



Murphy-Harpst
LIFE AND HOPE FOR CHILDREN

Building Foster Care Solutions

SPRING 2025 NEWSLETTER

Successes

Outstanding Agency Award

Services

York Academy

Support

Summer Supplies



MURPHY-HARPST

100

1924 – 2024

A Century of Hope & Care

MURPHYHARPST.ORG

Our Mission

Provide a safe and nurturing environment where severely abused and neglected children and teenagers can thrive and heal toward a goal of re-engaging with society and leading productive lives.

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Letter from the President

Friends of Murphy-Harpst,

What does it take to be outstanding? At Murphy-Harpst, it takes unwavering commitment to the children and youth entrusted to us. It requires innovation, collaboration, and a talented team of caregivers dedicated to making a difference. Just as importantly, it takes generous donors and volunteers who believe in our mission and help bring it to life.

That's why we were honored to accept Together Georgia's Outstanding Agency Award at their Conference on Children and Families in Augusta this past November. This recognition is a testament to the collective effort of our staff, partners, and supporters like you. As we embark on our second century of service, this award reminds us of the profound impact we have on Georgia's most vulnerable children.

While we are grateful for this recognition, our true motivation remains the children we serve. Their well-being drives every decision we make. Our partnership with the State of Georgia reflects our vital role in addressing the child welfare crisis, providing safe, supportive environments for children who need them most.

The demand for these services far exceeds availability, which is why we are working tirelessly to expand our programs. On our Cedartown campus, we're enhancing therapeutic services, while our highly successful Evolve Initiative continues to grow in Rockdale and Richmond counties, with plans to expand further. These programs are already making a difference—improving behaviors, increasing family reunifications, facilitating adoptions, and ensuring stable foster placements.

As Murphy-Harpst evolves to meet the needs of the children we serve, our core commitment remains unchanged: providing the depth of care necessary to help them find stability and thrive. This vital work is only possible because of you. Your generosity enables us to provide therapeutic and counseling services, ongoing staff training, and the simple yet profoundly meaningful aspects of childhood—a new pair of shoes, a birthday party, a high school graduation.

Thank you for believing in our mission, for your support, and for being part of this incredible journey of hope, healing, and transformation.

All my best,

Michael Scott Merritt, President and CEO



Scan to Read the Full Article

Murphy-Harpst Named 2024 Outstanding Agency by the Georgia Conference on Children and Families

What a year it has been! Murphy-Harpst Children's Center is thrilled to wrap up our centennial anniversary with a look back at an incredible year of milestones and achievements.

From receiving prestigious awards to launching innovative programs, we've been hard at work fulfilling our mission to deliver exceptional care to Georgia's foster children. Here are some of the highlights:

- **Honored for Excellence:** Murphy-Harpst was named the 2024 Outstanding Agency by the Georgia Conference on Children and Families.
- **Meeting the Growing Need:** Georgia has seen a recent surge in foster care cases, and Murphy-Harpst is committed to providing a safe haven for vulnerable youth.
- **Expanding Our Reach:** Our Evolve initiative continues to grow! We opened two new homes in Augusta this year, with three more planned for 2025.
- **More Reasons to Celebrate:** Served over 200 youth across 50 Georgia counties. Facilitated 36 adoptions or family reunifications. Provided over 2,700 individual and 300 group therapy sessions.

Evolve: Where Hope Takes Root in Georgia's Foster Care Crisis



Another night, another temporary holding place. For far too many children in Georgia, this was the reality—a revolving door of unfamiliar faces, cold rooms, and the uncertainty of what tomorrow would bring.

Today the state has more than 11,000 children in the foster care system, with only 2300 foster family homes available, a staggering statistic that obscures the individual stories of trauma, resilience, and a yearning for stability. Options have been limited further as Georgia has lost about two-thirds of its congregant care facilities during the past few years, forcing children with complex needs into temporary and unsuitable placements—psychiatric hospitals, jails, even hotels. The consequences are devastating. By age 21, many who age out of the system face homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, and a lack of education.

