



Rural Health Report

*Strengthening our
Commitment*

January 2025



Children'sSM
Healthcare of Atlanta



At Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, our commitment to deliver the best possible outcomes for children is our driving force. It is the dedication of our passionate people, our clinical expertise and our unique environment, tailor-made just for kids, that allow us to provide quality care to children from all 159 counties in our state.

Guided by the awareness of the challenges rural hospitals face in their ability to treat pediatric patients and the unique needs of rural pediatricians, we are making strides in breaking down barriers to care. Our collaboration with Mercer University School of Medicine (MUSM) and the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center (GRHIC) to strengthen pediatric capabilities for rural hospitals and rural pediatricians has continued to grow through the expansion of the Kids Alliance for Better Care (KidsABC) network.

In addition to our work with rural providers, Children's proudly funds scholarships through a program at MUSM for medical students specializing in pediatrics who commit to serving in rural Georgia for at least four years after residency. By 2031, all 20 of the current pediatric scholars will be working in rural communities, making a tremendous impact on families seeking care close to home.

Through various academic affiliations, Children's continues to train and mentor pediatricians and pediatric subspecialists across our System and is the largest pediatric training site in the state. Our programs have a high retention rate, with over half of trainees staying in Georgia after training.

Through this report, we are excited to share more information about how we continue to support the needs of children in our rural communities.

Sincerely,

Donna Hyland
CEO, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta



Children's and Mercer University School of Medicine proudly announced their affiliation to address pediatric healthcare access in rural Georgia at the Georgia State Capitol.

Our rural health impact by the numbers



Children's cared for patients from all
159
counties in Georgia,
including all
120
rural counties in 2024.



Children's served nearly
25,000
individual kids from rural
counties for a total of
70,000+
patient visits from July 1, 2023
to June 30, 2024.



Children's provided
\$31.5 million
in unreimbursed Medicaid
and charity care to patients
from rural Georgia,
addressing the majority
of the rural patients
we served in 2023.

Children's is the only healthcare system in Georgia solely dedicated to kids.

Our Medicaid payor mix of **56%** is one of the largest of any hospital system in the state.

Our Medicaid payor mix in rural Georgia is **59%**.

Our investment in rural health

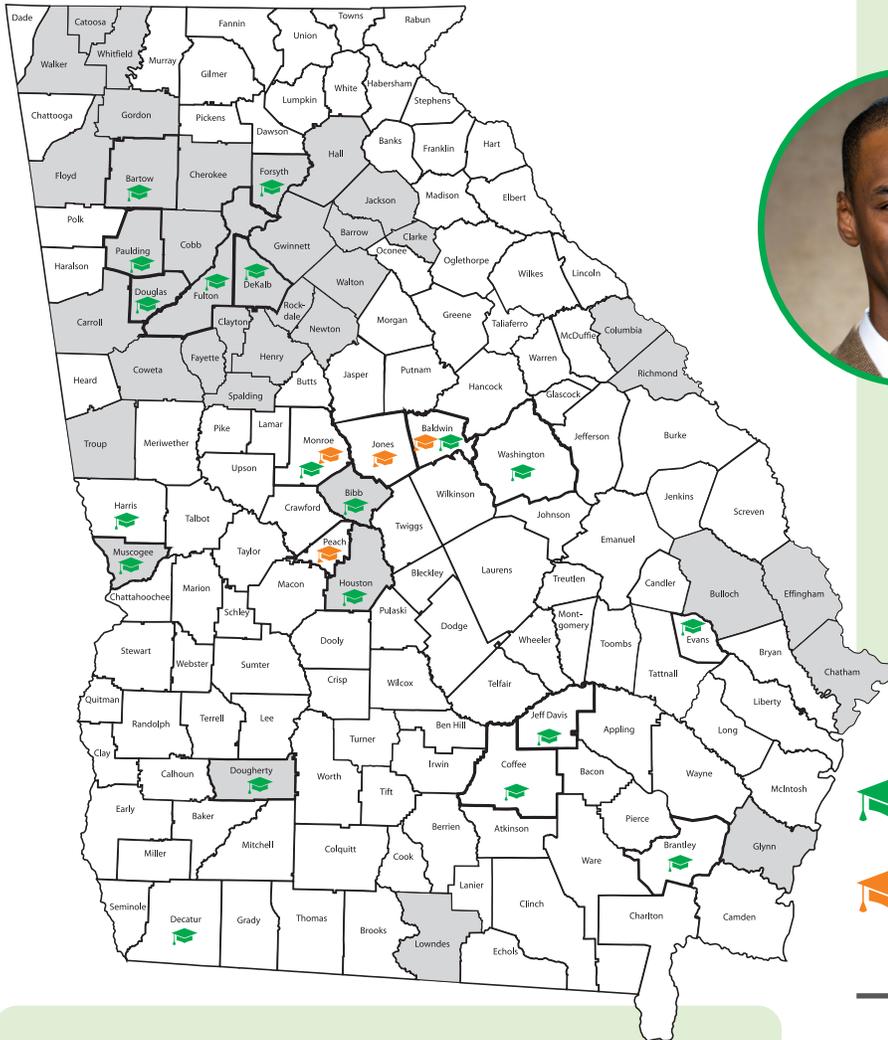
Children's has established a dedicated and long-term sustainable fund of
\$200 million to support pediatric rural healthcare.

