

## November EMPLOYEES OF THE MONTH



# ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH SERVICES

*To connect with youth involved in the justice system and to change the trajectory of their lives.*

## FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR     *December 2025 Newsletter*

### MT. MEIGS CAMPUS

Mr. Anthony Symile



### AUTAUGA CAMPUS

Ms. Tekisha Graves



Season Greetings DYS Staff,

I recently had the opportunity to hear a speaker share the quote below:

***Hope, is a seed planted in rocky soil; with no knowledge of how deep its roots will reach or how many its fruit will feed. But we must prepare and plant and see.***

-Hasan Davis

It spoke to me, and I believe it spoke to many in the audience who work with at-risk youth, especially young people who are justice involved. With obvious scriptural overtones and as we enter into this season of hope, the quote may speak to us both professionally and personally. Our jobs are challenging for many reasons, but one of our greatest challenges is to continue to be a difference-maker when sometimes we don't get to see the difference made until months or years down the road. We may have planted the seeds in the rocky soil with no idea if they took root. We can all agree that the youth coming into the system have greater needs than ever before. Hope in their future is a foundational need that all youth must have to act on the knowledge, skills, and success gained here at DYS.

What do we hope for? What change in our lives is needed (beyond a New Year's resolution) to lead us to greater hope and happiness? Are we the rocky soil sometimes? It can be a challenge some days to balance and filter our personal lives and issues with our professional tasks at work. Are we able to adequately address our own well-being and needs without taking it out on our co-workers and youth?

Hope is something we all need. A sense of inner peace that despite what we are experiencing now, that things can get better. Hope also calls us to be an active agent in the pursuit to make things better, both personally and professionally.

May you find the Hope needed this Holiday Season,

Steve Lafreniere

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**MISSION:** To be a life changing resource for youth involved in the justice system by providing quality educational opportunities, services, and supports to reduce reoffending, improve positive outcomes, strengthen families, and enhance community safety.

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## Alabama Juvenile Justice Summit Building Stronger Futures Together

The inaugural Alabama Juvenile Justice Summit, held from December 3rd to December 5th, 2025, brought together over 300 professionals from across the state to collaborate on innovative reforms aimed at improving outcomes for youth in the justice system. Co-hosted by the Alabama Department of Youth Services (DYS) and the University of Alabama's Youth Services Institute (YSI), the event embodied its theme, "Building Stronger Futures Together," through a packed agenda of keynotes, breakout sessions, panels, and networking opportunities. Attendees included judges, probation officers, educators, mental health providers, researchers, and policymakers, all united in their commitment to rehabilitation, accountability, and community safety.

Governor Kay Ivey kicked off the summit with a heartfelt welcome letter, emphasizing Alabama's dedication to supporting youth and fostering a more compassionate system. "This historic event marks a significant milestone in our shared commitment to strengthening Alabama's juvenile justice system," she wrote. Echoing this sentiment, DYS Executive Director Steven Lafreniere and YSI Director Jill Beck highlighted the summit's role as a launching point for cross-sector collaboration, data-driven decision-making, and evidence-based practices.

### Key Highlights from the Agenda

The three-day event featured a mix of general sessions, breakout workshops, and interactive receptions, allowing participants to dive deep into topics ranging from trauma-informed care to recidivism reduction. Here's a snapshot of the schedule:

<b>Wednesday, Dec 3</b>	Registration, Opening Keynote by Brett Peterson on "The Dialectic of Leadership," breakout sessions on resilience-building therapies, family engagement, education in specialized treatment centers, diversion programs, recidivism analysis, and cross-system collaboration. Evening reception sponsored by Pathway Inc.
<b>Thursday, Dec 4</b>	Buffet breakfast, youth panel presentation moderated by Jason Granholm, breakouts on credible messengers, day treatment innovations, education/job readiness, reentry programming, data-informed decisions, and trauma's impact on youth. Luncheon keynote by Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Sarah Stewart. Afternoon sessions covered gang violence reduction, traumatized brain responses, community-based treatment for sexual behavior issues, and more.
<b>Friday, Dec 5</b>	Buffet breakfast, panel presentation moderated by Jason Granholm, breakouts on credible messengers, day treatment innovations, education/job readiness, reentry programming, data-informed decisions, and trauma's impact on youth. Luncheon keynote by Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Sarah Stewart. Afternoon sessions covered gang violence reduction, traumatized brain responses, community-based treatment for sexual behavior issues, and more.