The Genesis of a Solution

From this crisis, Evolve Initiative emerged. A group gathered at Augusta's Trinity on the Hill in 2021 to address the lack of residential programs in the area, connecting Murphy-Harpst leadership with community leaders. A juvenile court judge, lamenting that children were coming before the bench with “nowhere to send them,” asked, “Can Murphy-Harpst do something?”

“We recognized the need for an out-of-the-box approach, something that could bridge the gap between traditional foster care and more intensive therapeutic settings,” says Scott Merritt, president and CEO. “We needed an approach that could be localized, in Augusta and beyond.”

Merritt brought in consultant Cindy Simpson, now Murphy-Harpst's vice president of Strategic Initiatives, who fashioned Evolve's “hybrid” model. It places four children in a neighborhood home with a rotating foster parent, while also providing 20 hours of in-home therapy and wraparound services. “The goal is to stabilize children in a safe and supportive environment where they can begin to heal and prepare for success,” Simpson says.

It Takes a Village

From its beginnings, Evolve was a community project. After working with the state to pilot the project in Conyers in February 2023, Murphy-Harpst continued to collaborate with church and community leaders to launch in Augusta in May 2023. Partners have included the Community Foundation for the Central Savannah River Area; Fireside Ministries and Industries, a non-profit agency serving families in Augusta's inner city; and Augusta developer Wayne Millar. Recently a member of Murphy-Harpst's board has worked to secure office space for the program.

“For this project to succeed, it needed to have deep roots in the community,” says Scott Fuller, vice president of Advancement. “The generous volunteerism and gifts of our partners is integral to the success we are experiencing.” At the same time, its expansion is not only serving vulnerable youth, but is working to revitalize once-blighted neighborhoods. There are now six residences in Augusta located primarily in Augusta's Olde Town and Harrisburg, with two more more planned by the end of 2025. Last year, 20 youth were served with nearly 80 percent successfully exiting the program, including step-down placements, adoptions and reunifications. About 90 percent reported decreased destructive behaviors, and increased life skills and behavior management capabilities.

More Than Just a Home

“Evolve isn't just another transitional housing program. It's a family,” says Simpson. Each home provides a stable, supportive nurturing environment where youth can learn to navigate community life, attend public school, and eventually find employment. Foster parents, behavioral aides, therapists, and care coordinators work together, an “expanded family,” providing personalized care.

The state has embraced this innovative approach. “With Evolve we are working with Georgia to reduce the number of youth in hotels and decrease the length of stay in psychiatric treatment facilities,” explains Merritt. “These less-than-ideal settings compound the trauma these children experience and further strains the system's resources. Evolve works to release these pressures.”

Looking to the Future

In partnership with the state, and with the continuing support of private donors and community collaborators, Murphy-Harpst's long-term vision is to expand Evolve and establish an independent living program in community apartments.

“We are working to create a seamless array of services that supports youth as they transition to adulthood,” Merritt says, “giving them the tools and resources they need to thrive on their own. Evolve has become a lifeline for these youth. It's a place where hope takes root.”

For more about Evolve's transformative work, see Steven's Story on page six.



House parent John Boston and resident Jabari prepare a meal together.



Evolve Home Staff: House Parents John Boston and Betty Stephens, Therapist Sharon Greenwood, Operational Manager Megan Lewis, Program Manager Melissa Walker, and Crisis Intervention Specialist Angelo Collier.



Evolve isn't just another transitional housing program. It's a family.

— Cindy Simpson



Evolve resident Anna enjoys an afternoon board game.



John Boston and Betty Stephens - House Parents.



House Parent Betty Stephens talks with a resident.



New Construction in Olde Town by Augusta Developer Wayne Millar.



Behavioral Aide Gracie Mathias engages an Evolve resident.



Harrisburg renovation by Fireside Ministries and Industries now housing boys.



Murphy-Harpst's Evolve Initiative Highlighted by Local News

WRDW, a local news station in Augusta, GA, recently covered Murphy-Harpst's Evolve Initiative and its work to support foster children in Georgia. The news story emphasized the critical need for foster homes in Georgia, with more than 11,000 children currently in foster care and a shortage of available beds.

