



GEORGIA
— CENTER FOR —
OPPORTUNITY

2025 ANNUAL REPORT





PRESIDENT'S LETTER

With so much economic uncertainty and political turmoil surrounding us, our nation runs the risk of forgetting that people—their dignity, opportunity, and well-being—are the priority.

But you haven't lost sight of this, and GCO hasn't either. Together, we're continuing to bring hope and opportunity to the places where real transformation happens—in homes, neighborhoods, and communities.

One thing we know for sure is that when it comes to building better futures, healthy family bonds change lives. That's why we're focused on giving families the tools to strengthen the most foundational relationship in a child's life—the one between them and their parents.

With our Raising Highly Capable Kids (RHCK) initiative, we're helping at-risk families connect with others and develop the skills to raise responsible, capable kids. Our community partnerships now include six Title I schools and six additional local organizations. Through these collaborations, GCO delivered even more RHCK workshops in 2025, impacting 125 parents and 205 kids.

The past year was also groundbreaking for educational opportunities. In March, the Promise Scholarship opened for Georgia families, offering an educational lifeline to students in the lowest-performing schools. And thanks in part to GCO's marketing efforts, 8,398 students were accepted into the program. That's thousands of Georgia children who no longer face barriers to a quality education because of their zip code or finances.

But fully transforming communities is impossible without opportunities for meaningful work. That's where our BETTER WORK program was on the front lines. In 2025, GCO served 465 job-seekers—in collaboration with over 100 employer and nonprofit partners—helping them connect to local jobs, develop relationships, and overcome barriers to work.

The people we serve tell us time and again that BETTER WORK provides much more than job

assistance. It restores their mindset around work and infuses them with a sense of purpose and direction.

Even so, it's difficult to make poverty escapable if we don't address what might be the biggest barrier to work—the safety net itself.

In response, the Alliance for Opportunity (A4O), a multi-state coalition that GCO co-founded and houses, has set its sights on reforming the safety net, along with workforce programs across the country.

In December, A4O hosted the powerful Meant for More Summit in Washington, D.C. Attendance surged past expectations as federal and state leaders came together to discuss robust safety net reforms and ways to empower more people to find self-sufficiency and dignity through rewarding work.

Last year, GCO also continued to champion policies that prevent violent crime from becoming a barrier to opportunity. We drove national conversations on public safety solutions, with op-eds in national and state outlets that were read by over two million people.

You'll learn even more about GCO's uplifting achievements in the following pages. We're proud of our impact in 2025, and we're honored to share our accomplishments with you. None of our work would be possible without your unwavering support and our shared vision of vibrant communities where everyone can achieve their potential.

We look forward to continuing to partner with you to advance solutions that increase opportunity and give more families a durable path out of poverty.

Randy Hicks
President and Chief Executive Officer



The Georgia Center for Opportunity Team

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OUR VISION

Vibrant communities where everyone can achieve their potential



OUR MISSION

To remove barriers so that every person—no matter their race, past mistakes, or the circumstances of their birth—has access to opportunities to build a flourishing, fulfilling life.

WHAT WE DO

GCO blends policy reform with community-based solutions to create better opportunities for family stability, meaningful work, quality education, and community safety so that low-income families can break the cycle of generational poverty.

HOW WE DO THIS

- ▶ We **build partnerships** because addressing poverty isn't a solo endeavor. It requires cooperation from people who can meet the needs of underserved communities where it matters most—in homes and neighborhoods.
- ▶ We **develop replicable community-based programs and tools** so that communities are equipped to be the first line of support in creating opportunities that break the cycle of poverty.
- ▶ We **advance policy solutions** that improve social and economic mobility at the state and national levels.

OVERVIEW OF OUR INITIATIVES

We believe what happens in homes and communities is most important and most consequential to the outcomes of each person's life, and this belief is reflected in our policy priorities and community programs. Through the combination of our priority initiatives, we put work, dignity, and opportunity back at the heart of government systems and civil society so that both can offer true and trusted pathways out of poverty.

GCO INITIATIVE	OUR GOAL
BETTER WORK	Empower civil society to create durable pathways out of poverty by helping people find and keep steady jobs.
Education	Give every child in Georgia access to quality education without restrictions based on income, circumstances, or zip code.
Family	Foster long-term family stability and reduce generational poverty by equipping parents and communities with skills and confidence to raise healthy, responsible, caring kids.
Public Safety	Equip high-crime cities in Georgia and beyond to reduce violence and create local environments that support families, jobs, and economic mobility.
Safety Net Reform	Redesign the safety net system to empower Americans to exit welfare programs sooner and create sustainable paths to meaningful work and self-sufficiency.

BETTER WORK

Empowering Georgians to Rediscover Their Potential Through Meaningful Work

In 2025, we served 465 job-seekers in collaboration with our network of over 100 employer and nonprofit partners.

Unlike job placement programs that simply count hires, BETTER WORK approaches employment as a journey—one that requires personal transformation and encouraging relationships, not just job-hunting skills.

Through BETTER WORK, Georgians find support to envision a future beyond an immediate job. We empower them to pursue long-term goals and careers and realize that opportunity and stability are within reach. And we do it through resources and partnerships that focus on the holistic needs associated with finding work—coaching on job skills and career plans, relationships with peers and mentors, connections to local employers, and access to community resources that help with everyday barriers to work.

2025 BY THE NUMBERS

465

clients receiving coaching

300

job interviews completed by clients

106

volunteers assisting with mentoring and Jobs for Life classes

166

clients hired into local jobs

43

clients graduated from Jobs for Life classes

100+

employer and nonprofit partners

2025 HIGHLIGHTS

Jobs for Life: Turning the Job Search into a New Vision for Life

As part of BETTER WORK, GCO offers a class called Jobs for Life. It teaches valuable work skills, but it's much more than a job training or placement course. It helps participants form supportive community relationships that can point them in a new direction in life.

