



## LEADERSHIP PROFILE

**President & Chief Executive Officer  
CHRIS 180**

**Atlanta, GA**

---

*"Healing children. Strengthening families. Building community."*

---

# The Opportunity

[CHRIS 180](#) is one of the Southeast's premier mental health, child welfare and family services organizations. Highly regarded among peers nationally for its innovative approaches, the organization is undergoing its first change in CEOs in nearly four decades.

In March 2024, Kathy Colbenson, CHRIS 180's President & CEO since 1987, announced her intention to retire upon the appointment of her successor.<sup>1</sup> Such a change in long-tenured leadership would be momentous for any organization. It is especially so for CHRIS 180, where the CEO has been the mission's most visible advocate for years.

CHRIS 180's next CEO will inherit an organization with revenues over \$35 million and a team of 400 first-rate professionals eager for continued growth and impact. They understand the ripple effect of CHRIS 180's trauma-informed behavioral health services on Atlanta's children, youth, adults and families—indeed, on the community at large—is extraordinary. A CEO who leads this mature, highly regarded nonprofit to even greater impact will influence consequences well beyond the organization's footprint or any one leader's tenure.

CHRIS 180 looks quite different from what it did in 1987 or even in 2007, when revenues were just one-fifth of today's levels. The next leg of the journey will also be different. What will remain unchanged, however, is the staff's commitment, the Board's resilience, and the community's support for the critical work of *"Healing children. Strengthening families. Building community."*



“

The ripple effect of CHRIS 180's trauma-informed behavioral health services on Atlanta's children, youth, adults and families—indeed, on the community at large—is extraordinary.

---

<sup>1</sup> The text of Kathy Colbenson's announcement is [here](#).

“

CHRIS 180 was founded in 1981 to provide a brighter future for children in the state foster care system who had significant mental health needs.



## The Organization

CHRIS 180 is a [nationally accredited](#) nonprofit organization that helps those affected by trauma—children, young adults, and families—become productive, self-sufficient members of the community.<sup>2</sup> Its name is an acronym of the core values that inform all its work: **C**reativity, **H**onor, **R**espect, **I**ntegrity, and **S**afety.

CHRIS 180 was founded in 1981 to provide a brighter future for children in the state foster care system who had significant mental health needs. Over the years, services have expanded to provide trauma-informed care that:

- *Provides earlier intervention* through counseling and school-based behavioral health services;
- *Strengthens families* so children can be safely nurtured in their own homes or adopted;
- *Assists youth* aging out of foster care and youth experiencing homelessness with counseling, housing, and employment; and
- *Strengthens families* via housing supports and counseling.

CHRIS 180 pursues an expansive goal: Save, serve, and protect abused, neglected, and traumatized children, youth, and young adults and empower families through positive, solution-focused programming. Its growth over the past dozen years has been extraordinary. For example,

- In 2012, revenues from all sources were under \$10 million. In 2023, they were over \$35 million.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Accrediting agencies include [CARF International](#), [CAQH](#), and [SAMHSA](#) (for CCBHC certification)

<sup>3</sup> The latest audited statements and Form 990 are available [here](#). The 2023 audit is expected to be released by late May or early June.

- Growth during the pandemic was both vigorous and challenging, as the agency absorbed \$10 million in federal and state COVID-related funding and staffed up to meet exceptional needs created or aggravated by the pandemic.
- In 2013, CHRIS 180 had just one counselor embedded in just one school. Today, the organization’s counselors are in 83 schools, and demand for [school-based services](#) continues to grow.
- In early 2023, CHRIS 180 announced a grant establishing a [Certified Community Behavioral Health Center](#). CCBHC is a potentially pivotal framework for impact and infrastructure, supporting trauma-informed recovery outside the walls of a traditional behavioral health center.

CHRIS 180 is a complex, multifaceted organization. Fuller descriptions of its 40 programs can be found on its extensive [website](#), but here are some highlights offered by different members of the team:

- CHRIS 180 is Georgia’s recognized gold standard for trauma-informed care and counseling, and therapists it has employed (or helped train) populate health centers across the state and beyond.
- Complex adoptions and kids aging out of foster care are a specialty.
- Inclusivity is foundational to the organization’s reputation. Long a leading voice for diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, CHRIS 180 models inclusivity in its services and its staff.<sup>4</sup>
- CHRIS 180’s [WRAP program](#) works with a high-acuity population of youth and families who need more intensive support than is typically available in outpatient treatment. Available

<sup>4</sup> For example, CHRIS 180 was the first and largest nonprofit organization in Georgia to openly celebrate and serve LGBTQ+ youth. Click [here](#) for timeline of CHRIS 180’s engagement.