### Inspiring Speakers and Presenters

The summit featured an impressive lineup of keynote speakers who shared personal and professional insights:

- **Brett Peterson**, Founder of Justice Path Advisors and Immediate Past President of the Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators, discussed leadership in reform, drawing from his success in reducing detention rates in Utah.
- **Chief Justice Sarah Stewart** provided judicial perspectives on creating effective and collaborative systems to improve juvenile justice services across the state.
- **Hasan Davis**, Founder/CEO of Hasan Davis Solutions, delivered a powerful story of transformation from juvenile delinquent to advocate, inspiring attendees to become "hope dealers."

## Cont'd...

A highlight of some of the breakout speakers included Dr. Fatima Johnson's exploration of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) for reducing reoffending through emotional regulation, and Eldra Jackson III's discussion on credible messengers as agents of change in high-risk communities. Other notable topics addressed Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), financial literacy for justice-involved adolescents, and arts integration in juvenile justice. Other breakout session examples included Dr. Kristine Jolivette on reentry programming, Monica Roland on DYS-funded diversion initiatives, and Joy Winchester on neuroscience-based strategies for trauma offered practical tools for implementation. Poster presentations from researchers at Auburn University and the University of South Alabama covered workforce preparation, educational interventions, financial literacy, arts exploration, personality assessments, and interview skills for at-risk youth.

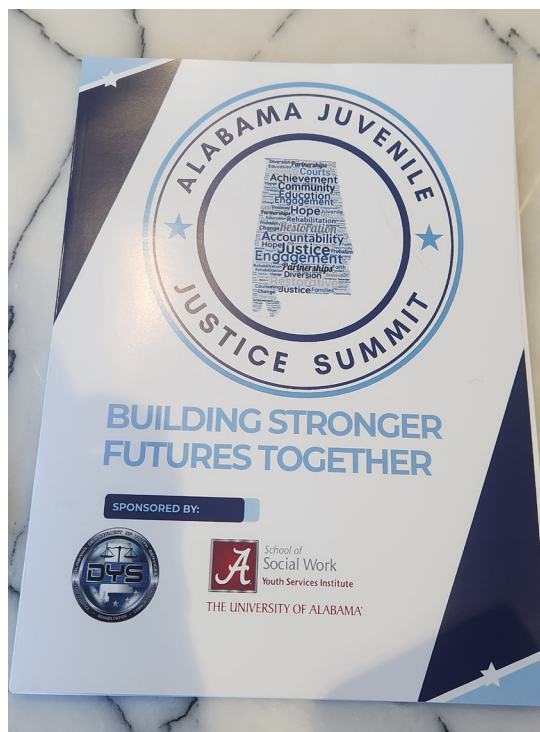
## Gratitude to Sponsors, Exhibitors, and Supporters

The event's success was made possible by generous sponsors, including Premier Sponsor Pathway Inc., Breakfast Sponsors Aramark and Rite of Passage, and Lunch Sponsor Mandt System. Exhibitors such as ACCESS Virtual Learning, AMI Kids Alabama Family Services, Brainchild, Handel Information Technology, Hill Crest Behavioral Health Services, iCEV Multimedia, Nobel Child Inc., and The Bridge Inc. showcased innovative resources for youth services.

A special thanks goes to the Planning Committee, co-chaired by Jill Beck and Steven Lafreniere, and members including Alesia Allen, Jason Granholm, Monique Grier, Keisha Lee, Judge Robert Minor, Christopher Narcisse, Joe Peeples, Ashleigh Simon, Judge Stephen Smith, Jason Swann, Shannon Weston, and Anthony Wynn.

## Looking Ahead: A Call to Action

As the summit concluded, participants left energized with new connections, data-driven insights, and actionable strategies to enhance Alabama's juvenile justice landscape—from prevention and diversion to reentry and beyond. DYS and YSI emphasized that this is just the beginning, with plans for future events to track progress and continue the dialogue.