[Scan to Watch the Video & Read the Full Article](#)



Voices of Evolve: Steven's Story*

Steven, 15 arrived at Evolve after being in 19 placements in 18 months. "He was quiet, depressed, had a report card filled with Cs and Ds, and was convinced that we would 'kick him out too,'" says Cindy Simpson, vice president of Strategic Initiatives. But something shifted. With consistent therapy and unwavering staff support, Steven opened up. He found a passion for football. With the help of a tutor he made the varsity team as a ninth grader. "Today he is happy and a leader with As and Bs, and wants to go to college. He believes in himself." Below Steven shares his journey.

How long have you been in an Evolve home, and how has the experience been for you so far?

I've been in the Evolve home since July 8, 2024, and the experience has been very good so far.

What were your first impressions?

My first impressions were that it would be boring and that I would not enjoy living in the Evolve home.

What types of support have you received from Evolve that have been most helpful?

I really liked the support I received from staff when they attended my homecoming football game with posters and t-shirts. That kind of support, and being encouraged to continue in sports, was awesome.

How has being in an Evolve home helped you grow or change as a person?

I feel like I've gotten stronger emotionally, and I think I can give support to other youth who are struggling with issues.

What is a typical day like for you in an Evolve home?

A typical day for me is getting ready for school and attending

sports practice after school. During my downtime at home, I enjoy playing video games, watching TV, and talking to the staff and other youth.

Are there specific activities or routines that you enjoy most?

I most enjoy working out, playing video games, and talking to my teammates and other friends.

What challenges have you faced during this transition, and how has Evolve helped you overcome them?

I faced a challenge of feeling that people wouldn't like me. Evolve has helped me overcome this feeling by recognizing that I'm a good person and giving me encouragement throughout my time here.

What are your goals for the future, and how is Evolve helping you work toward them?

My goals for the future include going to college, playing college football, and becoming a successful therapist to help other kids who may be in the same situation as I am now. The Evolve staff gives me positive feedback and allows me to learn about my interests.

What does having a stable home mean to you personally?

Having a stable home means getting a regular home-cooked meal, having a warm place to lay my head, and being respected as an individual.

What would you want other youth to know about the program?

I would want other youth to know that the program isn't as bad as people might think, and that they should make the best of it while they are here.

* Identifying information, including name and photo, have been changed to protect anonymity.

Honoring Martha Carroll: A Legacy of Heart and Dedication

As Martha Carroll concludes her remarkable tenure as Board Chair, we extend our deepest gratitude for her unwavering commitment to Murphy-Harpst. For six years, Martha's passion has been a driving force behind our mission to serve vulnerable youth. Her dedication, sparked by a Sunday school visit and deepened by genuine connection with our residents, has transformed lives. From expanding our reach in Atlanta through successful golf tournaments to orchestrating our unforgettable centennial celebration, Martha's vision has been instrumental.



Her heart for the children is evident in every interaction, every initiative, and every goal. Martha's dream to build a new school, driven by her educational background and deep concern for our students' well-being, underscores her lasting impact. Her genuine care for both youth and staff has created a warm, supportive community.

We invite you to witness Martha's passion firsthand. Scan the QR code to watch her insightful interview with Scott Fuller, VP of Advancement, where she shares her journey, highlights, and dreams for Murphy-Harpst's future. Thank you, Martha, for your extraordinary service and heartfelt dedication.

Scan the QR code to watch the full interview!



York Academy: More Than Just a School

Many of the children who arrive at Murphy-Harpst, due to unstable home environments, are behind in school. At York-Harpst Academy, our COGNIA-accredited school on campus, our teachers and para-pros work with therapists to create individualized education plans to help them catch up. But beyond what they find in textbooks, our children receive an education in trust, overcoming challenges, and a number of other activities and experiences. To truly understand what makes York Academy special, scan the code below to hear directly from the staff and students.



