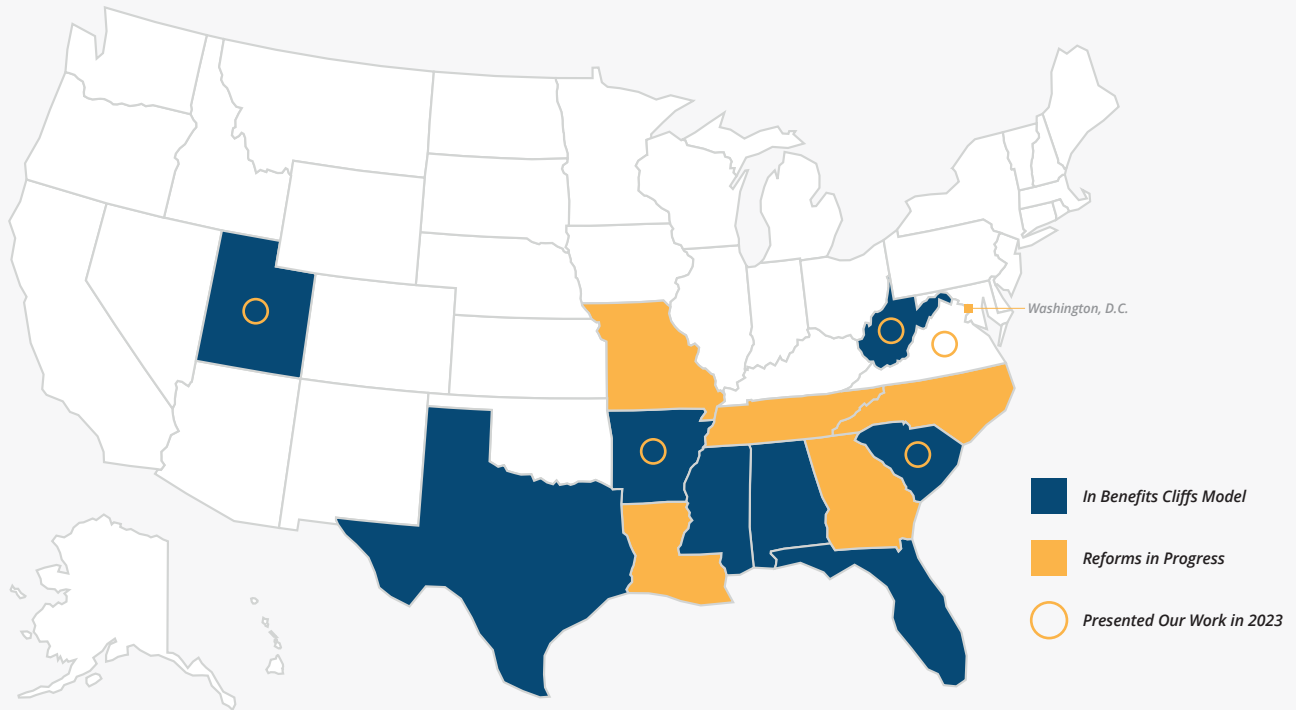
### EDUCATING LEADERS ON CAPITOL HILL

In December 2023, GCO joined the American Enterprise Institute and our Alliance for Opportunity partners at the Meant for More Summit in Washington, D.C. The event was a major success for communicating with leaders and staff on Capitol Hill and building momentum for the One Door policy.

*Every state should have the flexibility to design an integrated workforce and safety net model that enables people to succeed. Every hour a safety net recipient spends finding their way through the system is an hour they can't spend working their way into opportunity. The One Door policy allows states to create a system that works for people."*

**- Randy Hicks,  
President & CEO**

# EMPOWERING SAFETY NET REFORM IN THE STATES



**Arkansas:** Our primary state partner has formed a coalition of policymakers, nonprofits, community organizations, and several large businesses headquartered in Arkansas who want to develop and implement a plan for reforms using GCO's cliffs model and safety net research.