Children's is supporting
Mercer University School of Medicine (MUSM)
and the **Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center (GRHIC)**
as they continue to establish programs with rural hospitals and pediatricians
with the aim of improving access to pediatric care closer to home.

Children's has made a significant financial pledge commitment to
Atlanta Ronald McDonald House Charities to allow them to
further their mission of nurturing the health and well-being of children and families and
providing a home away from home for those who must travel to Atlanta for healthcare.

Rural Pediatrician Pipeline Support

Given the identified need for more pediatricians throughout Georgia, Children’s has committed to funding scholarships through a program at MUSM for medical students specializing in pediatrics who commit to serving in rural Georgia for at least four years after residency.



FEATURED SCHOLAR

Meet Tré Steel

Originally from Dallas, in Paulding County, Tré Steel did not grow up in a rural community.

A student at MUSM, graduating in 2027, Tré has gained perspective by working with rural communities and rural providers. He credits this eye-opening experience with helping him learn how rural pediatricians think on their feet, working with limited resources and support.



“When volunteering and learning in rural communities, I saw the need and challenges these communities face in accessing care,” Tré says. “It clicked for me that these are the communities I want to practice in.”

Our scholars



Home counties of Rural Pediatrics Scholarship Program recipients (2023 and 2024)



Home counties of Marriage and Family Therapy Scholarship Program recipients (2024)

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Established in 2024, the Marriage and Family Therapy Scholarship Program awards scholars who have a strong commitment to becoming Marriage and Family therapists and serving in rural, medically underserved areas of Georgia. Upon completion of their education, scholars will be required to work full-time for two continuous years in an approved rural Georgia county, and to serve the surrounding organizations or counties in need.

The inaugural program of Marriage and Family Therapy Scholars funded 5 scholarships in 2024.

Children’s funds 10 full-tuition scholarships annually. To date, Children’s has funded a total of **20 full-tuition scholarships.**

When will scholars complete their training?

Starting in 2026, the first pediatric scholars will have completed their medical training and will begin caring for kids in rural communities. All the Marriage and Family Therapy Scholars from 2024 will be serving rural communities by the end of 2025.

