

IMPACT

EVALUATING HOW GEORGIA FAMILY CONNECTION AFFECTS INDICATORS OF CHILD, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Mobilizing to Meet Communities' Emerging Needs

How Georgia Family Connection Collaboratives are Adapting Programs and Services

Georgia Family Connection Collaboratives have continued to adapt to changing community needs while sustaining local efforts to improve outcomes for children and families. Trends from nine years of statewide data show how Collaboratives have strengthened partnerships, leveraged resources, and evolved strategies to address local priorities and improve community well-being.

These findings are based on a longitudinal analysis of Self-Assessment data Georgia Family Connection Partnership (GaFCP) collected annually from all Collaboratives between FY17 and FY25. The standardized assessment provides insight into Collaborative functioning, strategy implementation, partner engagement, and financial investments over time.

The nine types of programs and services:

1. **academic development**
2. **child development**
3. **community-wide**
4. **economic development**
5. **family/adult development**
6. **information distribution**
7. **mental health development**
8. **physical health development**
9. **youth development**

For illustrative purposes we focus on two types of programs and services: mental health and economic development. The number of mental health and economic development programs Collaboratives implemented nearly doubled between FY17 and FY25. During that time, implementation challenges across most domains declined from

pandemic-era highs and returned to pre-pandemic levels by FY25, demonstrating Collaboratives' ability to navigate significant disruption while sustaining local efforts for children and families.

Collaboratives report on the programs and services included in their annual plans each year, assessing the extent of implementation, documenting capacity and reach, and identifying key changes and challenges.

Distinct patterns emerged related to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in relation to implementation challenges Collaboratives faced. Two patterns emerged, telling a story of how Collaboratives overcame challenges to implementing strategies during the pandemic and pivoted efforts to meet unexpected needs brought about by the pandemic.

Meeting Needs for Mental Health and Economic Development Programs and Services During and Post-Pandemic

While the pandemic's effect on Collaborative functioning is clearly supported by data trends in both activity and service delivery, trends also reveal how Collaboratives mobilized to meet needs.

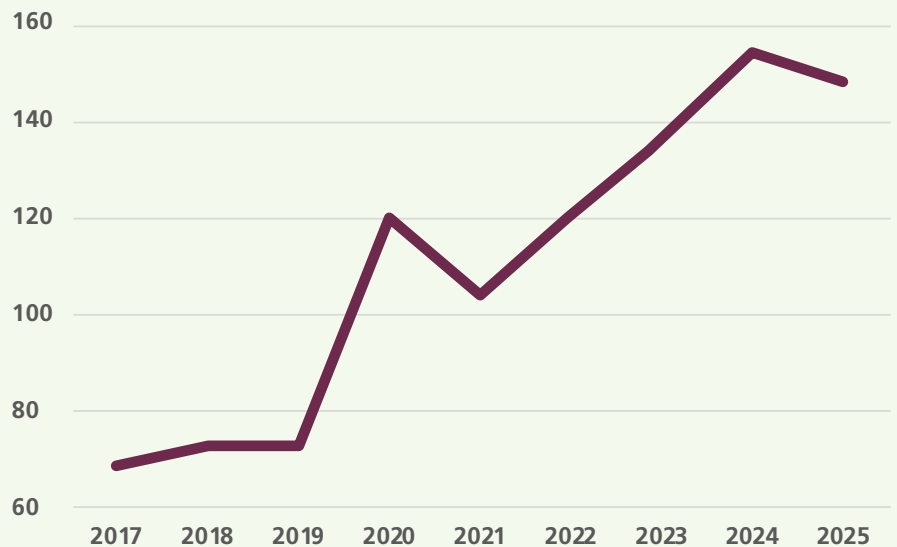
The number of mental health development programs increased from FY17 to FY25, rising more sharply in FY20 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of economic development programs and services implemented nearly doubled between FY17 and FY25.

Unlike the trend for mental health development programs and services, the sharp rise in the number of economic development programs occurred from 2023 to 2025—most likely a response to current economic pressures facing families than to the disruptions of the pandemic. These trends demonstrate how Collaboratives adapt to communities' changing needs by offering targeted services.