“

In 2013, CHRIS 180 had just one counselor embedded in just one school. Today, the organization’s counselors are in 83 schools, and demand for [school-based services](#) continues to grow.

“

The organization’s record of innovation, a necessity given the context in which it operates, is a source of significant pride.



24/7, WRAP also has a Mobile Crisis Response Team that helps mitigate placement disruption, unsafe behaviors, and law enforcement involvement.

Sadly, the State of Georgia ranks consistently low for the availability of mental health services. In 2023, [Mental Health America](#) ranked Georgia 49th for “access to care.”<sup>5</sup> A study that same year by *Forbes* found that Georgia ranked #4 among the “10 Worst States for Mental Health Care.” The *Forbes* study also noted Georgia had the fifth-highest percentage of youth who had a major depressive episode in the past year and did not receive mental health treatment.”<sup>6</sup>

In such a climate, CHRIS 180’s services, and its progress with clients and families, are a beacon for those in need. The organization’s record of innovation, a necessity given the context in which it operates, is a source of significant pride.

CHRIS 180 has a staff of about 400—a number of whom moved to Georgia specifically to work at CHRIS 180—and revenues north of \$35 million. Contracts and fee-for-service revenues make up about 80% of the total and charitable contributions about 15%.

## Recent Developments

The last few months have brought some difficult news. CHRIS 180’s long-time CEO lost her husband in December 2022 and her daughter in July 2023. The Board and staff responded with the emotional support one would expect from an organization dedicated to trauma-informed care, but a post-pandemic year that would have taxed even a fully focused CEO was especially challenging for one dealing with such deep personal losses.

<sup>5</sup> <https://mhanational.org/issues/2023/mental-health-america-access-care-data>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/health-insurance/worst-states-for-mental-health-care/>

Late in 2023, as a result of post-pandemic funding constriction and billing delays, the organization began to experience cash flow challenges that were exacerbated by inadequate internal reporting. In response, the Board installed a turnaround executive to assist the CEO in agency operations. Following a review of internal processes, CHRIS 180 instituted a reduction in force and undertook additional measures to promote new rigor in the organization.

Directionally, the turnaround is in progress, and a return to stability is well underway. The staff and leadership of CHRIS 180 are still adapting to the consequences of recent operational decisions. Even so, they embrace the tighter integration, closer collaboration, and enhanced communications that a thriving organization requires.

## The Mandate

The next CEO of CHRIS 180 will inherit an organization rightly proud of its work, staffed by a dedicated and resourceful team who love what they do and who they serve. All involved are eager to have greater impact on the lives of those in need.

Building on this mutuality of interests, CHRIS 180's CEO can expect a mandate that encompasses several overlapping priorities:

- **Culture.** The organization has a superb staff throughout the ranks, but as a group the leadership team is relatively new. The CEO must model and reinforce a culture of inclusion, collaboration, trust, and mutual respect, ensuring a cohesive organization that understands and capitalizes on the interdependence of each of its parts in achieving a shared vision.



“

The next CEO of CHRIS 180 will inherit an organization rightly proud of its work, staffed by a dedicated and resourceful team who love what they do and who they serve.

“

The CEO must have the financial savvy to understand just how important finances and financial management are to sustainable success.



- **Leadership & management.** Given the information, tools, and room to excel, best-in-class managers will overcome almost any short-term challenges, but they have to understand why that information and those tools are important. That requires clear expectations, timely data and regular, open, and respectful communications across the board, all of which will be points of engagement for the CEO.
- **Strategic clarity.** CHRIS 180 has long prided itself on being a resourceful operation. It offers a broad array of programs internally, and it has MOUs with some 20 external partners.

The recent operational challenges reinforce the need for strategic clarity, addressing such questions as “What services are we uniquely qualified to provide?” and “What services are we compelled to offer given the mission we embrace?” Equally important, “What are we doing today that might be done better, more impactfully or at lower cost by others who specialize in such services?”

- **Financial stability.** Firming up CHRIS 180’s financial leadership and restoring clarity and stability to the agency’s finances are critical priorities.