During the class, Jobs for Life students learn that meaningful work brings more

than income. It provides a sense of dignity and purpose that's essential for human flourishing. A rewarding job also gives workers the confidence and courage to rise out of poverty and build a better future. This resiliency then spreads, revitalizing and strengthening workers' families, as well as the surrounding community.

"It gave me more hope and motivation."

— Jamia



"I've gained the most important thing—a new way of living life."

— Melvin

"The most important thing I've learned is to work hard and don't give up."

— Corinne



I will remember how positive, encouraging, and uplifting being a part of BETTER WORK is. How the provisions were made to make sure we are equipped for the job-hunting, interviewing life. I feel much more confident as a person and a job seeker. I feel stronger mentally because I've had great information given to me and stronger emotionally because I've had prayers and support from the champions and facilitators."

— Monica, 2025 BETTER WORK client

LYFT PROGRAM:

Leading a Community Effort to Ease Everyday Barriers to Work

For many in Georgia, the lack of a reliable ride is the one thing standing between them and a regular paycheck.

Without a car, access to a bus stop, or ways to carpool, transportation becomes a daily gamble. That can mean missing a crucial job interview, being late to work and risking the loss of a job, or turning down shifts because it's impossible to get there. In operating our BETTER WORK program, we've seen firsthand how often a lack of transportation holds people back from a steady job and a more stable life.

In 2025, GCO set up a Lyft rides program to engage community members in helping their neighbors overcome this everyday barrier to work. Through the program, local partners, community members, and GCO supporters can donate rides for low-income job-seekers and at-risk families so they can more easily get to job interviews and show up on time for work. So far, GCO has provided 206 rides to and from work.



One morning, I was called in for overtime. I didn't have the means to make it in to help out, but I told my manager I would get back to him. BETTER WORK was readily available to help, and because of them, I was able to help out at work, as well as able to help myself to some extra hours that week.

The Lyft program encouraged my goal of self-sufficiency during a hard time economically. I was able to show up on time to work with nothing holding me back.

This program changed my life. The Lyft program showed me that reaching out for help can benefit you in more ways than one. I found exactly what I needed in that time with BETTER WORK, but most of all, I felt supported in my journey by people who care."

— Keturah, 2025 BETTER WORK client



WILL YOU HELP FUEL A RIDE TO OPPORTUNITY?

Even a \$35 donation can have a huge impact in helping people break cycles of unemployment and poverty. **Scan the QR code to give a neighbor a Lyft.**



COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT:

Mini-Documentary Highlights the Impact of BETTER WORK and Local Partners



A 2025 mini-documentary, produced by the City of Lawrenceville, shows what's possible when community partners unite to help neighbors in need take meaningful steps forward and rise out of poverty.

The video highlights the accomplishments of a unique partnership in Lawrenceville called ReCAST (Resiliency in Communities After Stress and Trauma), which addresses poverty and expands opportunities in the city.

ReCAST engages three dynamic partners to meet its goals. Impact46 provides essential housing services to people experiencing financial hardship. View Point Health offers mental and behavioral health assistance. And GCO's BETTER WORK program furthers ReCAST's goals by bringing together local employers, nonprofits, and mentors to help people find fulfilling jobs close to home.



We chose to participate in ReCAST because of the comprehensive approach to addressing community needs envisioned by the initiative. The focus on collaboration among local groups and on helping families develop community relationships reflects GCO's method of supporting people in need."

— Eric Cochling, Chief Program Officer and General Counsel

GCO's work is particularly impactful in Lawrenceville, where many residents struggle with barriers to opportunity. The city's poverty rate is 17.2%, well above Gwinnett County's average rate of 10.5%. The higher poverty rate also correlates with data showing that about 19% of prime-age (25-54) adults in Lawrenceville aren't currently working.

Carolina Pachon, GCO's BETTER WORK Program Manager in Gwinnett County, explained that the program changes lives by giving people "a sense of hope, stability, and a way forward."

The city highlighted this impact in its mini-documentary by sharing the story of Josiah, a BETTER WORK client.

Josiah, a young Lawrenceville resident, found BETTER WORK—and specifically GCO's Jobs for Life class—at a point when he most needed his local community to listen and offer support. He was having a hard time finding a sense of purpose in his life.

Carolina described Josiah as shy at first, but during the class, she saw a big transformation in his mindset. Josiah's self-esteem soared as facilitators and fellow students created a caring community around him. At the end of the program, he gave an inspiring graduation speech emphasizing the significance of the personal connections he'd made. "I've come to believe that the purpose of life is to build meaningful relationships with people," he shared.

Josiah now works in a restaurant and has a passion for cooking. He's looking for ways to combine this enthusiasm with his desire to serve others.

Today, Josiah offers this valuable advice to people who are struggling: "Let go of uncertainty. If you think you want to do something, do it."



EDUCATION

Expanding Education Opportunity to Prepare Kids for Flourishing Lives



According to the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, Georgia kids born into families at the bottom of the economic ladder have, at most, a 41% chance of rising to the middle class.

Several factors impact upward mobility for children, but education is by far one of the most significant. We know that when students don't meet key milestones, they fall behind in the necessary skills for secondary education and stable careers. Statewide, too many students are struggling to reach proficiency in reading and math, with the most severe gaps occurring in the poorest neighborhoods.

The worst thing Georgia leaders could do for these students is prop up an education system that limits options and innovation.

In 2025, GCO drove a reform agenda that refocused lawmakers on meeting the diverse needs of families, especially those who face greater financial and social barriers to quality education. For families relying on public schools, GCO helped pass legislation to support more effective learning environments and reading instruction.

GCO also supported the launch of Georgia's newest school choice program, the Promise Scholarship, which opened to families in March 2025. Thanks in part to GCO's marketing efforts, 628,529 families heard about the program, and 8,398 students participated in the first year, with the majority coming from lower-income households.

2025 HIGHLIGHTS

Passing Reforms to Improve Public School Outcomes

In 2025, lawmakers passed several GCO-supported bills that empower public schools to give kids a solid foundation for success in work and life.