**Georgia:** In collaboration with a bipartisan group of Georgia legislators, we produced a bill for the 2024 Legislative Session (House Bill 738) to kickstart workforce and safety net integration in Georgia. The bill would create a task force to map out a plan for a safety net reform pilot project. With this plan, Georgia would be ready to lead on reform when federal policy changes to permit the One Door policy for all states.

**Louisiana:** We are working with leaders in the Louisiana governor's office to advance safety net reforms, including the One Door policy and solutions to minimize benefits cliffs in the food stamp program.

**Missouri:** We presented on the cliffs model and safety net reforms to the secretaries of all major Missouri state agencies, and plans are coalescing to move reform forward. We also ran a digital public awareness campaign on Missouri's cliffs problem, targeting people who feel that government policies have started to work against, not for, those in need. The campaign generated two million views from 125,000+ users.

**North Carolina:** We completed an initial report showing the extent of the cliffs problem in North Carolina and providing policy reform recommendations, including the One Door model. At the same time, we worked with our partner think tank to run a digital public awareness campaign about the impact of cliffs, which generated 500,000 views from 100,000+ users.

**South Carolina:** We presented on the cliffs model and our reform ideas to a group of South Carolina nonprofits, state agencies, and legislators. This event led to a presentation for leadership of the state's Department of Health and Human Services and an invitation to present to leadership in the state Senate.

**Utah:** In partnership with the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce, we held two safety net policy events, which led to three policymakers agreeing to spearhead reform efforts. We also connected with local business leaders and human resource managers from 30+ companies to discuss the everyday impact of benefits cliffs on employment and how GCO's cliffs model could inform their hiring and pay structures.

**West Virginia:** At the request of a sister policy organization in the state, we expanded our cliffs model to include West Virginia. Now we are working with the organization to help model a variety of reform ideas to see which ones would work best to eliminate cliffs.

# BETTER WORK

## Making Employment a Community Priority

**Connecting people to meaningful work has long been a priority at GCO. Not only does employment bring financial independence, but it also empowers individuals to find fulfillment through a sense of purpose, structured routines, and social connections outside of family life.**

On the one hand, getting more people back to work requires policy change. Our safety net system is riddled with barriers to employment, pushing Americans into government dependency instead of encouraging them to grow their careers, income, family, and overall self-sufficiency.

When a safety net system discourages work and family stability—two of the most important building blocks of a better future—people lose hope. And the least humane response would be to ask the poor to wait until government decides to make a change.

People need jobs now—not when the government is ready. That’s where GCO’s BETTER WORK initiative comes in.

**Through BETTER WORK, we are developing a community-based model that makes employment a civil society priority, as well as a policy goal.**

BETTER WORK brings together employers, nonprofits, and other community partners to help more people find job opportunities close to home and accomplish the daunting step of getting on the first rung of the economic ladder.

In 2023, we continued to operate and grow two chapters: BETTER WORK Columbus and BETTER WORK Gwinnett. Together, these chapters served over 500 job candidates, collaborated with 73 employer partners, and engaged 30 mentors.

*Work is much more than a paycheck. The service we offer to others through our work—and the relationships we develop with coworkers and others as a result—naturally creates friendships and supportive communities. It’s also true that, like all human endeavors, we can corrupt the notion of work so that it’s exploitative of others or leads to numbing boredom and drudgery. But properly understood and pursued, work is a key to human flourishing and the cultivation of healthy, vibrant communities.”*

**– Eric Cochling,  
Chief Program Officer**

# OUR IMPACT IN 2023

## BETTER WORK COLUMBUS:

- ▶ 142 candidates connected to jobs and services
- ▶ 83 job-seekers completing job training or mentoring
- ▶ 44 job-seekers hired
- ▶ 9 new employer partners recruited
- ▶ 25 mentors recruited to support job candidates

