

Testimony before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Health and Human Services

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Child and Family Services Agency Oversight Hearing  
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Good morning, Chairperson Nadeau and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. I am Margie Chalofsky, the Executive Director of the Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center, commonly known as FAPAC, and an adoptive parent of a 23-year old son (with a beautiful one year old baby) adopted through CFSA many years ago.

FAPAC is an organization founded by foster parents in October 2000. We support a vision of strong prevention programs to keep families intact; high quality, well-trained and supported foster placements 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. We provide training and support for families, work to strengthen relationships between foster parents and birth parents, and partner with CFSA to develop solutions to systemic problems. We are very proud of our partnership with CFSA on the Family Link Shared Parenting Initiative, which encourages foster and birth families to share information and work together on behalf of their children. Additionally, most recently our scope has expanded to include a program directed at stabilizing families so that, perhaps, their children will not need to enter the foster care system, or will reunite successfully. Our program, Families Growing Stronger Together, (FGST), combines parent education with a comprehensive support component. We work with families in small cohort groups designed to develop peer networks of support that will be available to them after the group is over. We are grateful to the Georgia Avenue Family Support Collaborative, with whom we have a strong partnership, and who saw in our experience with foster families our potential to do this work. We are excited that FAPAC has recently co-located with GAFSC as well as Adoption Together's Post Permanency Family Center (PPFC) in a building in Ward Four that is evolving into a non-profit hub. We are committed to this prevention work in our newly expanding scope of work, and look forward to our continued partnership and opportunities to help the District's families.

There has been and continues to be much change at CFSA, and no shortage of things we could talk about today. In trying to keep my few minutes the most meaningful, I am going to focus my testimony on the items that appear most overarching and relevant to us.

First of all, I want to start with stating how pleased we are to see the return of Brenda Donald and support her confirmation as Director. From past history, we have experienced Director Donald to

be someone who truly respects the foster parent community, and strives to translate that respect into agency practice. Since FAPACs inception 16 years ago, we have worked with many directors and through many changes on the top. We believe that all these changes have slowed CFSA progress, and we are grateful for the continuity of leadership that will be in place with this permanent appointment. As we present some of our most pressing concerns today, we have confidence in Director Donald and her team, and believe that her comprehensive experience and sincere interest in moving work forward can and will create implementable resolutions.

One of the pressing concerns we have involves the current capacity of the CFSA Ombudsman's office to provide the neutral services that the community originally advocated for in creating this position. We have had a very positive relationship with the Ombudsman's Office and have freely referred families for problem resolution. When the office began, we were asked to give input to determine some of the basic criteria the office would be run by: "Neutrality, independence, impartiality, providing an objective perspective, having the scope of including both private agency and CFSA practice, and reporting to the director" were critical to the needs of the parent community and included in the job description. However, the last CFSA Director moved the office under the agency General Counsel's office. As the expected role of the General Counsel's office is to represent the agency, we do not believe this move allows for the same neutrality of investigation we advocated for and felt confident in when the Ombudsman was placed under the Director's office. In addition, allowing the General Counsel access to all family issues and complaints may create conflicts that could compromise the family's legal rights in a disagreement between family and agency. These combined factors have made us much less comfortable referring families who need safe intervention and whose needs should be placed first. In this light, we would like to ask the agency to consider moving this position back into the Director's office and for clarity and assurance on how they plan to maintain the neutrality of this process. We are interested as well in how families will be informed about the outcomes of their investigations, including findings on the violation of any rights identified in the Foster Parents Statements of Rights and Responsibilities Amendment Act of 2016. We thank this committee for introducing and passing this Foster Parents Rights Legislation last session, and point out that foster parents' rights will be better protected if the Ombudsman's office is set up to bring full accountability for any rights violations.

Another issue we would like to highlight is Placement. CFSA has struggled with its placement array and matching process for many, many years. As we see it, even in good times, DC's placement array

has not been robust enough to meet the needs of our older youth or children/youth of any age with more critical psychological or behavioral needs. Many factors historically helped to create this gap in capacity, including CFSA placement staff who may not have information about skill level or expertise of the foster parents they are calling; the lack of a consistent treatment/therapeutic foster care model; bifurcation between CFSA and the private agencies regarding placement matches; not enough families who feel they can handle some of the special needs; and other factors. Therefore placements may be made that are adequate based upon age and gender, but out in left field when it comes to matching a child's needs with a foster parent's capacity to meet those needs, leading to failed placements and multiple moves for children.

Given the chronic state of under capacity, one big change can throw the system into crisis. We saw this in 2008 when, after the terrible and highly publicized death of four children, calls to the hotline skyrocketed and more children came into care. We saw this again a few years ago when two agencies, including one very large one, lost their CFSA contracts. Now CFSA is proposing a major change in contracting for placements. We are encouraged that CFSA is working to identify and help address potential issues more comprehensively than when significant changes were made in the past; however, we also want to highlight the urgent need to address day-to-day placement matching procedures, including the deficits in the placement database process, with as equal and laser focused an approach.

One serious concern we have as Director Donald moves forward into making broad changes is the history of CFSA regarding new initiatives and practices. As many veterans of this work will tell you, CFSA has a history of starting new practices and initiatives that drop off the radar, either by an intentional shift in focus or just inattention and staff attrition. This creates a culture at the agency that can make some resistant to change, and others just really confused about what is up and running and what is not. As foster parents, we see this in the inconsistent and sometimes inaccurate messages that foster parents receive from staff, some of which add extra and unnecessary challenges to the role. It is hard enough parenting children you have just met, as well as parenting inside a system's rules and regulations. Additionally receiving erroneous information about critical policies and procedures is very damaging to the foster parents who are fulfilling this critical child welfare role and to the children placed in our homes.

CFSA is trying to address this by creating a comprehensive Resource Parent Handbook, designed to put most critical information in one place for ease in researching. We applaud this effort, but it is not enough. Director Donald will need to put into place accountability measures that ensure all CFSA and private agency staff have the information and use it correctly, so as to decrease some of the chaos that ensues when trying to follow procedures. If the new changes outlined in the Safe Haven Re-design are to bring true and meaningful improvements to children and families, CFSA will also need to put business processes in place for all important practices, initiatives, and supportive resources.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and thank you, Chairperson Nadeau, for your interest in helping to improve services for the District's children and families. I will be glad to answer any questions.