Scan to Read the Full Article



Summer Supply Needs & Volunteer Opportunities

Supplies

Pool Towels

Adult Sized Flip-flops

Pool Toys, Noodles, Inflatables - adult sized

Goggles - adult sized

Swim Ear Drops

Sunscreen - 30+ SPF or higher, kindly omit sports sunscreens

Adult Sized Plain White T-shirts

Canvas Boards

Mandala-type Coloring Books

Heavyweight White Paper for Watercolors or Acrylics



[See Full List](#)

Volunteer

Sponsor an Off-campus Trip to Movies, Art and Cultural Museums, Zoos, Animal Parks, Local Events, Festivals, and Fairs

TBRI: Building Trust and Hope at Murphy-Harpst

Meet Denzel Darden. He serves as the lead Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) trainer at Murphy-Harpst, as well as the evening manager at our Cedartown campus. He's a passionate advocate for transforming the lives of children through TBRI, and he's seen firsthand the power of shifting from traditional consequences to building genuine connections. Over the last few years, he has been methodically introducing TBRI concepts to staff and foster parents, witnessing its remarkable impact.

One foster parent wrote a heartfelt letter, expressing how TBRI training was a "breakthrough." It allowed her to see the "whole child" rather than just their behavior, especially crucial when working with children who have experienced trauma. This shift in perspective is at the heart of TBRI, focusing on treating the "whole brain child."



To find out more about the TBRI program, scan the QR code!

A Path to Thrive

For children in the foster care system, finding stability isn't just about placement—it's about belonging, healing, and opportunity. At Murphy-Harpst, we believe that every child deserves more than just a home; they deserve a future built on support, encouragement, and care tailored to their individual needs.

Liam's Journey, Finding the Right Fit

Liam's early experiences in foster care were marked by struggle. He moved from home to home, never quite finding the right fit. When he arrived at Murphy-Harpst, we saw more than just his challenges—we saw his potential. Here, Liam found structure, therapy, and a support system that understood him.

Foster Care and Beyond

Foster care at Murphy-Harpst works to find the right home, at the right time, with the right support. Our programs work together to ensure that children not only have a safe place to land but also the tools they need to move forward.



FULL STORY



Bringing Strength and Freedom to Life: The New Mural at Murphy-Harpst

Murphy-Harpst has a vibrant new addition to its campus: a stunning mural that captures the spirit of strength, freedom, and the therapeutic connection between humans and horses. This 12×18-foot masterpiece now graces the day room of the Thalia Empowerment Cottage, offering a burst of color and inspiration to residents and visitors alike.

A Collaborative Effort

The mural was brought to life through the collaboration of Katherine Tortoso, Equine Coordinator, and Christi Conner Tate, Artist-in-Residence. Over the course of five days, from sunup to sundown, Katherine and Christi dedicated their time and talents to transform a blank wall into a dynamic work of art. “Katherine even worked from 9 AM to 1 AM one day,” Christi noted, reflecting the dedication poured into this project.

Tools of the Trade

Creating a mural of this scale required a variety of materials and techniques. The duo used several acrylic paints, DecoArt, and Behr semi-gloss from the local Home Depot. Brushes, rollers, sponges, ladders, drop cloths, and painter’s tape were essential tools in the process. While Katherine focused on intricate details, especially the horses’ faces, Christi added texture and depth to the sky and grass with sponges and rollers.

The Inspiration Behind the Design

The mural’s design was inspired by the Murphy-Harpst Equine Program, one of the top therapeutic programs on campus. This program integrates equine therapy, therapeutic riding, and a barn work team, providing residents with opportunities to care for and connect with horses. “The residents and staff find peace

and joy at the barn, and we wanted to bring that same atmosphere into the living space,” Katherine shared. The image of horses running symbolizes strength and freedom, qualities that resonate deeply with the Murphy-Harpst community.

Challenges and Favorite Moments

Painting such a large mural presented its challenges. Katherine and Christi had to frequently step back to ensure proper proportions and navigate working around each other with ladders. Despite initial concerns about collaborating on such a detailed project, Christi found the partnership surprisingly seamless. “It wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be—though I’m curious if Katherine feels the same!” she joked.