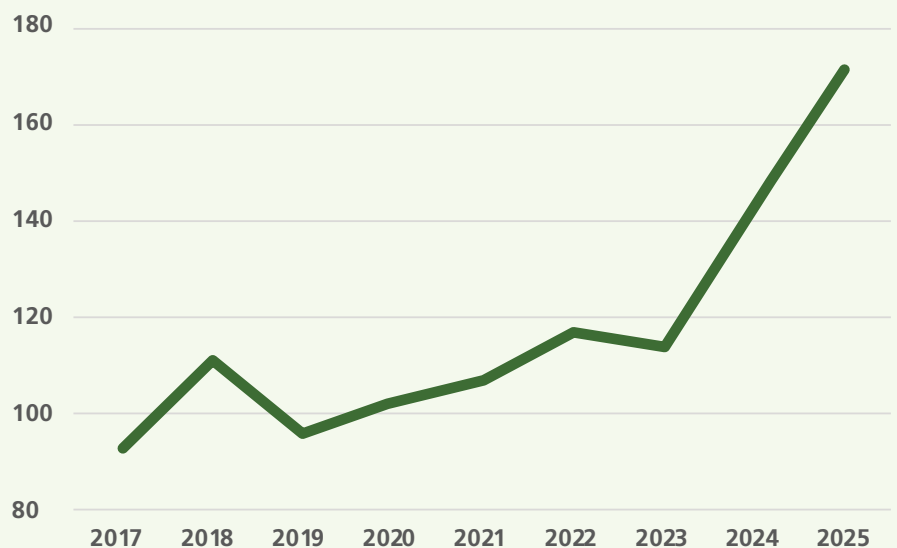
Matching program capacity to community need is a persistent challenge that varies by service domain. For example, increased community engagement in mental health development programs did not occur until one to two years after increases in capacity were reported in 2018 and 2021. Capacity to provide such services dropped precipitously during the pandemic in 2020, accompanied by a sharp increase in reported challenges. Counties appeared able to resume the capacity for those services by 2021, reporting fewer challenges and also declining engagement as communities emerged from the pandemic.

A different pattern emerged for economic development programs and services, again suggesting that counties were adapting to economic concerns from FY23 to FY25. That period saw increases in both capacity and community engagement, alongside a decline in reported implementation challenges.

