

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 Alexander 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 22-year old son adopted through CFSA many years ago.

FAPAC supports 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 foster, kinship and adoptive parents, work to strengthen relationships between foster parents and birth parents, and partner with CFSA and private agencies to develop solutions to systemic problems in the child welfare system. We are very proud of our partnership with CFSA on the Family Link initiative, which encourages, supports and provides training to build “Shared Parenting” relationships between birth and foster parents.

To begin our testimony, we would like to give public appreciation to the CFSA Director, Ray Davidson, for his efforts towards inclusion and respect of external stakeholders and his openness to hearing feedback and concerns. We testified as to these qualities at Mr. Davidson’s confirmation hearing, and have continued to experience these strengths in his leadership style. We also support the hiring of the new Principal Deputy Heather Stowe, and have confidence that together they can put movement under issues of concern that greatly impact the services provided to children and families.

We would like to acknowledge positively the following:

- The very helpful implementation by the Office of Well-Being of the short- term day care now available for emergency placements of babies and young children;
- On-going, the culture shift towards Shared Parenting and CFSA’s implementation of icebreaker meetings for new removals;
- Coming soon, the movement towards “Prudent Parenting” based on federal legislation to allow children more opportunities for “normalized” experiences while in foster care.

So, now to our concerns. We will focus this testimony on our most critical issue, that of **placement—matching, stabilization array and process**. We are in good company, including with CFSA itself, as we identify placement as a hugely significant issue.

Matching: Unless a placement worker knows a parent personally, matches are often made according to age and gender, not skill level or experience. The inadequacy of the data- base, and other limited information placement workers have access to, do not give them the information to make good matches. When matches are made without adequate information, the chance of placing a child with a parent who is not able to meet their needs grows significantly, leading to the sad situations and stories we sometimes here in these Council chambers from older youth. We have heard that this will be addressed in a new improved placement plan through the development of a robust data system, but the fact that placement workers often work in the dark is not a new discovery. We are truly glad to hear that CFSA is working on this improvement. However, since some of these issues have been talked about for years, we are anxious to see this move from a “draft plan” to an “implemented plan.”

Process: We have been working with CFSA staff to improve the actual process of placing of children in foster homes. Too many times over the recent years, we have heard foster parents use the terminology of “drive by placements,” meaning with no helpful “hand off” or sharing of either child specific information, or agency contact information. We believe that after years of working on this issue, this has recently begun to improve.

Stabilization and array: Although we credit CFSA with much progress over the years in adding services that build overall support for foster parents—i.e. the Ombudsman’s office, mobile stabilization, and most recently, day care, we are not doing enough to positively intervene when individual families need help to maintain their placements. As the children’s song goes, “there’s a hole in the bucket” and it is time for us to start to address this. For years we have been speaking out about the fallacy of recruiting into that leaky bucket which keeps us always hungry for new parents, while not attending to the individual needs of the ones we already have. Pressure to meet

recruitment and licensing numbers forces workers to open homes they may not feel will really work out, which keeps the cycle of disruptions and replacements going.

So what do I mean when I say individual needs when I have just stated that general support has improved? To name a few reasons families tell us they quit or disrupt their placements---asking for respite but only being offered it after you said you are at your end point; weeks missed at work due to confused and inaccurate information regarding the ability to hire babysitters and other help; lack of afterschool programs for older youth in homes where foster parents have to work; and in general the lack of an operating model of team work, partnership and family empowerment that knows how to support families to resolve issues they are having to keep placements intact.

This is especially critical for the children in our homes with the highest level of emotional needs. There is a significant disconnect between the behavioral/emotional needs of some of our children and the skills inherent in the range of placement options. We must significantly deepen the clinical skills of families AND workers through specific and targeted training, coaching and support if we are to build stability and positive outcomes for our most emotionally vulnerable children in family settings. Significantly, the placement array must include an emphasis on placing children who need 24/7 attention with families who don't have to work outside the home.

CFSA continues to move forward with positive motion in many areas. We support the current vision and administration and look forward to our continued partnership to move some of these long-standing issues forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and thank you Chairperson Alexander, for your interest in helping to improve services for the District's children and families.