House Bill 307: Helping Kids Read Better

This bill improved reading instruction by banning “three-queing,” an ineffective literacy technique that relies on students guessing words based on certain cues.

House Bill 340: Less Phone Distraction, More Student Engagement

This reform banned student cell phone use in K-8 classrooms during the school day. It also gave local Boards of Education certain flexibility in implementing the law, as long as cell phones are prohibited during school hours.

Senate Bill 93: Arming Teachers with the Most Effective Literacy Tools

This bill required state-approved educator training programs to align their curricula with evidence-based methods for teaching kids to read.

Connecting Over 600,000 Families to the Georgia Promise Scholarship

During the first Promise Scholarship application period in the spring of 2025, GCO ran a digital marketing campaign to build awareness among eligible families living in low-performing school districts. Through these efforts, we reached over 600,000 families, built a robust email list of Georgia parents, and learned which messages resonated most.

- **628,529 families reached**
- **18,959 visits to GCO’s informational webpage**
- **2,988,295 total ad impressions**
- **6,977 email sign-ups and 27,000+ emails sent**

Equipping Independent Education Providers to Raise Community Awareness of the Promise Scholarship

Georgia has two private school associations, but neither took a proactive role in educating private schools about how the Promise Scholarship worked and how it could serve prospective students. So in the spring, GCO launched an ambassador program for private school leaders and local education providers in select communities. The program included an online training series about how the Promise Scholarship would operate and a resource library that equipped ambassadors to have conversations with families and host community information sessions about the scholarship.

In launching our ambassador program, we discovered this type of education actually met a significant need. We were able to advise a number of private schools on how to integrate the Promise Scholarship with their school’s financial aid policy and share examples of how other states have dealt with this practical issue. We later learned that one of the private schools had taken the advice and updated its financial policy to make applying for the Promise Scholarship a standard step in its financial aid process for eligible families.

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT:

Local News Features the Impact of the Promise Scholarship on Families

“State to Pay for Thousands to Get a Private K-12 Education this Year”

– *The Current*



Shakia McCrary is a mom to a second grader who has learning disabilities that can lead to misbehavior if he's not kept on task. He was enrolled at a Macon-area public school, but the school's lack of specialized staff meant he wasn't getting the attention he needed.

Thanks to the Promise Scholarship, new options opened up for Shakia and her son. The financial support meant Shakia could choose one of two private schools within a half-hour drive that had smaller class sizes.

“Private [schools] crossed my mind, but I knew that I just couldn't afford it and still be able to live comfortably,” she said. If not for the state funding, she said her son would be heading back to public school this fall, and she would be dealing with the same issues. She is thankful for the Promise Scholarships and the new opportunities her son has had.

“‘I’m Doing the Right Thing’ | Macon Mother Relieved After Being Accepted for School Voucher Program”

– *13WMAZ*



Cee Michelle saw her two sons struggling in public school and knew they needed more individualized attention. On the last day of the initial application window, she applied for the Promise Scholarship. She had decided that homeschooling would be the best option for her sons, and the scholarship award helped with the costs of curriculums, school supplies, and supplemental online programs.

“When you're parenting and when you're doing this education thing on your own, there's no guide,” Michelle said. “It's so reaffirming to be awarded the scholarship because it's just like—I feel like I'm doing the right thing. I feel like this is what's best for them, and now I have the resources to support me in doing what I feel is best for them.”

DRIVING BIG CONVERSATIONS:

GCO in the News

Georgia Should Do More to Fully Fund Promise Scholarships for All Students

Savannah Morning News.

Buzz Brockway, Vice President of Public Policy

“Georgia lawmakers deserve praise for giving [kids] those opportunities through the Promise Scholarship and the state’s other choice programs over the years. Advancing meaningful policy reforms, especially in a complex space like education, is no easy feat.

Even so, only 15 percent of Georgia students currently have access to a private school choice program. That low percentage, coupled with the state’s low funding for choice programs compared to public schools, has left Georgia trailing behind many states—including its neighbors to the west, east, and south.”

The Sustained Support School Choice Needs

 **Governing**
For the people making government work.

GCO mentioned in *Governing Magazine*

“Education savings account (ESA) programs have become a beacon of hope for families seeking access to customized learning options, ranging from private-school tuition to homeschooling curricula. Yet recent developments in Utah, Arkansas and Georgia are a powerful reminder: Protecting education freedom and school choice will require constant vigilance from advocates and sustained support from lawmakers.

Earlier this year, House lawmakers proposed cutting funding for the state’s newly enacted Promise Scholarship education savings account by one-third—before the program had even launched. Fortunately, with backing from organizations like the Georgia Center for Opportunity and the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, the state Senate and Gov. Brian Kemp held firm and protected full funding.”

FAMILY

Giving Parents and Communities Tools to Raise Resilient Children



Research increasingly shows that family dynamics and traits like resilience, responsibility, purpose, and integrity are the biggest predictors of children's futures.

When parents are more confident and engaged in their roles as children's first teachers, kids experience greater happiness, more success in school, fewer behavioral issues, and better life outcomes overall.

Yet supporting relational and emotional needs has never been a strength of government assistance programs for low-income families.

For Georgia communities, GCO's Raising Highly Capable Kids (RHCK) program is becoming the go-to resource to fill that gap.

In 2025, we joined forces with 12 community partners, including six Title I schools, to deliver RHCK to more parents. The effect has been nothing short of profound. By strengthening parents, homes are once again becoming the places where kids receive formative guidance and positive support and where they develop the habits, relational skills, and sense of responsibility that lead to bright, self-sufficient futures.

2025 BY THE NUMBERS

Workshop Totals



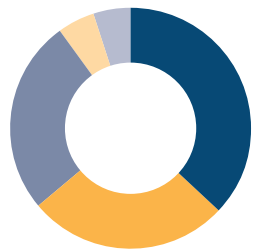
Demographics of Parent Participants

In 2025, RHCK primarily served parents of school-aged children who face numerous barriers to economic and family stability.