## BETTER WORK GWINNETT:

- ▶ 220 candidates connected to jobs and services
- ▶ 73 job-seekers hired
- ▶ 10 new employer partners recruited
- ▶ 5 mentors recruited to support job candidates
- ▶ 33 community job events held

## JOBS FOR LIFE CLASSES: A BRIDGE TO EMPLOYMENT

A key feature of BETTER WORK is our Jobs for Life classes, which teach candidates the skills needed to find and keep a good job. Over the course of eleven weeks, participants craft resumes and career plans, learn professional communications skills, and get real-world interview practice and feedback. But most importantly, Jobs for Life empowers participants to discover a new mindset around work—one filled with purpose, dignity, and confidence that has resulted in several participants graduating from the class with a job offer in hand.





Fall 2023 Jobs for Life Graduates with the Phenix City Mayor

## THE PERSONAL IMPACT OF BETTER WORK

### TIARRA'S STORY

Tiarra connected with BETTER WORK through our partnership with the Jobs for Life program. She was looking for new opportunities at a job fair after becoming unemployed. "The class pushed me even further. I wouldn't have ever found my mentor or the job I'm in right now. I love all the teachers. Every lesson was a blessing," she said. Today, she is at Troy University online school working toward a bachelor's degree in social work. "I used to live in fear, and now I embrace challenges and try to work through them instead of shying away from them," she added.

### QUENDASIA'S STORY

Quendasia suffered a traumatic brain injury in a car crash years ago. Before discovering Jobs for Life, Quendasia lacked confidence and struggled with long-term unemployment due to her injuries. Although she obtained a GED, she was hesitant to pursue further education. "Jobs for Life got my mind back on track with working," she shared. Quendasia now works at Piedmont Healthcare, an opportunity she never would have had without the support and networking through BETTER WORK and Jobs for Life.

## PARTNERSHIPS TO SERVE THE HOLISTIC NEEDS OF JOB-SEEKERS

For many job-seekers, finding and keeping a job is a challenge because of the struggle to meet day-to-day needs surrounding work—housing, food, transportation, and childcare. BETTER WORK makes it possible for job-seekers to overcome these challenges because of the approach we take to partnerships. By building local networks of both employers and nonprofits, we are able to serve job-seekers as whole people who have long-term employment goals, as well as immediate needs impacting their ability to work.

### NONPROFIT PARTNER SPOTLIGHT: NEIGHBORHOOD COOPERATIVE MINISTRIES (NCM) IN NORCROSS, GA

**Partnership History:** NCM has been a community partner for our Gwinnett chapter since the inception of GCO's BETTER WORK program.

**How We Collaborate:** NCM embodies values of compassion, faithfulness, and trustworthiness that align seamlessly with BETTER WORK's people-centric approach. NCM offers a comprehensive support system encompassing financial aid, shelter, and food resources, which helps job-seekers meet basic needs while they pursue employment. Together, BETTER WORK and NCM orchestrate various initiatives, with NCM hosting job events that help us connect job-seekers with potential employers. NCM's clients benefit from the invaluable support provided by BETTER WORK, including job coaching, resume assistance, and career advice.

**Community Impact:** NCM's commitment to addressing the holistic needs of individuals creates an environment where securing employment becomes a stepping stone toward self-sufficiency.

### EMPLOYER PARTNER SPOTLIGHT: D.P. JONES ELECTRICAL IN COLUMBUS, GA

**Partnership History:** This family-owned business, established in 1939, is a recent addition to our employer partner network for BETTER WORK Columbus.

**How We Collaborate:** D.P. Jones Electrical brings a legacy of customer satisfaction and an eagerness to give back to the community. They exemplify this commitment by going the extra mile to create opportunities even for those job-seekers who feel like their search is at a dead end. The company's on-the-job training gives individuals a chance to learn a trade while supporting their families.