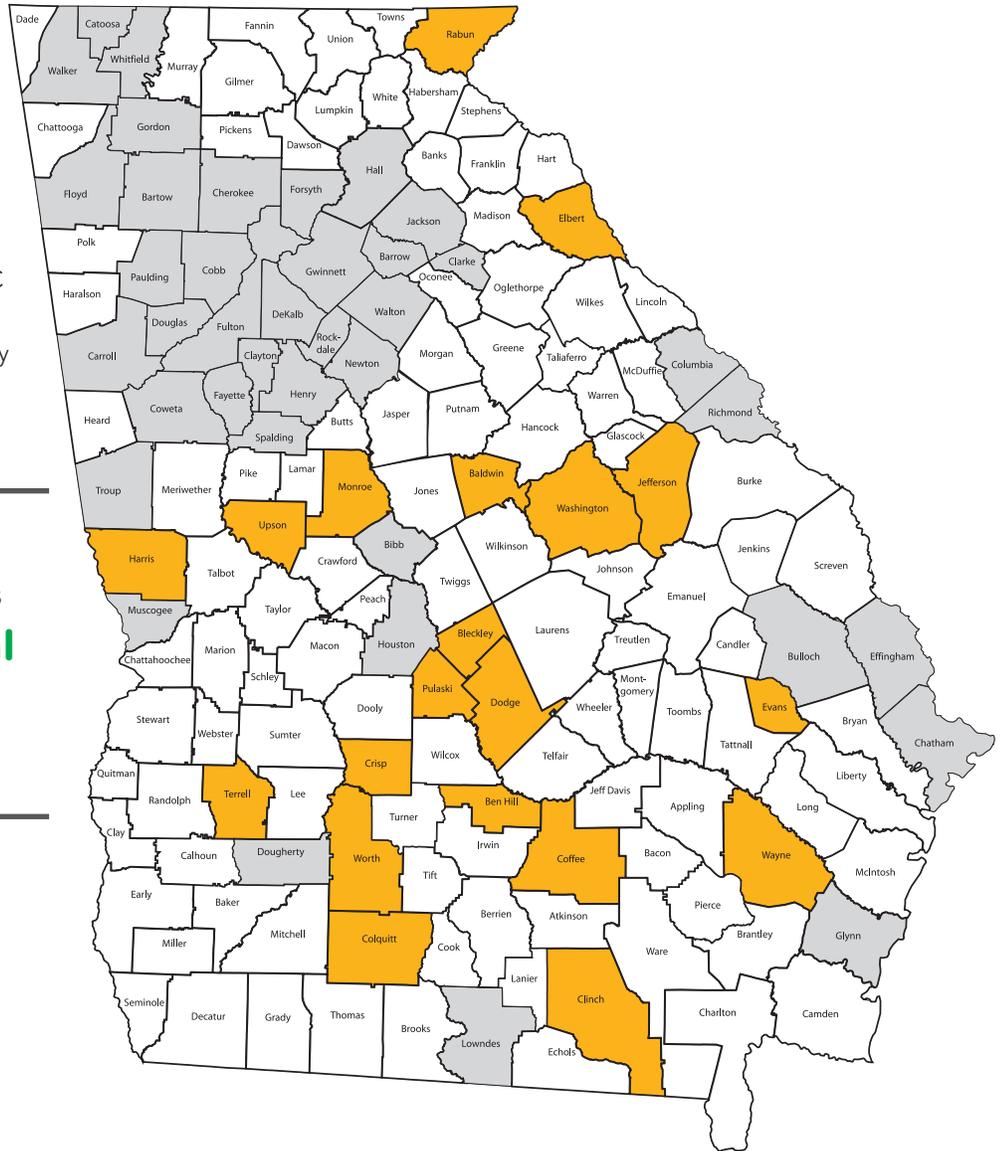
Strengthening pediatrics in rural Georgia

Children’s is supporting MUSM and the GRHC as they establish programs with rural hospitals and pediatricians with the aim of improving access to pediatric care closer to home.



The Kids Alliance for Better Care (KidsABC) is a joint initiative between Children’s, MUSM and the GRHC. KidsABC provides avenues of support for Georgia’s rural hospitals, pediatricians and rural family practitioners to keep care for kids close to home.

The KidsABC initiative is now actively working with hospitals and pediatricians in **20 rural counties across Georgia.**



“At Mercer University School of Medicine and its Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center, our work focuses on finding sustainable solutions to strengthen and increase access to health care in rural Georgia. KidsABC is a very important initiative. We are supporting these physicians and their staff who provide pediatric care, expanding the workforce and enabling families to get care close to home. We do this by building strong alliances within our state, providing expert consultation and ensuring that the equipment for children is available. This transformative effort is made possible by Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta. We are deeply grateful for their commitment to rural Georgia.”

— Dr. Jean R. Sumner, Dean, Mercer University School of Medicine

Strengthening pediatrics in rural hospitals

Rural Hospital Support

Rural hospitals currently face a challenge in their ability to treat and keep pediatric patients in their communities. KidsABC supports rural hospitals to better prepare them to respond to pediatric patients in their emergency departments. Through the alliance, participating rural hospitals undergo an assessment based on standards established by the National Pediatric Readiness Project to gauge their pediatric readiness, with a focus on staff competency, facility readiness and the presence of pediatric-focused clinical guidelines. Upon completion of the assessment, participating hospitals receive applicable training for hospital staff, assistance establishing guidelines/protocols and access to telehealth consultation.