Key Characteristics

- 87% Female
- 62% Married
- 66% Between ages 21-40
- 61% Make \$39,999 or less per year

Race



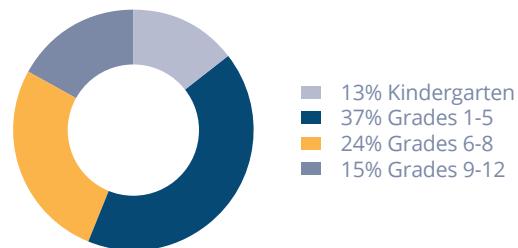
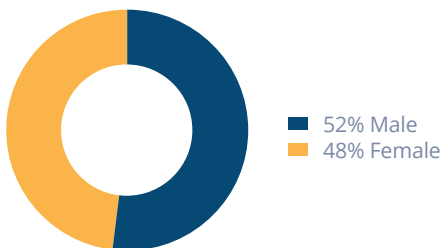
- 37% White
- 27% Hispanic/Latino
- 26% Black
- 5% Asian-American
- 5% Other

Employment Status



- 45% Full-time
- 11% Part-time
- 44% Not currently employed

Demographics of Children Represented



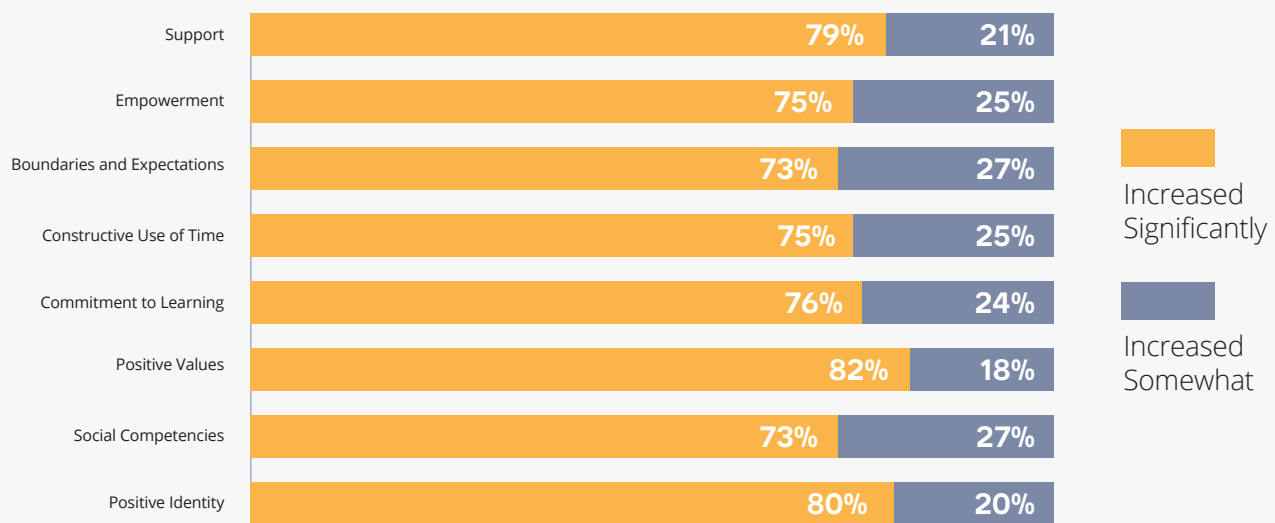
2025 HIGHLIGHTS

Equipping Parents with Confidence and Skills to Bring Out the Best in Their Kids—and Their Families

The RHCK curriculum teaches parents how to use 40 Developmental Assets, which were identified through research from the Search Institute. The assets are the essential qualities and experiences that are most critical for helping kids become well-rounded and responsible adults. The more assets children gain, the more likely they are to avoid high-risk behaviors and make decisions that lead to stable, opportunity-filled lives.

In 2025, the majority of workshop participants reported that understanding these Developmental Assets increased their parenting skills and confidence significantly.

Participants' Use of RHCK Developmental Assets (2025)



We have a common denominator of wanting the best for our children and making sure that we are intentional about providing them every opportunity, surrounding them with great people who love and support them, who will push them, making sure not only that they excel academically, but socially in the community, and just being aware that they have what they need inside already to be successful."

— Jackie, Houston County parent

Laying the Foundations for Life-Long Resilience

As part of GCO's post-workshop evaluation, we asked parents what changes they noticed in their kids after implementing tools from RHCK. In both survey data and parent interviews, there was an undeniable trend of transformation: children had developed a deeper sense of purpose in themselves, a bigger heart for others, and a more positive outlook for the future.

Top RHCK Developmental Assets Improved in Kids (2025)

- ▶ Belief that their life has a purpose and can be used for good
- ▶ Optimism for the future and belief that they will have a good life
- ▶ Acceptance of personal responsibility
- ▶ Demonstrating a heart for helping other people
- ▶ Forming and keeping friendships, communicating well with different types of people, and listening with empathy
- ▶ Increased engagement in learning and participation in real-time activities with peers



Parents conclude their RHCK workshop with a graduation event, celebrating their accomplishment and the start of a new chapter of family and community life.

"We have a responsibility to raise productive, positive, driven, and purpose-filled mini-adults. Children are a gift, and some of the discussions opened my mind to just how much my words, coaching, and involvement contribute to their sense of self-worth. It also impacts their perspectives on reality, acceptance of the truth, personal responsibility, and so on. There is a lot resting on the shoulders of the parents, and, as a single father of two young children, this program opened my eyes to a better way of doing things."

— Jon, Lamar County parent

In Their Own Words: What Did Parents Gain Most from RHCK?

"A sense of purpose and letting my kids know life has purpose to it."



"Appreciation for how parenting affects overall outcomes not just for individual children but for the family and community as a whole."

"Motivation and self-worth. To know that you are doing a good job, you're not alone, and there are people to help you."