**Community Impact:** This partnership has wasted no time in getting people hired into valuable roles. Take, for example, Edward Russel's story. Edward was a BETTER WORK candidate who was feeling defeated in his job search—until he found D.P. Jones Electrical. The collaborative efforts between Edward, the BETTER WORK team, and D.P. Jones Electrical resulted in permanent full-time employment. For Edward the opportunity has been life-changing, allowing him to finally find satisfaction and purpose in working for a company that appreciates him and shares his family values.

# FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS

## Raising Highly Capable Kids

**In communities struggling with poverty and disadvantage, the stakes of family life are especially high. Fragmented relationships make it difficult for kids to succeed in the classroom, for marriages to survive, for parents to maintain jobs, and for kids and adults alike to avoid crime and other risky behaviors.**

For children, a lack of family relationships is a leading cause of mental health issues, and among adults, 46% who are unemployed long-term have strained family relationships.

Long-term, generational poverty is rooted in this lack of connected, healthy relationships. Government assistance was never supposed to replace the support we find in our closest relationships, and yet the norm has become to rely on government first, and not each other, when facing adversity.

**After years of on-the-ground community work, we know firsthand that good, self-sufficient futures start early and close to home.**

It's in families that children learn to love and trust, where they learn to live in community and sacrifice for others. But when things go badly for a family, it can be tough for children to learn important life lessons and skills, and so the cycle of poverty and despair continues.

**In 2023, we honed our Family Initiative to focus on life's most foundational connection—the relationship between parents and children.**

*“At its core, the Raising Highly Capable Kids program is built on a profound understanding of the critical role that parents and caregivers play in a child's development. It recognizes that a child's struggles are often a symptom of unmet needs—emotional, social, or cognitive. Instead of simply addressing surface-level actions, RHCK dives deeper, empowering parents to foster the essential life skills and attributes that undergird positive behavior, as well as success in school and life.”*

**– Joyce Mayberry,  
Vice President of Family**

We launched a new community program, Raising Highly Capable Kids, which equips parents and caregivers of at-risk kids with the skills, confidence, and community support they need to help their children excel in school and in life. Over the course of 13 weeks, RHCK teaches the 40 building blocks of healthy child development. Research has proven that when children have these developmental assets—and healthy parent involvement in their lives—they attain better life outcomes, including improved academic success, healthier long-term behaviors, and positive relational skills.

For Georgia, RHCK is more than a program. It's a pathway for turning communities into nurturing grounds for every person's potential and prosperity.

**Imagine if we could reduce the likelihood of future government dependence simply by empowering families and communities to get the next generation on the right path early.**

## OUR IMPACT IN 2023

- ▶ **201 families served through our relationship education classes.**
  - ▶ **30 families served through RHCK.**
  - ▶ **33 supported through other classes.**
- ▶ **10 workshops and trainings hosted.**
  - ▶ **3 inaugural RHCK classes.**
  - ▶ **7 additional relationship-focused workshops and trainings.**
- ▶ **50 RHCK workshop facilitators recruited and trained.**
- ▶ **26 community partners engaged to expand the RHCK program.**

### OUR KEY COMMUNITY PARTNERS:

- ▶ Lawrenceville First UMC
- ▶ Central Gwinnett High School
- ▶ Jordan Middle School
- ▶ Moore Middle School
- ▶ Lilburn Elementary
- ▶ Lilburn Middle School
- ▶ Summerour Middle School
- ▶ Discovery High School
- ▶ SE Gwinnett Co-op
- ▶ Lawrenceville Co-op
- ▶ Norcross Co-op
- ▶ North Gwinnett Co-op
- ▶ Gwinnett County Public Library - Norcross
- ▶ Free Chapel-Gainesville

### COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT: RHCK CELEBRATES FIRST PARENT GRADUATION



After launching three pilot RHCK workshops in the fall, our first cohort of parent participants graduated in November 2023. Through the workshop, they gained the tools and confidence to raise healthy, caring, and responsible kids and found support and friendship along the way.



