

**Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Human Services
February 10, 2012**

**Child and Family Services Agency Oversight Hearing
Margie Chalofsky
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Good morning Chairman Graham and members of the Committee on Human Services. I am Margie Chalofsky and I am the Executive Director of the Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center, commonly known as FAPAC. FAPAC provides training, support and individual case advocacy for foster, kinship and adoptive parents, works to strengthen relationships between birth and foster parents, coordinates a multi-agency training coalition, and works in partnership with CFSA and private agencies to develop solutions to systemic problems in the child welfare system.

FAPAC supports a vision of strong prevention programs to keep families intact; high quality, well-trained and supported foster placements and continued work with birth parents when children do need to come into care; serious efforts towards reunification and other permanency options; and meaningful and effective post- permanency services to support families and keep them stable and healthy.

I would like to begin by thanking Brenda Donald for returning to the leadership of CFSA. We have been anxiously awaiting the decision as to who would be in this role, and are pleased that it is someone who is well familiar with CFSA and DC, understands the importance of community involvement, and has sincere interest in system change. We applaud Ms. Donald's efforts so early in her tenure to reach out for community input and to set the stage to move forward in an inclusive manner. We would also like to thank Debra Porchia-Usher for having stepped up to hold down the fort as Interim Director. We would like to acknowledge some things that occurred under her leadership that were noteworthy to us:

- Revised foster home regulations were developed;
- CFSA and FAPAC began a pilot project to build partnership between foster and birth parents; and
- A plan to implement the In-Home/Out-of –Home Practice Model was put into place, including comprehensive training for workers and supervisors in both the public and private agencies.

We acknowledge and appreciate Ms. Portia-Usher's management and organizational skills that were able to get these and other things done while she was in the interim role.

Trying to make this testimony most helpful for a new director, we have chosen to identify some things that we see as working well and other things that we believe need priority attention.

We see the following as working well:

- **The Office of the Ombudsman:** We continue to be very pleased with the implementation of this position and advocate for its expansion. To build the capacity of this office, we recommend consideration for increased staffing. We also recommend that consideration be given to closely linking the Quality Assurance and QSR process with or into the Ombudsman's Office.
- **Practice Operations Manual Training:** We were pleased to be invited to participate in the new POM training for workers and supervisors. Our parent participant came back very enthusiastic about the shift in practice that truly focuses on engagement and partnership with both birth and foster families. She found the training to be a comprehensive curriculum led by skilled and experienced CFSA trainers. We have high hopes that this will lead us forward into a new model of working with families.
- **Post Permanency Family Center (PPFC):** The foster and adoptive parent community has benefited greatly from the agency's commitment to continued post permanency services through the Post Permanency Family Center. PPFC has provided for families quality training, therapy and support as they navigate their parental roles preparing for and after legal permanency. Legal permanency is critical but it does not miraculously make the emotional needs of our children go away at the signing of the papers. Although PPFC stabilizes and enriches a large portion of families, we must advocate strongly for CFSA to see it as one piece of a continuum of services, and to come together with DMH to assess and respond to both the acute and chronic needs of families who adopt or become guardians for children with serious mental illness.
- **Increased community input into policy workgroups:** We have been very pleased to see the more consistent inclusion of representatives from the community on policy workgroups.
- CFSA's participation in the **Resource Parent Training Coalition**, which is working to expand foster parent training resources through multi-agency collaboration.
- **Foster Parent Support for DC CFSA families:** We continue to find this a high performing unit at CFSA that well serves families who live in the District and foster directly for CFSA. We have stated for years and will continue to state that families who live in Maryland and

foster for CFSA---*most critically pre-adoptive and kin families*---do *not* have the benefit of these excellent services and thus receive significantly less support than do DC families.

Additionally, we have heard recently that there are an alarming number of guardianships that are breaking up. We must all come together to look at the “whys” and then to identify and support the services that could intervene to keep our children more stable in these homes. There are a large number of kin families who reside in Maryland. We find ourselves wondering whether if these families would have had the benefit of quality support services prior to permanency whether they might have been better prepared and thus less likely to disrupt their guardianships

Our priority list of concerns:

- **The serious lack of alignment and level of understanding throughout CFSA and the private sector on procedures, policies and requirements.** These misunderstandings lead to critical situations for families. A family asked us to research the requirements on a specific issue. We asked representatives from four units inside CFSA and got four different answers. If I had brought the same question to our private agency colleagues I am sure there would have been even more diverse responses. This confusion as it related to basic requirements leaves families in the lurch and sets them up to fail.
- **Our children move much, much too often.** Although CFSA has begun to focus on this issue, we have mostly seen their emphasis to be on the numbers in order to comply with current LaShawn requirements. Counting moves is only the first---and most superficial---step towards really understanding and dealing with why our children move. Although we understand why CFSA developed their centralized placement system, in which CFSA needs to approve all moves made by the private sector, we are fearful of the actual interpretation, which often sounds to us like “just don’t move them.” From our perspective, private agencies and CFSA staff themselves have not been given guidance nor resources to guide practice so that our children can stay stable and safe in order to prevent multiple placements. As long as we put children into placements that are unprepared to meet their needs, continue to not provide our children with quality therapy, continue to provide inadequate training for the foster, kinship and adoptive parents and social workers who work with them,

continue to provide inadequate services for birth parents, and continue to allow splitting to occur so that the parental role becomes a shell of what our children and youth really need, DC's children will continue to move over...and over.. and over again We are looking forward to working with the new Director to delve into these issues in order to develop a meaningful and impactful plan to address multiple placements.

- **Foster parents continue to face their own “ism” when dealing with our system.** I have not yet figured out what to call this “ism” but this is what it looks like. Parents are recruited through a wide net of “all it takes is room in your heart and in your home.” They begin their process hopeful and excited and treated like “heroes.” When they actually become foster, kinship or adoptive parents, they find their reality greatly altered. All of a sudden they are faced with others who condemn them for the very role they were recruited for and for asking the system to honor the commitments made to them when they were recruited. After being told in training that “the city provides for the financial needs of the children ” foster parents often find themselves harshly viewed for taking a stipend to care for the children in their homes. After being told “you are to be the child’s advocate” foster parents often find themselves to be vilified when they ask for services for this same child. After being told “ask for assistance when you need it” foster parents often find themselves told that if they are not capable of the role, the children can be moved.

Let's be real. Not all foster parents are great. Not all social workers are great. Not all GAL's are great. Not all judges are great. But it is only the un-empowered in our society who are judged according to the behavior of the worst of their community. If a teacher, social worker, priest or coach does something wrong or even horrific, public opinion does not judge everyone in that profession. It is not assumed when you become a teacher that you will do something wrong and if you serve well you are the “exception.” However, for un-empowered groups---moms on public assistance--- minority youth--and indeed foster parents, it is considered acceptable in our society to judge the whole by the behavior of the worst. For foster parents, it makes their role a painful one, causing them serious “system-induced” grief beyond the inherent grief and loss brought to their homes by the circumstances of the children. Until we take a deep look at what we can do to make foster parenting a respected role, we will always find ourselves recruiting into a leaky bucket, creating a vicious circle of having to license those who might not be the best while the highest quality parents continue to walk out the door.

In closing, we are hungry for top-down leadership that uses internal and community input to develop strategic outcomes and then aligns procedures and processes to support those outcomes. We are hungry for leadership that can move the District to marry the need for LaShawn compliance with deeper and meaningful system change. We look forward to working with Ms. Donald to finally get to the higher hanging fruit.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.