"RHCK begins with becoming a highly capable parent—one who models integrity, emotional maturity, and consistency. Community parenting makes it much easier. We don't have to do this alone. We have each other, and life is better as a community."

"I didn't realize until coming that I was needing true, genuine relationships. This has been the greatest blessing to me and my family—receiving community!"

"We all learned a better view and perspective of family values and roles."



COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT:

GCO and Choices Pregnancy Center Build a Village of Support for Rural Families

For One GCO Community Partner, RHCK Was the Key to Deepening the Impact of Its Mission.

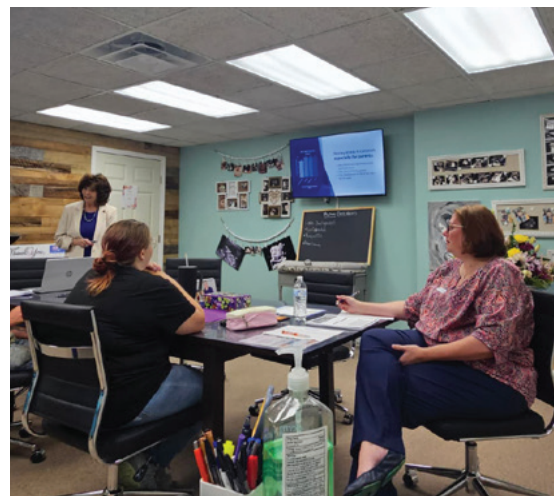
The saying “it takes a village” is especially true when it comes to raising children, strengthening families, and cultivating a thriving community. Our partnership with GCO has become a powerful expression of that belief.

Together, we’ve been able to offer families in our rural community something truly transformative: a proven, research-based parenting curriculum through RHCK. This program equips parents with the tools, confidence, and knowledge to create nurturing home environments in which they can raise children to become resilient, capable, and engaged members of our community.

At Choices Pregnancy Center, our mission is to meet parents exactly where they are—whether they’re stepping into parenthood for the first time or continuing their journey with new challenges. Through our wraparound services, we strive to build a “village” of support that surrounds each family with encouragement, resources, and practical skills. Our partnership with GCO advances that mission by allowing us to offer high-quality parenting and life-skills education completely free of charge, removing barriers that often prevent families from accessing the help they truly need.

Our continuing partnership enables us to expand opportunity, enrich family culture, and strengthen the fabric of our community. Together, we are empowering parents, uplifting children, and creating a ripple effect of hope and stability for generations to come.

— **Choices Pregnancy Center,**
GCO community partner and RHCK
workshop host



PUBLIC SAFETY

Pointing Lawmakers to Better Policies for Lowering Crime and Expanding Opportunity



The criminal justice system is arguably the government institution that Americans interact with most on a daily basis.

Those fortunate to live in low-crime communities barely notice the system at work. They can move around their neighborhoods with confidence and security because law enforcement measures are operating effectively in the background to reduce violent crime and deal with bad actors.

In high-crime communities, the experience of the criminal justice system is much different—and far more life-altering. The system intervenes in daily life more directly when violence increases and decisions must be made about offenders' liberty and futures. Every choice has a ripple effect—on the offender and their loved ones, on the individuals and families victimized, and on the broader community environment.

And while national trends tout impressive declines in murder and violent crime rates, they don't reflect the biggest crime-related issue for communities: crime—like poverty—tends to concentrate, and the majority of that crime is committed by a small percentage of the population. The neighborhoods most affected are the ones already struggling with poverty and disadvantage.

With such high stakes, no state should be relying on insufficient data or unproductive policies to operate their criminal justice system. Yet many states do, and few lawmakers know what to do about it.

In 2025, GCO's public safety initiative gave them answers. Under the direction of GCO's Public Safety Fellow, Joshua Crawford, **GCO produced original research, drafted legislation, and leveraged national media to equip policymakers to adopt public safety reforms that work.**

2025 HIGHLIGHTS

GCO Bill Enables Kentucky Lawmakers to Build a Fairer Justice System and Safer Communities



GCO's Joshua Crawford testifies on House Bill 136 before the Kentucky Senate Standing Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection

GCO authored and advanced House Bill 136, a reform that requires Kentucky's Department of Corrections to provide lawmakers with comprehensive data on sentence lengths, parole outcomes, recidivism rates, and demographics. Prior to this reform, policymakers had relied on incomplete data and anecdotal evidence to operate their criminal justice system. Now, they can evaluate the system more accurately and design policies and budgets that hold criminals accountable, prioritize the most successful reentry programs, and enhance community safety. Thanks to testimony from GCO's Joshua Crawford, the bill passed both legislative chambers with bipartisan support and became law in March 2025.

GCO Research Reveals That Cutting Prison Populations Is the Wrong Policy Priority

In partnership with the Manhattan Institute, Joshua published "Policy Pruno: The Inability of Policymakers to Save Taxpayer Dollars Through Reducing Prison Populations at the Margins," a policy brief that explains why state efforts to reduce prison populations have not saved money. This publication was the first-ever brief to analyze state data and present policymakers with an evidence-based case that they should focus instead on policies that address the true cost of crime and strengthen public safety.



The brief found that trends in Georgia are consistent with those in almost every other state—incarceration rates are falling while prison budgets are growing. Between 2010 and 2023, Georgia's prison population decreased by 11.7% (6,618 people), but prison spending increased by 23.6% (approximately \$258 million). Notably, the brief points out that most individuals in Georgia's prisons are violent and repeat offenders. Not only does reducing the number of inmates save little money, but it's also an approach that weakens public safety, especially for impoverished communities in which high crime rates are a barrier to family stability and economic opportunity.

DRIVING BIG CONVERSATIONS:

GCO in the News

THE HILL

DC's Amazon Lawsuit Reminds Us That Safety Is a Luxury for Black Americans

Joshua Crawford, Public Safety Fellow

"All of this matters because crime concentrates at the sub-city level. Between 3 and 5 percent of one-block street segments represent 50 percent of all crime in most cities. In the neighborhoods where this crime concentrates, people and businesses flee. This locks in cycles of poverty and violence that can only be broken by restoring community safety and public order. And in the United States, the data shows these neighborhoods are going to be made up of a majority of Black residents."