## PARENTS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH RHCK

### SKYE DIAMOND, MOTHER AND FALL 2023 RHCK PARTICIPANT

*“As a parent of a two-and-half-year-old girl with developmental delays, I am always looking for resources and learning opportunities to keep building parenting skills in order for me to give her the best possible support and raise a healthy and successful human being. The parent resources in my community are very limited and could be expensive, especially for us in the Latino community.*

*When I learned about this amazing training at no cost, with all the accommodations provided, I immediately registered and I am so glad I did. This training is helping me think outside the box, to recognize the importance of engaging in self-care routines to better support my child, and to find ways to connect with my community. I have learned so much from the other fellow participants of this program, which motivates me to help other parents...in the same way this program is helping me.”*

### KELVIZ DIAMOND, FATHER AND FALL 2023 RHCK PARTICIPANT

*“What has impacted me most as a parent is learning healthy ways to deal with my past traumas to be a role model for my daughter and to deal with health issues that constrain me from being able to do some activities with her...I have learned how to find resources and community support, to become more patient, and to better use communication.”*

### GEORGE AND GHISLAINE, PARENTS AND FALL 2023 RHCK PARTICIPANTS

*“We have become more intentional in parenting, and we are definitely investing more in raising our children and also working as a couple on whatever issues we may have to make sure that we are stronger parents and we are united in our parenting journey. We have implemented weekly family meetings and more engagement in our community.”*

## COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT: GROWING RHCK THROUGH LOCAL COLLABORATION



### PARENTS FIRST INITIATIVE

GCO has joined forces with Lawrenceville First United Methodist Church in a unique partnership called the Parents First Initiative. This partnership will leverage the Raising Highly Capable Kids program and provide a community support network to help parents develop the skills they need and build the meaningful relationships that weave a community together.

# FACILITATOR RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

RHCK workshops are led by trained facilitators who guide parents through the curriculum and shape an environment of care, curiosity, and camaraderie. We have created an RHCK facilitator training opportunity to engage a variety of community leaders from schools, churches, and counseling and support services in RHCK's expansion. Not only does this allow RHCK's impact to spread, but it also strengthens local communities' ability to meet the needs of families seeking immediate help.

## WHAT OUR COMMUNITY FACILITATORS ARE SAYING ABOUT RHCK



*"The RHCK program is great scientific information that is practical and relative...[It guides] parents to relate to their children while also taking responsibility as a parent. I was drawn to this program because of the need in my community...Parents have the greatest impact in the lives of their children. I believe empowering parents with significant change can create long-lasting effects more than a couple of professional counseling sessions."*

**– Tina Taylor, Licensed Professional Counselor**



*"An unexpected benefit of being part of the program were the friendships with other parents that may not have occurred outside of our weekly meetings. The shared experience and safe environment allowed me to easily extend a bond of friendship and receive additional support and encouragement from persons working towards the same goal of being a better parent."*

**– Adam Witter, School Engagement Specialist at Lawrenceville First United Methodist Church**



*"The program helps parents understand their strengths while identifying some assets they may need to work on. The program even helps parents who think they have it all together. The biggest impact of the workshop is the power of community. I have been able to create relationships with parents who feel better about Jordan Middle School. Parents feel that sense of community and are empowered to work on assets with their children."*

**– Felecia Sconiers, Family Engagement Coordinator for Jordan Middle School**

# EDUCATION

## Expanding Opportunity for Every Georgia Kid

**Education is one of the most powerful ways that kids connect with positive role models, ideas, and skills that enable them to imagine a meaningful, prosperous future.**

At the same time, those potential futures are evolving—and fast. New technology, new industries, and new ways of working mean that Georgia can no longer get by with a school system where only one in four high school students are college-ready and proficiency rates in reading, science, and math are around 30% or less.

Protecting this status quo is like asking someone to tread water with no rescue in sight. And yet that is exactly what Georgia's leaders have been asking of parents when they insist that zip codes are the most important determining factor in a child's education. This approach has left more than 500,000 kids stuck in public schools that we would never want to send our own kids to—schools that have received a failing grade directly from the state. And it's stolen hope from parents who deserve to make personalized education choices that promise a better future for their kids.