# DYS Highlights

## Alabama Juvenile Justice Summit Building Stronger Futures Together





### McNeel School Hosts Writing Our Stories Event at the Vacca Campus

On Wednesday, November 5th, the Vacca Campus and McNeel School hosted the annual Writing Our Stories event. The event celebrated the publication of *Lords of Time: Creating an Eternity with Words*, which is an anthology of poems and prose from the youth at the Vacca Campus. The program included a welcome by Mr. Willie Simmons, Principal of McNeel School, special remarks by Mr. Steve Lafreniere, Executive Director of DYS, and Dr. Tracy Smitherman, Superintendent of the DYS School District 210. Dr. Richard Evans, Executive Director of the Alabama Writer's Forum provided introductions for the Writing Our Stories program. Ms. Salaam Green and Ms. Tina Braziel, the Teaching Writers of Writing Our Stories introduced the youth. The youth, one by one, read their poems to the audience. A book signing was held in the McNeel School library after the event. DYS is thankful to the youth, teachers, staff, and parents who came to the program to support the youth who participated in Writing Our Stories.



### Honoring the Impact of Patrick McCovery

Patrick McCovery has been a powerful source of inspiration and encouragement for the Autauga Campus. After overcoming 17 years in the Alabama Department of Corrections, he now dedicates his life to giving back and creating hope for young people. His authenticity, resilience, and compassion resonate deeply with our youth, reminding them that change is possible and their futures still hold meaning. Patrick's impact extends beyond his own efforts—his son and fiancée also generously offer their time and support. Their presence and commitment create a meaningful and uplifting experience for the students, showing the strength of a family devoted to service and second chances.





## Mt. Meigs Campus and L.B. Wallace School Host Veterans Day Event

On Thursday, November 13th, the Mt. Meigs Campus and L.B. Wallace School held a Veteran's Day program for the youth. Mr. John Gatzman and Mr. Greg Copeland were special guests for the event.



## Welcome New DYS Employees for November 2025

**Joi Anderson** - Mt. Meigs Campus

**Samira Ballard** - Mt. Meigs Campus

**Mitchell Clements** - Vacca Campus

**Quinterrius Grace** - Mt. Meigs Campus

**Timiya Henderson** - Mt. Meigs Campus

**Felicia Lawrence** - Mt. Meigs Campus

**Zephaniah Milton** - Mt. Meigs Campus

**Tabranecia Patterson** - Vacca Campus

**Devonte Powell** - Autauga Campus

**Joshua Stokes** - Mt. Meigs Campus



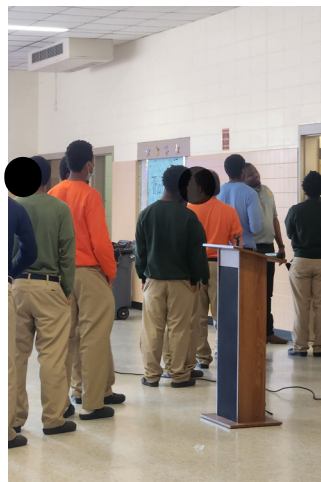


## DYS Campuses Host Thanksgiving Lunch for Youth and Staff

The Vacca and Mt. Meigs Campus held their Thanksgiving luncheon on November 19th, 2025. For the Vacca Campus, the 'Vacca Boys' performed an original rap performance. There were additional student presentations that included poems and dance. The guest speaker Youth Pastor Cordell Breeding of Rock City Church shared an inspirational message. The students, families, and staff were then served Jim N' Nicks and a dessert bar of cakes, cookies, and brownies.

For the Mt. Meigs Campus, youth and staff gathered in the dining hall to give thanks. The youth from IN2Work provided inspirational messages of what they are thankful for in their lives. The youth and staff were served a traditional Thanksgiving lunch.

For the Autauga Campus, the Church of the Highlands generously provided a full Thanksgiving dinner, creating a warm and memorable holiday experience for our students. Their kindness and commitment to serving our community were evident throughout the event. The Autauga Campus extends their sincere appreciation to the dedicated volunteers—Johnathan, Damon, Mark, and Riley—whose time, energy, and compassion helped make the celebration special for everyone involved. Their service truly made a difference.