/ CITY JOURNAL

Why Kids Join Gangs—and How to Stop Them

Joshua Crawford, Public Safety Fellow

"To address the root problem, policymakers must understand why kids join gangs. Specifically, they need to recognize that the biggest driver of gang membership is violent crime.... the path to safer neighborhoods doesn't start with keeping kids out of gangs but with creating safer neighborhoods. When communities offer lower crime, stronger social ties, and resulting economic opportunity, fewer young people feel the need to join gangs."



The Fantasy That Cutting Prison Populations Saves a Lot of Money

Joshua Crawford, Public Safety Fellow

"Over the past decade, states have enacted hundreds of criminal justice reforms—from reclassifying drug possessions to reducing mandatory minimum sentences—often with the promise of both greater fairness and lower costs. Yet while these policies have succeeded in driving down incarceration rates, they have failed to deliver the taxpayer savings that many conservative lawmakers expected when they pushed for criminal justice reform."

MEDIA SPOTLIGHT:

Calling Attention to the “Baltimore Miracle” in the Fight Against Crime

In an op-ed for *The Baltimore Sun*, Joshua highlighted how Baltimore has become one of the country’s most impressive crime-reduction success stories.

Joshua described the violence prevention strategies that Baltimore officials embraced and challenged leaders in other crime-ridden cities to do the same. The message caught the attention of Maryland Governor Wes Moore, who shared the op-ed on social media and amplified GCO’s message that if cities want less crime, choosing the right policies makes all the difference.



Are We Witnessing a “Baltimore Miracle” in Fight Against Crime?

Joshua Crawford, Public Safety Fellow

“Through May 1, 2025, homicides are down another 31%, putting Baltimore on pace for its fourth sub-200 murder year since 1970, and the city’s lowest total since the mid-1960s. What happened?”

The short answer is a lot. The city, in partnership with the State’s Attorney and non-profit partners, employed a whole-of-government approach that pulled multiple levers simultaneously.... Taken together, these efforts—and others—have produced nothing short of a miracle, a ‘Baltimore Miracle’ that has seen a dramatic reduction in violent crime in one of the most difficult public safety environments in the nation. Leadership in other crime-ridden cities would do well to take notice.”



SAFETY NET REFORM

Giving Americans One Door to Work and Opportunity

2025 was the year the safety net stole the spotlight.

States turned to welfare programs with renewed attention—and some alarm—as the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill instituted new work requirements and cost-sharing arrangements for SNAP and Medicaid.

As states face implementation deadlines for these reforms, they'll have to confront the biggest weakness of our safety net system: it isn't a system at all.

It's a patchwork of more than 80 separate programs, each with its own caseworker, database, rules, and hoops to jump through. This fragmented design isn't just ineffective and expensive. It's inhumane. It leaves recipients unable to break free from government dependency, and it renders state systems completely unequipped to serve people holistically and carry out new federal rules.



In the midst of this upheaval, **federal and state leaders are looking to GCO and to our solutions for addressing structural flaws in the safety net** that block recipients from meaningful work, family formation, and lasting self-sufficiency. Through the Alliance for Opportunity (A4O), our engine for national safety net reform, we're equipping leaders with a clear roadmap for change: One Door to Work. This reform connects workforce development services to welfare programs, streamlining the administrative burden for states and empowering Americans to find purpose and independence through work.



About the Alliance for Opportunity

A4O—led by GCO, the Pelican Institute for Public Policy, and the Texas Public Policy Foundation—is reimagining the social safety net to help Americans escape dependence and achieve lasting economic stability. We're creating a multi-state coalition that demonstrates effective models at the state level and drives federal reform based on proven results.

2025 POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

Advancing Federal Reforms That Expand State Flexibility and Innovation

Because safety net programs are federally established and federally funded, they often have a one-size-fits-all design that limits states in tailoring programs to better serve recipients. In 2025, GCO identified and championed federal policy solutions that will allow states to streamline and modernize how they deliver safety net programs.

In Congress, GCO worked with Representative Burgess Owens (R-UT) to develop and introduce federal legislation that will allow more states to integrate their workforce and welfare programs like Utah has successfully done. To give states multiple avenues for reform, A4O also collaborated with Department of Labor officials on opportunities for states to submit waivers that, if approved, would give them permission to test new structures for safety net programs that increase employment and upward mobility.



Rep. Owens at Meant for More Summit

Empowering States to Open One Door to Work

A4O provides policy leaders with research and tailored roadmaps for reform so they can link workforce development services to safety net programs and help more people find independence and dignity through employment.



Arkansas: In 2025, Arkansas lawmakers used our recommendations to draft and pass Senate Bill 50, which established a legislative task force to explore adoption of the One Door model. Following the bill's passage, top Arkansas legislators commissioned A4O to conduct a comprehensive study on the effectiveness of Arkansas's workforce and safety net programs and provide recommendations for the task force to pursue.



Georgia: At the recommendation of GCO, Georgia's House Appropriations Committee directed the state to review Georgia's workforce development system. The audit found that these programs need better coordination, less duplication, and clearer outcome metrics to meet their stated goal of assisting individuals who face barriers to employment. In December 2025, the Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts published the findings and advised the State Workforce Development Board and the governor to pursue reforms that improve program coordination, data sharing, and outcomes. Around the same time, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution published a GCO op-ed that called for Georgia's next governor to make welfare reform a priority. It caught the eye of the Georgia Senate's incoming President Pro Tempore, who then initiated a meeting with GCO staff about this issue. Both of these steps have laid the groundwork for GCO to collaborate with state leaders on advancing One Door, work-first reforms in the coming months.