Research is clear that students who successfully complete high school tend to have higher lifetime earnings than their peers, better health, more involvement in their communities, decreased mortality rates, fewer criminal records, and lower teen pregnancy rates. This relationship between education and poverty is starkly reflected in 2022 poverty rates. For those with no high school diploma, the poverty rate was 25.2%. It dropped to 13.3% among individuals who have a high school diploma but no college degree.

The opportunity is clear: Reducing poverty must go hand-in-hand with shaping an education system that works for every child.

**That's why Georgia Promise Scholarships were the cornerstone of our education agenda in 2023.** This program—a type of education savings account—would give children in the bottom 25% of Georgia's public schools a lifeline to escape the limitations of their zip code and finally access the education option best suited to their needs. Through our legislative outreach and state-wide marketing campaign, we delivered to Georgia parents the first-ever passage of an ESA-style bill in the Senate. Thanks to the momentum of this victory, the Promise Scholarship bill stayed alive for a 2024 vote in the House of Representatives.

***“If we truly want all of Georgia's students to obtain a quality education that prepares them for a meaningful career and a stable life, parents need more options. If we want Georgia's economy to continue to thrive and attract new jobs and opportunities to our state, parents need more options. Expanding opportunities will lift our entire educational system—and entire lives.”***

**– Buzz Brockway,  
Vice President of Policy**



## OUR IMPACT IN 2023

- ▶ Passed the Georgia Promise Scholarship bill in the Senate—a first-time legislative milestone for education opportunity in Georgia.
- ▶ Sent 7,361 voter and parent phone calls to Georgia legislators, moving 24 swing legislators to support Promise Scholarships.
- ▶ Generated 2.2 million impressions, 170,000 engagements, 22,000 link clicks, and 17,000 unique landing page visits through our Every Kid digital marketing campaign.
- ▶ To date, our efforts have led to nearly 300,000 Georgia kids benefiting from expanded education options, including charter schools, private school scholarships, and special needs scholarships.

# GCO IN THE NEWS

## 2023 Media Highlights

**THE  
WALL STREET  
JOURNAL**

*Josh Crawford  
Director of Criminal  
Justice Initiatives*

### **COVID BECOMES AN EXCUSE FOR CRIME**

"To understand what's driving crime, it's essential to take a broader view. Covid isn't why homicides are surging in progressive enclaves or declining in cities where law and order is being restored. The true culprits—and the best levers for change—are policy decisions at the state and local level."

**The Atlanta  
Journal-Constitution**

*Josh Crawford  
Director of Criminal  
Justice Initiatives*

### **A PATH THAT COULD REDUCE ATLANTA'S JUVENILE CRIME**

"Unresolved truancy is strongly predictive of future juvenile delinquency and even adult criminality. So, getting it right with those kids today can help a child escape being preyed on by adult gang members and prevent serious violence in the future."

**Newsweek**

*Josh Crawford  
Director of Criminal  
Justice Initiatives*

### **MURDER IS ACTUALLY GOING DOWN—WHEREVER THEY'RE PAYING COPS MORE AND TARGETING GANGS**

"Several cities are showing that we can begin to walk back the increases in violent crime of the last half-decade plus, but doing so won't happen with wishful thinking and liberal idealism. It takes serious policy change and the adoption of best practices: holding violent offenders accountable and making sure the punishment fits the crime, focusing on the drivers of violence, and getting to at-risk youth early."

**RealClearPolicy**

*Buzz Brockway  
Vice President of Policy*

### **UTAH'S 'ONE DOOR' POLICY SHOWS THE WAY FORWARD ON SAFETY NET REFORMS**

"A big part of this is consolidating and combining programs that serve the same families. For individuals, this will eliminate the need to go to multiple agencies for help. It will also mean that welfare recipients will be connected straight to work programs, setting a foundation to free them from generational poverty."

