

## **Social workers told: 'What you do matters' Celebration part of faith-based initiative**

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The fried chicken and green beans were served in appreciation of some of the least-appreciated public servants.

Church people and a high-ranking bureaucratic executive praised Friday's gathering of more than 50 Gwinnett foster care caseworkers and supervisors at a luncheon at First Baptist Church of Snellville.

However, the most touching words came from a buck-toothed clown.

"What you do matters," said Pat Powell, an entertainer who performed at the luncheon and who works in the same sort of trenches as the caseworkers.

Through her Street Wise Ministries, Powell has evangelized and entertained for about 17 years, mostly in Atlanta's public housing projects.

It was a caseworker, Powell said, who helped her understand the importance of her ministry and of the role of social workers. The caseworker brought a child to her, and the child told her how happy she was to be going to a good foster home.

"Daddy's not gonna hurt me anymore," the little girl said.

Too often, Powell said, the caseworkers get too much of the blame for what goes wrong in the child welfare system, and too little of the credit for what goes right.

"The caseworkers get a bad rap," she said. "People don't hear about the children they've dug out of the trenches."

The luncheon was partly a celebration of progress in Gwinnett's foster-care system.

About two years ago, that system was operating in "crisis mode," said Lisa Lariscy, Gwinnett County director for the Georgia Department of Family and Children Services.

The foster-care system in Gwinnett had been the target of a critical report by a children's advocacy group. The report criticized instability in the agency's upper management and the general quality of case management.

The agency has since improved its internal stability and its relations with juvenile-court authorities, Lariscy said.

There are about 800 children in Gwinnett's foster-care system, the third-highest number among the state's counties, she said.

"What we really need now is to let our staff know how much they are appreciated," she said.

Friday's luncheon was part of an initiative being led by Georgia's first lady, Mary Perdue.

The effort is to seek ways for faith-based groups to support the work of public social-service agencies.

Next month, there will be a daylong program at a Lilburn church exploring how church-based volunteers can help. In October, the informal coalition hopes to issue a report on the topic.

Lariscy said she had a top-priority need that church people could start helping her agency with right away: "Bring us more good foster parents."