Number of Mental Health Development Programs and Services Implemented



Number of Economic Development Programs and Services Implemented

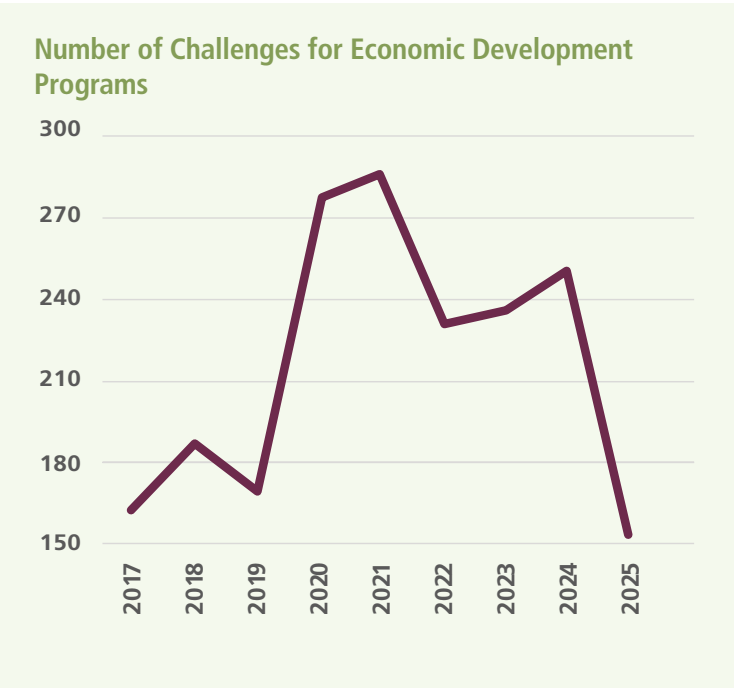
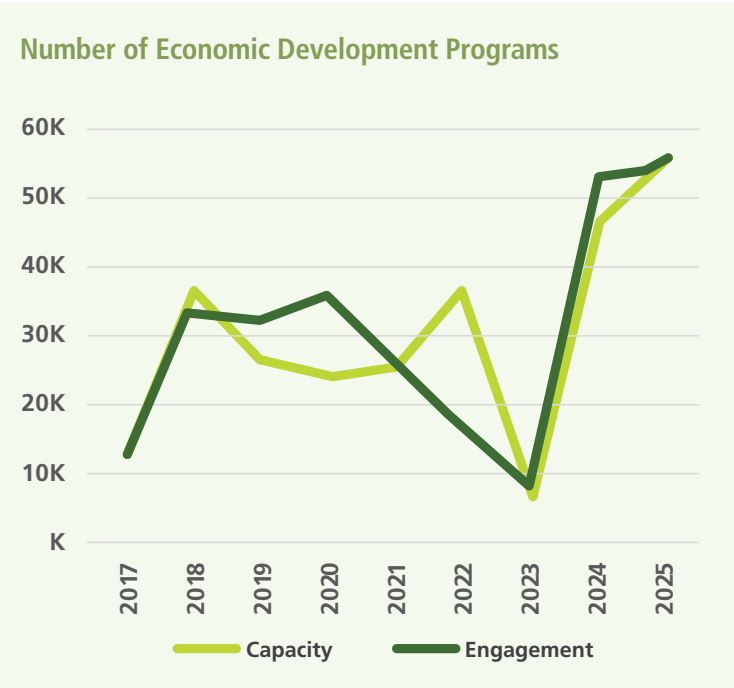
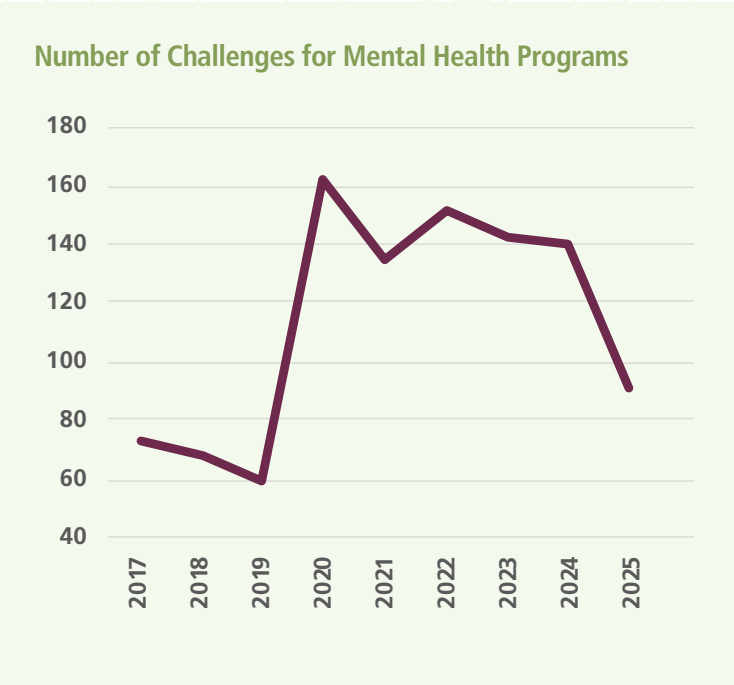
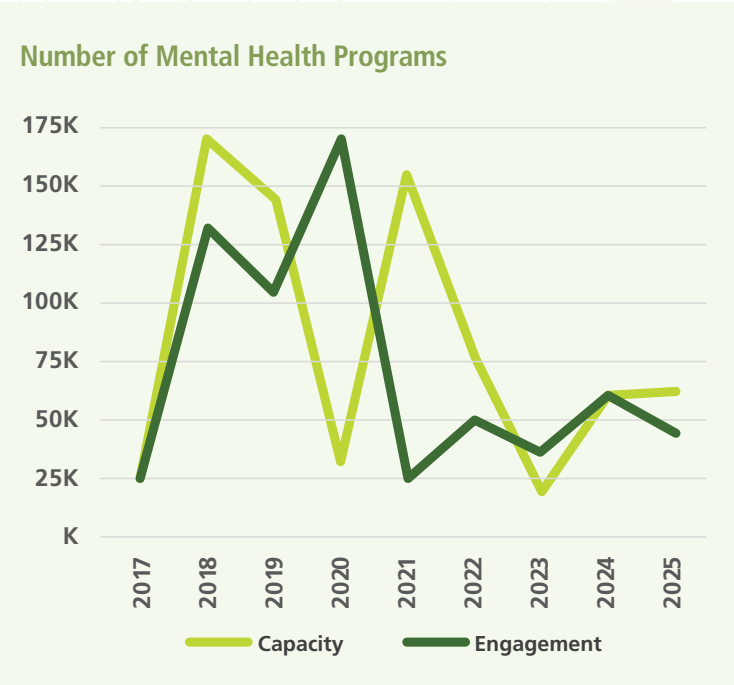


