



Testimony
Before the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on Human Services
Child and Family Services Agency Budget Hearing
Margie Chalofsky
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April 12, 2008

Good morning Committee Chairman Wells and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Margie Chalofsky and I am the Director of the Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center, commonly known as FAPAC. As you know, for the past seven years, FAPAC has advocated for systemic reform based upon issues and barriers brought to our attention by foster, kinship and adoptive parents of the District's children.

The Jacks/Fogle tragedy has united us in collective grief and responsibility, and as a city we are all trying to wrap our arms around ways that we can make our children safer and keep them out of harm's way. I want to believe that when the administration chose to fire six workers, the mayor believed that holding these workers accountable would make our children safer. Perhaps no one could have predicted the tsunami-like impact that the children's deaths – and the accompanying administrative actions – would have on this system, with the massive increase in hot-line calls and the significantly increased demands on agency workers. These difficult circumstances are now juxtaposed on a staff decreased in numbers and suffering from sadness, fear, anxiety, and continually demoralizing press coverage.

Child welfare work is very challenging; the responsibility for safeguarding children's lives is daunting. And now, some of our city's child welfare workers are leaving to seek work in other arenas perhaps less challenging. Others are staying, but their daily decisions are impacted by their fear. As a result, more children are being removed to a foster care system that is already at capacity.

If this tragedy and the subsequent actions taken by the administration result in chasing good workers and good foster and adoptive parents away – or causes them to act solely out of fear of risk – we will then have made our city's most fragile children even less safe than before, and the District will have failed them again.

So how does this concern relate to CFSA's budget? Now that we are facing this tsunami, we must carefully assess our increased need and budget for its implications with vision and forward thinking. We cannot just continue to remove increasing numbers of children into a system with decreasing numbers of foster parents. We must find ways to strengthen the systems that keep families together and save our foster care resources for the children who really need to be removed from their birth families. With that in mind, we are concerned about what we see as the under-funding of a significant program that supports kinship caregivers. This is The Grandparents Caregiver Program. We urge the Council to take a look at increasing funding for this critical program.

We must also increase the capacity of our system at this critical time by focusing very serious efforts on Foster Parent Retention. We are pleased that Dr. Bobo has committed to putting resources into this area and has embraced the concept that foster parent *recruitment* efforts must always be coupled with foster parent *retention* efforts. We are hopeful that under Dr. Bobo's administration we will finally be able to implement initiatives that will better support and encourage foster parents in their challenging roles and build more partnership and teamwork between foster parents and social workers.

As you requested, Councilman Wells, I am submitting with my testimony a recommended list of actions to increase Foster Parent Retention. We have always stated that foster parent retention is the responsibility of everyone who works in a foster care agency. At this point, I would like to broaden that statement and suggest how powerful an incentive and retention strategy it would be if the city as a whole embraced its foster parents with active encouragement and support. How amazing it would be --- and how possible it could be --- if the District would develop a package of city incentives for its kinship and foster parents. A few I could suggest could include DC tax breaks, arrangements for discounts from some of the newer big businesses coming into the District, encouragement of employers to support their employees who want to foster by offering flexible leave opportunities, and some affordable housing put aside for kinship or foster parents, much like "police officers or teachers in the neighborhood" programs. We could brainstorm many ways that the District could show that it values the service that its foster parents give to our children, and the list we are submitting can serve as a starting point for that dialogue.

In closing we would like to express our support for Dr. Sharlynn Bobo and her leadership in this most extraordinarily difficult and complex time.

Thank you.

Foster Parent Retention Recommendations
Submitted to Councilman Tommy Wells
by
Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center and
DC Metropolitan Foster and Adoptive Parent Association
April 12, 2008

Agency/Government administered:

- 1) Retention campaign geared to increase public recognition of the value of foster parents to the DC community.
- 2) Day care available more quickly for emergency placements and more overall availability.
- 3) After school programs for teenagers (there currently are few if any programs for children over 14, yet foster children are not allowed to be left home alone at that age, and most of our families work outside of the home).
- 4) DC Tax breaks.
- 5) 24-hour on-call support for emergencies, including crisis respite.
- 6) Programs for youth with frequent suspensions so as to not jeopardize foster parent's employment.
- 7) Increased capacity for (CFSA and private) agencies to assist with transportation needs, most critically during the hours that foster parents are at work or have competing transportation demands from needs of multiple children.
- 8) Facilitated work on new model of teaming and communication, conflict resolution and guidelines for agency/worker/foster parent relationships.

Foster parent community administered with District funding:

- 1) Foster parent mentoring program.
- 2) Clinically facilitated discussion groups for foster parents.
- 3) Educational allotment for families to allow them to obtain specialized training in the community (that may not be offered by their agency) and which would match with the individual and complex needs of children in their homes.
- 4) Liability insurance.