When asked about their favorite elements, Christi expressed her fondness for the sorrel horse, while Katherine highlighted the vibrant colors and detailed imagery that she hopes will provide a sense of comfort and peace to those who see reddish-colored sorrel.

A Lasting Impact

Though the mural was a surprise for the residents, its impact is undeniable. It stands as a symbol of resilience, beauty, and the transformative power of art and nature. For Katherine, Christi, and the entire Murphy-Harpst community, this mural is more than just paint on a wall—it’s a reflection of hope, healing, and the spirit of those who call Murphy-Harpst home.

Tributes (July 2024 - January 2025)

IN HONOR OF

Lawrence and Betty Ann Ablitt

Lea Agnew

Daneise Archer

Mr. and Mrs. King Askew

Diana Baber

Gov. Roy and Marie Barnes

Alice Ann Bell

Jim Biggs

Nevan and Hailey Black

Pam Bohlander

Howard and Kim Boyd

Phil Brewster

Kayla Burrus

Diana Busby

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Martha Carroll

Martha Carroll

Martha Carroll

Martha Carroll

Martha Carroll

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Carole Cole

Christi Connor-Tate

Christi Connor-Tate

Christi Connor-Tate

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Bishop Robin Dease

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Rev. Burch Fannin

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Gainesville First United Methodist Church

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Whittington, Jones &
Rudert CPAs
Michael and Connie Williams
Cheryl Burger
Due West MC Alpha Omega Sunday
School Class

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Tim Sullivan
Robin Cooper
Joann Evans
Claude and Liz Grizzard
Donald Haley
Richard Britt
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Mary Price
Clyde and Renee Smith
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Rome First United
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Hutcherson
Michael R. Jones
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Trinity (Austell) UMC Courier Sunday
School Class
Dana and Tatjana Feneck
Lamar P. McEachern
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Dr. Alex and Valerie Parkinson

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Ena Moore
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Sinclair "Gussie" Foster Moore
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Jimmy Riddle
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Brenda Shadrix
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Mary Slaughter
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Inetz C. Stanley
Tommy Sullivan
John P. Sullivan, Jr.
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Kristine Holcomb Wright
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David MacDonald Jr.
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Bob and Elaine Martin Jr.
M. Ovaline McArthur
Bob and Deborah McKeeman
Seth and Shawn Collins
Debbie McNiff
Dr. and Dr. Robert and
Julie Moore
Susan Posey
Farris and Claire Yates
James H. Moore Estate
Jim and Tamela Moore
Elizabeth Yates
Roger and Beckie Sloan
Sam and Olina Ann Niemeier
Margaret and Tom Gose
Thomas Owens
Shelvie Ozment
John and Susan McCullough
Bryan and Jackie Hays
Sam and Olina Ann Niemeier
James R. Porter
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Janet H. Bagwell
Jan Renard Murphy
Laura Jean Richards
Ailene Mooney
Joe and Jacqueline Dewitt
Hill A. Robertson
Brian and Kimberly Shadrix
Charles Shadrix
Richard and Susan Shivers
Rena K. Wiggins
Jean H. Smilie
Cathy Smith
Anne France Tremege
Bernita S. Waller
Sally S. Sullivan
Dorothy S. Wade
Rev. Dr. Jacqui Rose Tucker
Sean and Suzanne Taylor
Morrow First UMC Marvin Foster
Sunday School Class
Karl and Carol Leymann
Dr. Jason and Amy Oyler
Jack and Stacy Kennedy
Teresa L. Morrow
Tim and Mary Anne Fair
John and Susan McCullough
John and Susan McCullough
Don Yelton



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As we step into our second century of care, we are filled with excitement for the future. We deeply appreciate your support, as you are a vital part of this journey. Murphy-Harpst depends on the dedication of our friends, partners, and volunteers to help spread the word about the transformative work we are doing across Georgia. We are always eager to engage more supporters in our mission—whether through hosting a dinner, sponsoring a 5K, organizing a group of volunteers for our campus, or simply sharing our content on social media. Together, we can make a greater impact. Thank you for helping us amplify our mission!



Use the QR code to find out more ways you can stand in the gap for Georgia's most vulnerable children.

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