Louisiana: In June, Gov. Landry signed the One Door to Work Act—the first step in a multi-year effort to align the state’s workforce and social services systems. The reform creates a new entity, called Louisiana Works, which will house workforce development programs under one roof and integrate them with the state’s SNAP and Medicaid eligibility systems, giving recipients a clearer path to employment and self-sufficiency. This legislation, which had 40 co-sponsors and unanimous support in the House of Representatives, was the direct result of A4O’s work with Gov. Landry’s office and other state leaders. The process began in 2023 with a performance audit of key welfare programs that uncovered inefficiencies and a lack of coordination among agencies. Lawmakers then created a task force to recommend improvements, ultimately leading to the One Door to Work Act. A4O will continue to work with leaders as they implement the reform in the coming months.



Mississippi: In partnership with Empower Mississippi, the resident state think tank, we provided agency administrators and the governor’s office with recommendations that shaped legislation to establish a One Door task force. The bill passed in 2025, and the work of Mississippi’s task force is underway.



Utah: GCO worked with a partner think tank, the Sutherland Institute, to design a pilot program that will reduce barriers to work and remove benefits cliffs for families receiving support from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Through our collaboration with the American Enterprise Institute, we shared the program with other organizations working on benefits cliffs, and the idea is now becoming the model for multiple states.



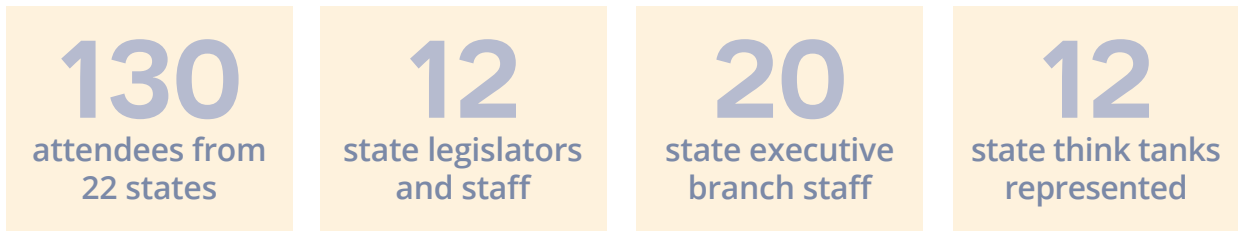
West Virginia: A4O met with lawmakers and administrative officials to assess the best path for reform in the Mountain State. Just weeks after attending our 2025 Meant for More Summit, a West Virginia legislator drafted a One Door bill for the 2026 legislative session. It was introduced on January 23, 2026.

2025 EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

Meant for More Summit – Washington, D.C. December 2025

Our second Meant for More Summit brought together 130 leaders from 22 states—including lawmakers, nonprofit representatives, researchers, and partners from across the country. The event also drew federal agency leaders from the Department of Labor, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The discussions focused on how we can shift from a program-centric safety net to one that's truly human-centered and helps more people find lasting opportunity. It was a day marked by new ideas and collaborations that will shape meaningful reform in the months ahead.

Meant for More by the Numbers



Key Outcomes from Meant for More

- » *A West Virginia lawmaker drafted One Door legislation for introduction in 2026.*
- » *Strategy discussions were held with leaders from Ohio, South Carolina, Florida, and Montana about pursuing One Door reform or other federal waiver opportunities.*
- » *North Carolina arranged for A4O experts to meet with legislators in January 2026 and testify on One Door reform.*



U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Panel – Washington, D.C. *September 2025*



Eric Cochling, GCO's Chief Program Officer and General Counsel, was a featured speaker at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's quarterly panel on housing and family formation. He highlighted how the safety net shapes people's choices around work, family formation, and household structures—most often pushing them to forgo marriage and better jobs.



State Policy Network Annual Meeting – New Orleans, Louisiana *August 2025*

GCO and our A4O partners hosted a safety net reform panel at the State Policy Network's Annual Meeting, a national conference that brings together hundreds of state-based organizations working to remove policy barriers to freedom and opportunity. The panel featured representatives from two A4O partners, the Pelican Institute in Louisiana and Empower Mississippi, who discussed how their states are taking steps to improve their safety nets through work-first reforms.

DRIVING BIG CONVERSATIONS:

GCO in the News

2025 Media Influence by the Numbers

9

national
op-eds

4

state op-eds and
89 mentions

55

million readers
reached

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Georgia Candidates for Governor Should Make Welfare Reform a Top Priority

Buzz Brockway, Vice President of Public Policy

"Policymakers in Georgia have a road map to turn to called 'One Door to Work,' which integrates workforce development with welfare. Under this policy, people who access the safety net for help are connected to one caseworker who not only helps them meet their immediate needs but connects them with resources to find a job.... Welfare reform isn't a second-tier issue. It's central to sustaining Georgia's current trajectory as a leader in economic opportunity. Georgia's One Door gives the next governor a way to strengthen families, expand the workforce and set the state on a path to growth."



The Safety Net "System" That Isn't

Eric Cochling, Chief Program Officer and General Counsel

"The safety net was intended not only to help struggling Americans survive poverty but also to escape it. The work requirements in the One Big Beautiful Bill are an important step toward restoring that vision. But as states move to implement them, they'll quickly realize that for work requirements to truly succeed, individual safety net and workforce programs will have to start functioning as a true system."



Randy Hicks, GCO President and CEO, shares the vision for transformational safety net reform with federal and state leaders at the 2025 Meant for More Summit.

/ CITY JOURNAL

A Better Way to Get Welfare Recipients Back into the Labor Force

Randy Hicks, President and CEO

"This complex maze [of the safety net] dehumanizes millions of Americans in need. It forces low-income individuals to navigate countless forms, offices, and eligibility rules just to receive assistance. Few programs offer a clear path back into the workforce. Yet work is essential to escaping poverty. Unemployment is a major driver of long-term dependency—and a key reason many people turn to welfare in the first place. Unfortunately, in nearly every state, the federally funded workforce training system operates entirely separate from the safety net."