The CEO must have the financial savvy to understand just how important finances and financial management are to sustainable success. The Board expects the CEO to name a fully qualified Chief Financial Officer, but the need for insightful, strategic financial oversight cannot be delegated.

- **Funding.** About 80% of CHRIS 180’s funding comes from contracts and fee-for-service arrangements with various public agencies, each with its own set of relationships and protocols. Philanthropic support from foundations and individuals accounts for about 15% of the total.

The CEO must ensure the staff, structure, and mechanisms to track and anticipate key elements of CHRIS 180’s revenue stream—and be sufficiently adept to know when, how and with whom to engage in support of shared goals.

- **Board engagement.** CHRIS 180 has long had a highly engaged Board of Directors. The nature of that engagement has shifted in recent months as the Board has needed to become deeply involved in day-to-day operations. In building a relationship rooted in trust and transparency, the new CEO will help develop new ways of communicating with the Board, new ways of engagement, and new expectations as together they frame CHRIS 180’s new future.

## The Relationships

<p><b>The CEO reports to</b></p>	<p>The CHRIS 180 Board of Directors</p>
<p><b>And manages a staff of about 400 through five direct reports:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief Clinical Officer</li> <li>• Chief Development Officer</li> <li>• Chief Financial Officer (currently an interim appointment)</li> <li>• Chief Marketing Officer</li> <li>• Chief People Officer</li> </ul>
<p><b>While stewarding relationships with</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional grantors/funders at state and local levels</li> <li>• Program partners</li> <li>• Peer leaders in Atlanta and among mental health organizations elsewhere</li> <li>• State and local officials in education and government</li> <li>• Public and private foundations, especially those with a history of support for mental health services</li> <li>• Individual donors and supporters</li> </ul>



“

A working knowledge of community-based mental health services would be highly appealing, but the CEO Search Committee is open to a variety of relevant backgrounds.



## The Candidate

The search for CHRIS 180's next CEO will focus on passionate leaders with deep affinity for the organization's mission and the people it serves. A proven leader seasoned by the special demands of growing organizations with complex, multifaceted revenue streams would be ideal. Of special interest will be those who have successfully weathered significant challenges, leading teams to impact at scale with respect, empathy, and discipline.

A working knowledge of community-based mental health services would be highly appealing, but the CEO Search Committee is open to a variety of relevant backgrounds.

**Competencies:** CHRIS 180 seeks a CEO with many of the following experiences, traits, and skills:

- Passion for CHRIS 180's trauma-informed mental health services combined with the operating experience and data-informed general management disciplines that such a complex operation deserves
- The proven ability to model, foster and reinforce a cohesive, collaborative management team that respects dynamic tension, promotes open dialogue and collaboration, and expects accountability for shared goals and strategies
- A seasoned team- and organization-builder; a leader of leaders experienced in contexts of similar scale and complexity
- Personal and professional resilience, especially gained while leading a relevant entity through challenges to stability and strategic growth
- A manager proficient in the work styles and habits of different generations; someone whose approach is flexible but whose values are not
- The self-awareness to know one's strengths and to staff or structure around one's weaknesses

- A record of impactful engagement and leadership in the nonprofit sector, especially in the context of mental health. Comfort as CHRIS 180's chief champion, internally and externally, will be integral to success.
- Respect for the power of data and experience leveraging the power of technology, especially in high-touch contexts.

**Culture:** CHRIS 180 intends to hire a CEO who reflects and embodies

- A zeal for learning and a listening heart
- A sensitive but confident management ethos; a servant leader with the nurturing demeanor and management disciplines a growing organization deserves
- An inviting yet decisive leadership style that promotes mutual accountability and respect
- Comfort connecting with a multiplicity of constituents and stakeholders, whatever the forum or the medium. Comfort with the underserved and those in harm's way is essential
- An inquisitive, anticipatory nature and an innovative bent, especially important in an evolving regulatory environment where the rules are unforgiving and the dynamics rarely static
- Strategic thinking and deep respect for first-rate execution; a leader who ensures that therapeutic excellence is supported by operational and financial excellence
- The diplomacy, empathy, and relatability to lead with care, even—especially!—when enlisting support for new habits, evolving priorities, and short-term pain for longer-term gain; a CEO who is both compassionate and assertive



“

CHRIS 180 intends to hire a CEO who reflects and embodies an inviting yet decisive leadership style that promotes mutual accountability and respect.