In 2023, the inaugural cohort included **8** hospitals. In 2024, **6** additional hospitals joined KidsABC, and in 2025, KidsABC expects to add **9** hospitals to the network.



The emergency departments of Clinch Memorial Hospital (top right) and Mountain Lakes Medical Center (bottom left) were recognized for their commitment to strengthening pediatric emergency care.

“Crisp Regional Hospital serves the rural community of Crisp and surrounding counties. The closest pediatric specialty care is over an hour away. With this in mind, we realize the importance of being able to best serve the children of our community by providing initial stabilizing care. The education and networking through KidsABC enabled us to become aware of our knowledge and equipment needs. The old saying, “You don’t know what you don’t know,” is a reality, and our teams learned so much by collaborating with Children’s. This knowledge has improved staff confidence when it comes to taking care of our community’s most precious asset—children.”

— April Dukes, Chief Nursing Officer, Crisp Regional Hospital

Hospitals participating in KidsABC

Since 2023

- Clinch Memorial Hospital, Clinch County
- Coffee Regional Medical Center, Coffee County
- Crisp Regional Hospital, Crisp County
- Dodge County Hospital, Dodge County
- Mountain Lakes Medical Center, Rabun County
- Taylor Regional Hospital, Pulaski County
- Upson Regional Medical Center, Upson County
- Washington County Regional Medical Center, Washington County

Joined in 2024:

- Wayne Memorial Hospital, Wayne County
- Monroe County Hospital, Monroe County
- Colquitt Regional Hospital, Colquitt County
- Elbert Memorial Hospital, Elbert County
- Evans Memorial Hospital, Evans County
- Bleckley Memorial Hospital, Bleckley County

Rural Pediatrician Support

Rural pediatricians often feel isolated with little access to subspecialty support, after-hours support and regular clinical updates. This initiative provides physician-to-physician telehealth support and offers provider training. MUSM conducts an assessment to determine core training needs.



The Rural Pediatrician Support project initially involved **5** rural pediatric practices, with **6** additional practices joining KidsABC in 2024.

"I am thrilled to have the opportunity to participate in the KidsABC program, because of which my practice has improved significantly in several different ways. Our access to behavioral and mental health support has been invaluable, allowing patients to be seen virtually by a Children's pediatric psychiatrist. We also participated in the pilot program establishing telemedicine visits with Children's specialists. Our first telemedicine office visit took place in fall 2024. The family was grateful not to have to travel to Atlanta for a follow-up visit with Nephrology. As a rural pediatrician and a working mother, I have enjoyed continuing education through the Pediatric Advancement Speaker Series. These lunchtime virtual lectures help me stay up to date with clinical guidelines and gave me the chance to meet and ask questions directly to some of the specialists at Children's."

— Dr. Jennifer Tarbutton, Washington County

Pediatric practices participating in KidsABC

Since 2023

- Sylvester Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, Worth County
- Eastman Pediatric Clinic and New Life Pediatrics, Dodge County
- CRH Pediatric Group, Coffee County
- Children's Healthcare Center of Sandersville, Washington County

Joined in 2024

- Kids 1st Pediatrics, Baldwin County
- Mercer Medicine, Harris County
- Medical Center of Elberton, Elbert County
- Crisp Regional Pediatrics, Crisp County
- The Pediatric Center, Wayne County
- Dawson Medical Center, Terrell County

Behavioral and Mental Health Support

Behavioral and mental health support continues to be identified as an urgent need across the country, with a specific need to create access points for rural providers and schools to connect to mental health professionals. MUSM and Children's work with schools, pediatricians and hospitals to develop a comprehensive approach to pediatric mental health.



This support is currently offered in **3** communities, with virtual mental health services and a focus on suicide awareness and prevention.