Welfare Stands in the Way of the American Dream

Randy Hicks, President and CEO

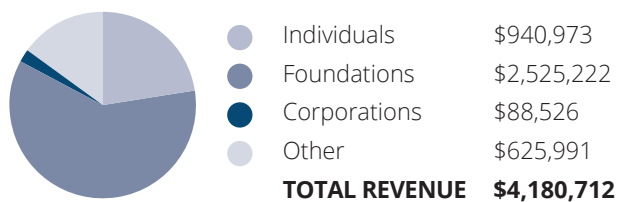
"If lawmakers dug deeper, they'd find baked into [welfare] programs a phenomenon where beneficiaries are often discouraged from getting a job or a raise. They'd notice that our tax code penalizes welfare recipients for getting married and forming a family. And they'd discover that even if we implement work requirements, welfare agencies are not set up to help recipients find jobs. These are policy failures that push people in the opposite direction of the American dream, into a life of dependency... a life that makes it difficult not only to get ahead but to build meaningful relationships and a sense of purpose."

GCO BY THE NUMBERS



2025 FINANCIALS

TOTAL REVENUE



TOTAL EXPENSES



MEET OUR NEWEST TEAM MEMBERS



CIERRA JOHNSON
MARKETING ASSOCIATE

Cierra Johnson leads strategic storytelling efforts for GCO's BETTER WORK and Raising Highly Capable Kids programs. She develops compelling narratives that highlight transformation and impact, while also creating engaging social media content, supporting newsletters, and updating the website. Prior to joining GCO, Cierra worked as a Marketing Manager, Social Media Manager, and Television Producer for local and national networks. Her production experience spans documentaries, films, talk shows, and podcasts. She also supported her family's nonprofit, serving individuals facing foreclosure or mortgage hardship and strengthening her commitment to community-centered work. Cierra graduated from Clark Atlanta University with a bachelor's degree in mass media arts and a concentration in journalism. GCO's mission to remove barriers and create quality access to education, purposeful work, and a healthy family life deeply resonates with Cierra. Through storytelling, she helps amplify voices and inspire hope.



MARIE LADINO
SENIOR WRITER/EDITOR

Marie Ladino collaborates with GCO's Communications Team, senior leaders, and subject matter experts to produce a variety of strategic communications that support GCO's mission to give Georgia families a durable path out of poverty. She brings deep federal government policy expertise from her role as a Senior Writer and Editor in the Office of the Under Secretary and in the Communications Office at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. She also served as the Managing Editor for the Smithsonian American Art Museum's journal. Marie earned bachelor's degrees in finance and art history from the University of Texas at Austin and the University of New Mexico, respectively. She also received a master's degree in art history from the University of Maryland. GCO's passion for helping Georgians flourish inspires Marie, and through her work, she aims to spread the word about the transformations GCO makes possible.



DAVID ORR
OPERATIONS COORDINATOR

David Orr transforms GCO's strategies into repeatable, well-executed processes, ensuring smooth day-to-day operations and supporting multiple departments. He anticipates needs, streamlines systems, and helps the team stay focused on the mission of providing Georgians a durable path out of poverty. David brings extensive experience in operations, purchasing, and project management from his previous work at both a large insurance company and a small health care business. These roles sharpened his skills in process improvement, resource stewardship, and creative problem-solving. David holds a bachelor's degree in organizational management from Covenant College and a master of divinity from the Metro Atlanta Seminary, with a focus on service in the marketplace. GCO's mission inspires David through its focus not only on empowering individuals to break free from poverty but also on changing the policies that can hold people back.



MARIAH THOMAS
PROGRAM SPECIALIST, BETTER WORK

Mariah Thomas provides direct services to GCO's BETTER WORK clients in Gwinnett, including career assessments, resume reviews, and mock interviews. Before GCO, Mariah worked at the Columbus Consolidated Government in the Human Resources Department, occupying increasingly higher-level positions there. During that time, she volunteered with GCO's Jobs for Life classes, where she helped place a number of clients in city positions and advised many others. Mariah obtained her bachelor's degree in communications, with a minor in Spanish, from Columbus State University. She also studied abroad in Mexico. Her language skills help her serve the Hispanic community in Gwinnett. At GCO, Mariah relates to many of her clients. As they share their stories, she often offers a testimony to give hope while actively connecting people with employment opportunities and other resources.



TRAVIS THORNE
VICE PRESIDENT OF FAMILY

Travis Thorne leads GCO's family-focused initiatives that strengthen parents, support children, and help families build pathways toward lasting opportunity. His work is grounded in the conviction that strong families are essential to human flourishing and long-term community transformation. Travis brings more than 20 years of experience in consultative sales, leadership, and relationship management. He has also spent many years serving in ministry, with a focus on family and men's small groups. A Georgia native who grew up in Jonesboro, Travis earned a business degree from Emory University, with a minor in religion. His passion for GCO's mission is rooted in his upbringing. Travis's mother's 30-year career in education and his father's life as a blue-collar tradesman shaped his belief in the dignity of work, the power of education, and the importance of strong families.

LEADERSHIP AND STAFF



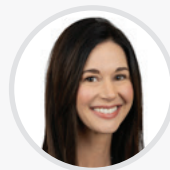
KIRSTEN BARKER

Vice President of Workforce Solutions



BUZZ BROCKWAY

Vice President of Public Policy



KIMBERLY CHALEK

Vice President of External Affairs



ERIC COCHLING

Chief Program Officer and General Counsel



JOSHUA CRAWFORD

Public Safety Fellow



JIM ECKSTEIN

Executive Vice President



AMBER GORMAN

Program Manager, BETTER WORK



RACHEL HAMILTON

Grants Associate



RANDY HICKS

President and CEO



JOHN HILL

Family Program Manager



CIERRA JOHNSON

Marketing Associate



MARIE LADINO

Senior Writer/Editor



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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 believe in and achieve better futures.

GIVE BY CHECK

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

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Peachtree Corners, GA 30092

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