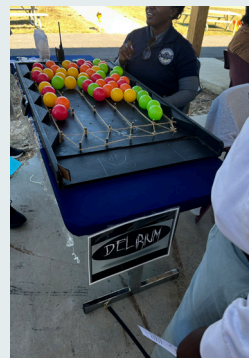
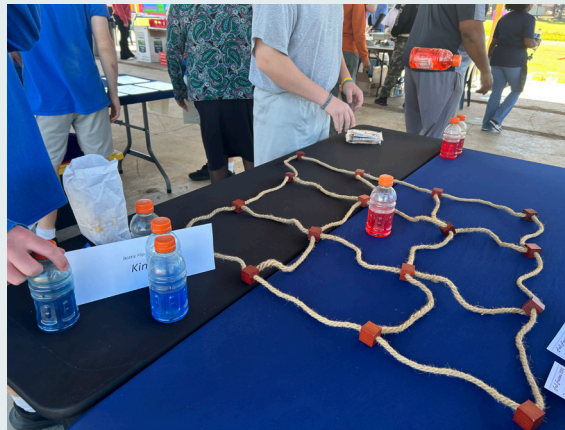


## Community Providers Host Thanksgiving Events for Youth

Pathways IDI, Pathway Campus I and II, and LCYDC



## Mt. Meigs Campus Hosts Fall Festival as Incentive Reward for Youth





## Vacca Campus Welcomes New Music Program for the Youth

The Vacca Campus is thrilled to welcome Derek Farrior from Rock City Church as the official DJ and Music Instructor for the new Vacca Beats Program. Since November 2025, Mr. Farrior has been guiding our youth in the art of music production, recording, and audio engineering. Every week, the young participants sharpen their skills through hands-on practice and real-time instruction. One of the most rewarding challenges has been helping them shift their focus—from themes of violence to messages of hope, resilience, and future possibilities—transforming both their music and their mindset along the way.



## Antioch Baptist Church Offers Fellowship to the Mt. Meigs Campus Youth

The Antioch Baptist Church fellowshiped with the youth and staff on campus November 30th. After service, the youth received a goodie bag with snacks. Antioch Baptist Church has been providing services since 2022 and are very much appreciated.

## Vacca Campus Mandt Training

The new Vacca Campus Mandt trainers presented a mock orientation/ in-service class on November 12th. The training provided the opportunity for the newly certified instructors to build confidence and enhance their delivery in a realistic classroom setting. Pictured: Curtis Pierce, Darryl Smith, Ladale Oatis



## Autauga Campus United Way Campaign

The United Way campaign for 2025 is underway with at the Autauga Campus. This campaign is focused on supporting community needs in areas like education, health, and financial stability through various fundraising events and workplace campaigns. Thank you to Mrs. T. Graves for leading this campaign event.





## EMPLOYEE COUNCIL WELLNESS

# WRAP YOURSELF IN JOY

### JOY CHALLENGE

START WITH A MINDFUL MORNING

BE PRESENT

PRACTICE GRATITUDE

FIND JOY IN THE LITTLE THINGS

MAKE SLEEP AND REGULAR REST A PRIORITY

SET AN ATTAINABLE GOAL TO INSPIRE YOURSELF

DO SOMETHING IN SERVICE OF OTHERS

BE KIND TO YOURSELF



**“A TRUE JOY IN LIFE SHOULD BE KNOWING  
THAT YOU HAVE TOUCHED THE HEART OF  
ANOTHER HUMAN BEING.” -  
STEVEN AITCHISON**



# CONNECT & REDIRECT

## Our Values.....

### **Safety & Accountability**

We believe a safe environment is everyone's responsibility and is foundational for individual and programmatic success.

### **Character & Integrity**

We believe the behavior we desire in others should first be seen through our own actions.

### **Communication & Collaboration**

We share ideas freely and courageously. We embrace the potential of new ideas and approaches.

### **Respect & Connection**

We believe youth and staff become meaningfully engaged through respectful relationships that are consistent, compassionate, and fair.

### **Empowerment & Discovery**

We create opportunities for others to learn, engage, and transform.

### **Equity & Inclusion**

We embrace our diversity, believing it transforms us and our community.

### **Transparency & Excellence**

We are committed to being informed by data to improve the quality of our efforts and accountability to our stakeholders.

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