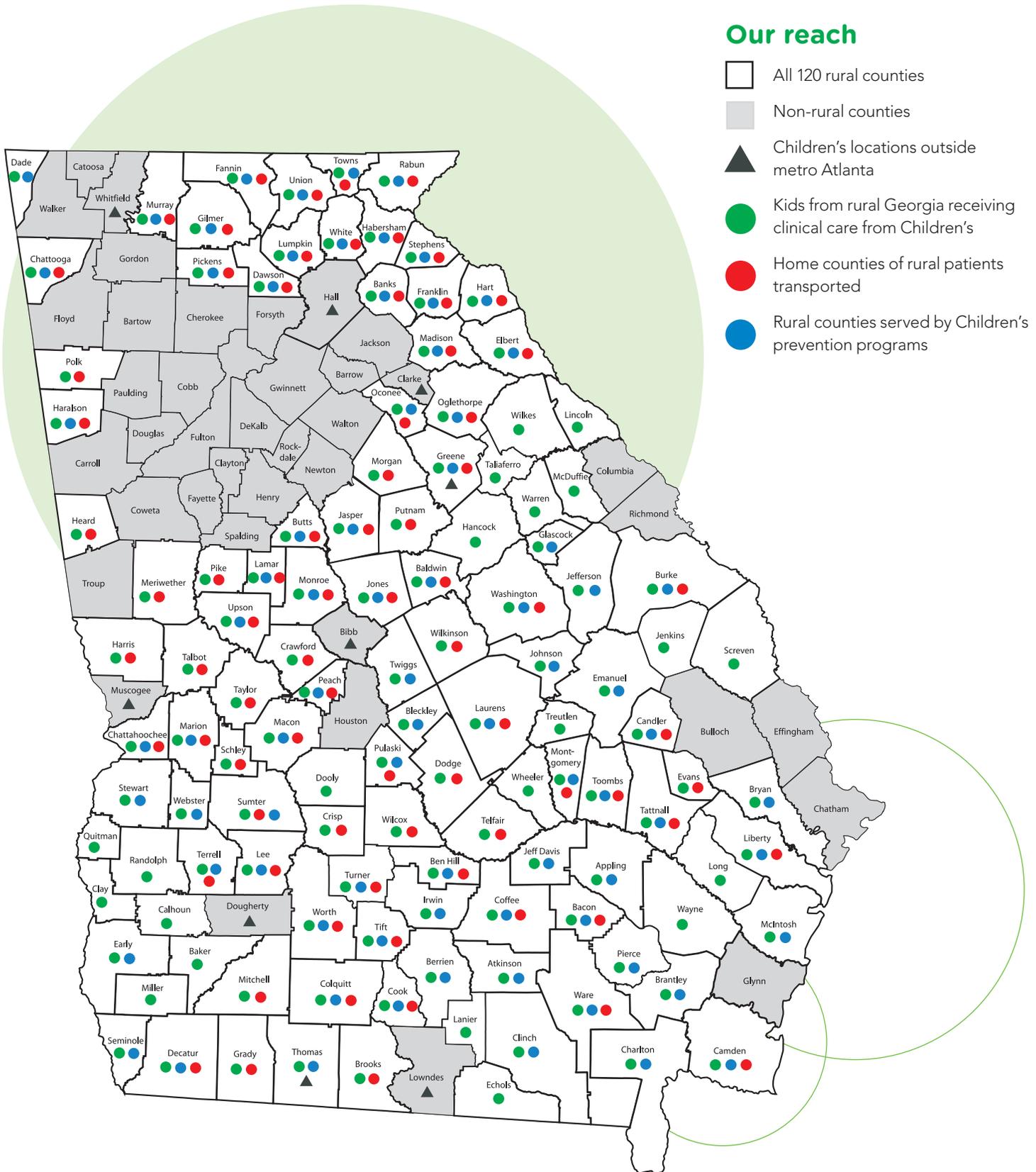
Rural Access Line Pilot

Children's provides a direct line for rural providers participating in KidsABC to seek consultative support from Children's pediatric specialists.



Our teams received **218** calls to the Rural Access Line from July 2023 to June 2024. The volume of calls nearly tripled from 2023 to 2024, allowing our teams to support rural providers through an average of 30 calls per month in 2024.

Our reach in rural Georgia



Data from July 2023 to June 2024

Rural counties in Georgia are defined by the State Office of Rural Health, a division of the Georgia Department of Community Health, as those with total populations of less than 50,000 people.

Treating kids from every county in Georgia

Our reach

Rural patients sought care at Children’s for emergencies, surgeries, cardiology, neurology, orthopedics, hematology/oncology, transplant and a variety of other treatments.

Most kids only need primary care. Typically only 1 in 5 children requires hospitalization or specialty care.

Children’s Cardiology

There are **23** Children’s Cardiology clinics throughout Georgia.