Meeting Needs for Mental Health and Economic Development Programs and Services During and Post-Pandemic (Cont.)

A consistent pattern across both mental health and economic development programs and services is that even as programming expanded, the isolation and reduced in-person contact during the pandemic created prolonged challenges to service delivery that are only recently returning to pre-pandemic levels. Also, the total number of challenges for both mental health and economic development programs spiked during the pandemic and

remained elevated during the post-pandemic era. Only in FY25 did implementation challenges for these programs return to levels seen prior to the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic created observable disruptions, such as reducing implementation fidelity, increasing challenges, and straining capacity—and the data consistently show that Collaboratives responded with purpose.



From Resource Map to Community Lifeline

Nearly three in 10 children in rural Berrien County—28%—live in poverty. That reality is compounded by transportation barriers, food insecurity, limited access to health care, a shortage of affordable child care, and a lack of behavioral health services.

Family Connection/Communities In Schools of Berrien County leveraged Georgia KIDS COUNT data, ALICE reports, school attendance data, and family feedback to pinpoint where needs were greatest and align the Collaborative's strategies. Census data revealed these challenges concentrated in specific areas.

A countywide Resource Mapping Project identified services by census tract, revealing where supports existed and where gaps remained—and strengthening the Collaborative's ability to use local data for decision-making. Their self-assessment highlighted that while a wide range of services existed, families often didn't know about them or struggled to navigate systems.

"We began hosting additional events, strengthening communication among agencies, and expanding our Berrien Family Resource Center's role as a single point of entry for support," said Sara Paulk, executive director of the Collaborative. "This work deepened rural outreach and shaped a vision for a 'family resource center on wheels.' Families now connect more easily with resources, and partner organizations report stronger coordination and fewer duplicated efforts."

The Resource Mapping Project sparked new questions about how families access care, including whether some travel outside the county for services unavailable locally. "That insight reinforced the importance of understanding not only what resources exist, but how families actually navigate them," said Paulk.

The project has continued to shape strategic decision-making and community planning, serving as a model for using local data to drive more intentional investment in children and families.

Hurricane Helene in 2024 left Berrien County facing extended power outages, food insecurity, property damage, and widespread disruption to work, school, and child care. Coordinated response structures at the Berrien Family Resource Center and established strong partnerships allowed the Collaborative to move immediately into coordinated action rather than building systems during the crisis.

Within hours, needs were assessed and resources mobilized across schools, DFCS, churches, the Chamber of Commerce, and other community partners. Volunteers contributed more than 1,000 hours distributing food, water, and supplies over two weeks. An online intake system and QR code enabled real-time assessment and connected more than 800 families to direct support and follow-up services.

"As the response unfolded, one lesson became clear," said Paulk. "Families already knew and trusted the Family Resource Center, and partners knew where to turn. That trust made coordinated action possible."

