

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

Child and Family Services Agency FY '16 Budget Oversight Hearing
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Good morning, Chairperson Alexander and members and staff of the Committee on Health and Human Services. I am Donna Flenory, a DC therapeutic foster parent from Ward 7 and an Executive Board Member of the Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center, commonly known as FAPAC. I am testifying today in my role as a foster parent of older youth as well as the FAPAC organizational representative. As a FAPAC board member, I support FAPAC's vision to empower foster, kinship and adoptive parents to become strong advocates for the children in their homes, and to partner with CFSA and private agencies to develop solutions to systemic problems in the child welfare system. I currently also serve as a FAPAC *Shared Parenting* trainer, a program that helps to build the capacity of the foster parent community to strengthen relationships with the birth parents of the children in their homes. Additionally, I am active with the DC Department of Behavioral Health as a Youth Family Peer to Peer Specialist faculty member.

To share a little of my own history, I began my foster parenting path 15 years ago as a Proctor parent, a program that formerly operated as CFSA's most highly specialized therapeutic program for youth whose needs required one-on-one 24/7 attention. When CFSA discontinued that program, I became a therapeutic parent for Foundations for Home and Community. A few months ago, CFSA terminated their contract with Foundations and now I have come full circle back to CFSA. However, CFSA has for the last many years contracted out to the private agencies all therapeutic foster care. Now that I am back at CFSA, I am hoping that the Agency will be able to develop the capacity to offer the supports and services to families that my children and I received through being part of a private therapeutic agency.

Since I became a therapeutic foster parent 15 years ago, I have fostered more than 43 foster youth between the ages of 15 months and 21 years. Working with older youth is what I love most, and I have built many wonderful relationships with my teens and other members of their families. In these past 15 years, I am pleased to say that CFSA has greatly improved its inclusion of families in the development of practices and policies, and I have had the chance to participate in multiple positive systemic changes that have resulted from the partnership and hard work of agencies, families and community/advocacy groups.

Despite the many positive changes we have seen, I am deeply concerned that the District of Columbia still fails our older youth. For many years foster parents have been speaking up at multiple

forums and meetings about the lack of true support when our youth age out of care without a real permanency plan in place. Although the District was ahead of the national curve in supporting foster care placement until age 21, many, or I would even say most, youth are not prepared to be out there in the world by themselves at this age. It is important to understand that our system encourages our youth to be fully taken care of and provides for all their needs and then says good-bye at age 21 without providing a real life-line. Most parents of all circumstances will tell you that their children lean on them more today, in this economic climate, than we did when we were leaving home in past generations, and that current studies show that many young adults return home, or never leave home, even when in school or working. For our youth in foster care, who have experienced trauma and multiple losses, most are not ready to face the hard world on their own. If our system really committed to help youth and families build stepping-stones to permanency, then this would not be an issue. Sadly, although permanency for older youth has been a clearly stated goal for years, it has not been attached to meaningful actions to address its complexities, especially for youth who have been so hurt by the adults in their lives that they can no longer trust even those adults who do offer honest loving support and guidance.

I recently attended the CFSA budget briefing and was delighted to hear about the opening of a new transitional housing program for youth. I applaud CFSA and DBH for their initiative in developing this program. However, although new programs are being developed, some of our youth are aging out even as we sit here having this hearing, and will not be able to take advantage of the programs that are now only in development, or that have very specific eligibility requirements. And very significantly, no program is a “parent.” Currently, some of our youth find “family” by couch surfing in friends’ living rooms; some find it by returning to their birth families; many others return to the last foster care placement where they felt supported, even if they left through their own choice. For these youth, including many of mine, their former foster parents become their permanency. When we get that knock on our door, which could come days, weeks, months or even years after that child has left our home, many of us have been placed with other children. Our limited resources are going to the children currently in our homes, and despite negative stereotyping, most foster parents I know go into their pockets regularly to provide additional financial resources that may far surpass the stipend they receive. Although we perhaps can give them our own couches to sleep on, we are not in a position to support their needs without serious strain. Our youth deserve more than our couches. They deserve help with their basic needs as they figure out how to make it out there, and

they deserve to live in places they feel safe and secure while they are taking their leap into independence. I would like to recommend that CFSA consider funds that could follow youth after aging out to support their basic needs in healthy family settings of their choice: their prior or current foster parents; a stable relative's home, a mentor or teacher's home, etc. I also recommend training for foster parents on how to navigate other DC systems to help get assistance for the youth who stay in their homes after emancipation, or return later on. Finally, it is critical for youth themselves to get training on navigating the systems available to them after CFSA exits their life, so that emancipation is not akin to being thrown into cold water without a life jacket.

Thank you for the chance to testify today. I will be glad to answer any questions.