**The Atlanta  
Journal-Constitution**

*Corey Burres  
Vice President of  
Communications*

### **INCREASE CHOICE AS PUBLIC SCHOOLS CAN'T MEET ALL KIDS' NEEDS**

"We need to look to innovation in education and stop fearing change. Keep public schools at the center while decreasing the stress on the system by creating alternatives. After all, what we all want is a great education for our kids."

**The Atlanta  
Journal-Constitution**

*Buzz Brockway  
Vice President of Policy*

### **GEORGIA NEEDS TO WIDEN SCHOOLING CHOICES IN 2024**

"We must work to deliver quality education to all students, which means finding ways to support families who take a different schooling path. While many will access their education through public schools, not all kids are a perfect fit for that system, and they cannot be left behind."

# GCO IN THE COMMUNITY

## Speaking Engagements & Recognitions



### **MEANT FOR MORE SUMMIT – WASHINGTON, D.C .**

GCO President and CEO, Randy Hicks, was a featured speaker at the Meant for More Summit, a joint event with GCO and our partners at American Enterprise Institute and the Alliance for Opportunity. Through this event, we shared our poverty solutions with national leaders and laid the groundwork for advancing federal and state-level safety net reforms.



### **SAFEST CITY EVENT – DALLAS, TX**

GCO Director of Criminal Justice Initiatives, Josh Crawford, was the keynote speaker at ACT Justice's "Safest City" event in Dallas, TX, where he explained what public safety means for communities.



### **STATE POLICY NETWORK ANNUAL MEETING – CHICAGO, IL**

Three GCO team members—Josh Crawford, Corey Burres, and Luisa Becco—were guest speakers at State Policy Network's Annual Meeting, a national conference that connects state-based organizations working to strengthen American freedom and opportunity. Through their individual panels, these GCO team members highlighted our work on crime reduction, as well as our unique approaches to engaging communities in civil society solutions for poverty.



### **LILBURN MIDDLE SCHOOL BUSINESS PARTNER RECOGNITION AWARD**

Joyce Mayberry, Katherine Greene, and Katelyn Stewart received Lilburn Middle School's Business Partner Recognition Award for GCO's partnership to deliver relationship education classes to parents and students.



### **BETTER WORK FEATURED IN PEACHTREE CORNERS MAGAZINE**

Luisa Becco, program manager for BETTER WORK Gwinnett, was featured in Peachtree Corners Magazine for her community leadership to expand work opportunities for people in poverty. The article highlighted GCO's partnership with Neighborhood Cooperative Ministries and other community organizations to help individuals break the cycle of poverty and achieve financial independence.

# LEADERSHIP AND STAFF



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Press Manager



**KRISTIN BARKER**  
Vice President of  
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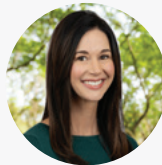
**LUISA BEECO**  
Program Manager,  
BETTER WORK Gwinnett



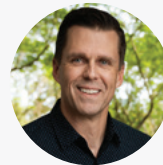
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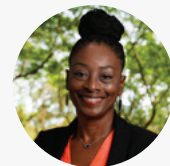
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**KATELYN STEWART**

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**KELSEY UNDERWOOD**

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## **GERALD THAMES**

*Director, Thames Family Foundation*

# HOW TO SUPPORT OUR WORK

Together, we can relieve the suffering associated with poverty, unemployment, and family fragmentation and make it possible for the most vulnerable in our communities to find help and hope.

## GIVE BY CHECK

Checks should be made out to Georgia Center for Opportunity and mailed to:

5051 Peachtree Corners Circle, Suite 200  
Peachtree Corners, GA 30092

## GIVE ONLINE



Scan the code to make a gift through our website.

## SUBSCRIBE



Our quarterly newsletters keep you updated about the impact of your support throughout the year. Scan the QR code to sign up.

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