Children’s Critical Care Transport Team

Children’s pediatric-trained transport team provides critically ill infants, children and teens from rural Georgia with access to specialized hospital care and treatment at our two dedicated pediatric trauma centers—Arthur M. Blank Hospital and Scottish Rite Hospital. Arthur M. Blank Hospital is the only Level 1 pediatric trauma center in the state.

404-785-DOCS

Children’s offers a physician-to-physician advice service through 404-785-DOCS that is available across the state.



Top photo: Our teams transport kids from across Georgia.

Left photo: Michael “Mikey” was diagnosed with osteosarcoma. During his treatment at Children’s, our facility dog, Blanche, cheered him on and motivated him to meet his goals.



Above: Ava was born with a rare and serious heart condition that required a 6-hour open heart surgery.



Left photo: Miller, born with a rare congenital heart defect, received specialized care and surgery at Children’s.

Children’s served nearly **25,000** individual kids from rural counties for a total of **70,000+** patient visits

Children’s Cardiology cared for **9,455** patients from all **120** rural counties.

Children’s transported **389** patients from **76** rural counties.

13,500+ calls were made to **785-DOCS** seeking support for local patients.

Patient data from July 2023 to June 2024

Impacting children in rural counties with our prevention programs

Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Strong4Life

Through Strong4Life, the prevention arm of Children's, we provide training and resources to local schools, early care centers and community organizations focused on impacting kids across Georgia. Strong4Life.com was developed by our team of specialists as a free, easy-to-access resource to help Georgia's families raise healthy, safe, resilient kids.

Our prevention programs reached kids in **79** rural counties.

Strong4Life worked with **58** schools and early care centers in rural counties.

Programs in schools across Georgia

School health services

The Children's regional school nurse coordinator serves as a contact for school health professionals and collaborates with the Georgia Department of Education, the Georgia Association of School Nurses, the Georgia Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to provide training, education, technical assistance and communication on clinical pediatric topics.

Children's reached **197** school health professionals from **70** rural counties.

Project S.A.V.E.

Created in 2004, Project S.A.V.E. (Sudden cardiac arrest, Awareness, Vision for prevention, Education) is a Children's-led program designed with the mission of preventing sudden cardiac arrest in children, teens and young adults throughout Georgia.

Marcus Autism Center's School Consultation Program

Through Marcus Autism Center, Children's provides consultation, trainings and professional development for school systems to effectively serve students with educational needs and behavioral challenges. All school consultants are Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs).



Meet Brooks, from Ben Hill County



Brooks was born with cleft lip and palate.

“

The cleft team at Children’s went above and beyond to make my husband and me feel at ease.

—Brooks’s mom,
Mary Claire Giddens

”

When baby Brooks was born at just 35 weeks, his early arrival was a bit of a surprise—his cleft lip and palate, however, were not. His progress at almost 1 year old is remarkable, but it was no easy journey.

When Brooks’s mom was only 20 weeks pregnant, his family learned that Brooks not only had a cleft lip but a strong likelihood of experiencing other concerning health problems. They had no idea what to expect, but knew they needed to act. When he was born, he was taken to Children’s, traveling nearly 200 miles from Fitzgerald, Ga. He was evaluated and placed in a molding device to guide the growth of his mouth in the right direction. Brooks had his first surgery to repair his cleft lip at 4 months old, followed by a palatoplasty at 9 months old.

While Brooks will remain a patient at Children’s for many more years for follow-up appointments and surgeries, his primary pediatric plastic surgeon, Dr. Colin Brady, is proud of his progress.

“It’s an honor to have the opportunity to do a job like this, to be a part of a child’s long-term health journey and to help them be proud of the face they have moving forward,” Dr. Brady says.

“Since we see them over the course of so many years, they become a big part of our families.”

“The cleft team at Children’s went above and beyond to make my husband and me feel at ease,” says Brooks’s mom, Mary Claire. “Our surgeon was so kind and patient and always took time to thoroughly answer our questions. Nurses were available by phone to assist with every question that came up. Sometimes nurses or the nutritionist would call me just to check in on Brooks. Though I can’t imagine how many patients they must serve, I never felt like just a number. Being treated with such care and compassion helped us feel assured that this team was truly invested in Brooks’ care.”

Now almost a year old, easygoing Brooks has recovered from his surgeries and loves showing off his new smile to anyone he meets!



Mission

To make kids better today and healthier tomorrow

Vision

To be a unified pediatric system that does *Everything Possible* to make *Anything Possible* for kids



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