Partners adapted existing community assets to meet emerging needs, including converting Little Free Libraries into emergency access points for food and essential supplies. The experience reinforced that preparedness is not only about supplies. It's about relationships, communication systems, and cross-sector coordination built long before a crisis occurs.

"The Berrien Family Resource Center was intentionally designed around three core principles: relationships, accessibility, and collaboration," Paulk said. "Families often face multiple, interconnected challenges, yet systems often require them to navigate services independently. The goal was to create a centralized, welcoming place where families could access support, build trusted relationships, and connect to resources that strengthen stability."

Families can access food, clothing, diapers, hygiene items, school supplies, literacy resources, parenting support, referrals, and connections to partner organizations—all in one place. Staff take time to listen and understand each family's story.



From Resource Map to Community Lifeline (Cont.)

"We believe every family has assets and resilience, and our role is to build on those strengths while helping remove barriers," said Paulk. Data from ALICE and Georgia KIDS COUNT continues to help the Collaborative understand the scale and concentration of needs across the county.

"Trust is what makes the center effective," she said.

"Families know they will be welcomed without judgment, treated with dignity, and connected to meaningful support. That trust opens the door to deeper engagement in services that strengthen long-term stability. It also positioned the center as a trusted hub for partners and local government to direct families in crisis during Hurricane Helene."

Through monthly Collaborative meetings and ongoing partnerships, agencies share information, identify gaps, align services, and reduce duplication so families receive support more efficiently.

One family came to the center during a sudden financial crisis seeking food assistance. They received food, school supplies, clothing, and referrals for autism screening. Over time, staff built a relationship with the family and connected them to long-term supports that stabilized their situation.

"The parent later shared that having a trusted place to turn during a difficult season gave them confidence to move forward," said Paulk. "That's our work: not simply meeting needs, but building the trust, relationships, and coordinated systems that make stability possible."

Using Self-Assessment Data to Bolster Community Resiliency

Continued analysis of aggregate Self Assessment data will deepen the understanding of how Collaboratives respond to evolving community needs over time. In addition to the longitudinal analysis of these data, GaFCP analyzes the results annually to produce two individualized reports for every Collaborative—enabling Collaboratives, investors, and partners to make more informed decisions about resource allocation, program design, and community impact.

GaFCP also uses these analyses to inform stakeholders about the strength of local decision-making—and the statewide network. These insights help GaFCP tell Georgia's story of collaboration, guide strategic decisions, and elevate local strategies.

The alignment between program capacity and engagement across domains, including the lag observed in mental health services, offers valuable guidance for Collaboratives as they continue to right-size their programs.

Here's how Collaboratives can use Self Assessment data:

- Review your annual Strategy Implementation Report (SIR) to examine changes in program and services implementation and participation to help focus your program efforts.
- Utilize your SIR to explore program capacity and reach and create opportunities for discussion and improvement with program managers.
- Work with your Evaluation and Results Accountability (ERA) provider to examine your longitudinal SIR program implementation data to assist in making informed decisions about program changes.
- Review your SIR to monitor program and service challenges—and address identified barriers.
- Utilize these data to inform your Collaborative partners and other community members about the work of the Collaborative in addressing current community needs with strengths and challenges.

IMPACT examines how collaboration among our local- and state-level partners affects indicators of child, family, and community well-being. Each edition presents a snapshot of a finding taken from reports produced by GaFCP's Outcomes Team of researchers, including Metis Associates and Georgia State University.

GaFCP is a public-private partnership created by the State of Georgia and investors from the private sector to assist communities in addressing the serious challenges facing children and families. GaFCP also serves as a resource to state agencies across Georgia that work to improve the conditions of children and families.

Georgia KIDS COUNT® provides policymakers and citizens with current data they need to make informed decisions regarding priorities, services, and resources that impact Georgia's children, families, and communities. Reach out to Rebekah Hudgins of the GaFCP Outcomes Team at rhudgins@anthroeval.org with any questions or feedback.



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