

Testimony before the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on 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 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 24-year old son adopted through CFSA over 20 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 developed and helped CFSA to launch Family Link, a Shared Parenting model that encourages foster and birth families to share information and work together on behalf of their children. Most recently FAPAC's scope has expanded to include programming directed at stabilizing families so that, perhaps, their children will not need to enter the foster care system, or will reunite successfully. This program, Families Growing Stronger Together, (FGST), combines parent education with a comprehensive support component. 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 committed to this prevention work in our expanding scope, and look forward to continued partnership with the agency and other community organizations to help the District's families.

I am testifying this morning to share a few thoughts on CFSA's progress, as well as issues that from our perspective need ongoing attention.

As you know, Chairperson Nadeau, CFSA has made major changes these past months as part of their Temporary Safe Haven Redesign. One of the biggest changes has been the movement of all MD families fostering DC's children into one private agency. We understood the challenges that CFSA was having trying to build accountability with multiple agencies, and thus supported their decision by stepping up to encourage families in their transition process and to elevate issues that foster parents shared with us. During this process, we have found CFSA, most specifically the

current and sadly soon-to- be- leaving- Deputy Director of Program Operations Stacy Rodgers to be very open to hearing and responding to community concerns in a reflective and proactive manner. We believe that the transfers of families went well and we credit both the CFSA team and the NCCF team with the tremendous amount of work and attention to detail and logistics to make this successful. Those of us external to CFSA who gave input to the transition responded with hunger to the inclusive teaming approach that Deputy Director Rodgers brought to the table as well as her recognition that this inclusion helped to bring better results. An African proverb states, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” As CFSA and NCCF come together to address critical issues of parity of policies, practices and supports, we feel confident that Director Donald understands the need to continue to highlight the need for internal/external teaming into these next steps.

Although there has been a necessary “all hands on deck” focus on this monumental shift, there remain long-term systemic issues for which attention must not be lost. As a venue where foster parents come to speak freely and safely about their fears and frustrations, FAPAC is on the pulse of issues that have remained stagnant throughout the years. One issue is especially poignant to us. This is the underlying fact that although recruited to be partners, once they are licensed and placed, many foster parents do not feel like they are treated as part of any team. Although foster parents have been successful in achieving a level of inclusion on the policy/administrative sides, we have collectively as a system failed them by the exclusion from anything resembling partnership on a case practice level. As one parent expressed it “Sure they say we are their partners- when we do what they want. As soon as we have an independent opinion, we are shut out.” FAPAC hears example after example of foster parents who try to give input and are ignored, often to the detriment of the children in their homes. We are not saying that foster parents are always right or that the agency has to agree with their opinions. We know that the agency has the right to make its decisions. We are saying that when you are the person living with the child every day, your opinion should be automatically listened to with respect and your input taken into serious consideration. There are no institutionalized practice guidelines that ensure even the lowest bar of this inclusion. The agency needs to help social workers to best understand the value of this input as well as to help them gain the clinical skills required to listen to diversity of opinion with respect. If the agency truly believes that its foster parents are not worthy to have useful input, then the agency is quite bluntly responsible for licensing the wrong people to care for their children.

Significantly, many families feel unsafe to express themselves when they have a problem with those who yield much influence over their homes, and foster parents and birth parents remain vulnerable to the subjective “isms” that run unchecked by any zero tolerance against these biases. Although agency administrators routinely want us to reassure parents that they will not be retaliated against from raising issues, there has been nothing put into place that tries to protect families against the myriad of ways that retaliation can and does occur. Thus, we cannot with professional integrity encourage families in that direction. One suggestion we have made is for social workers to have more of a 360 evaluative that gives a confidential opportunity for foster parent input. That way, workers who consistently do poorly in this area can be given targeted training, increased supervision, or in the most egregious cases, perhaps directed to another line of work. We were glad to have recently learned that CFSA is in the process of working on possible ways to implement this inclusive evaluation process.

Another issue of long term concern is the a lack of support and resources for youth with higher end emotional needs as well as for the foster parents who step up to care for them. One part of the agency that has been very responsive to this critical need is CFSA’s Child Welfare Training Academy. Under the leadership of Brandynicole Brooks, CWTA is rolling out new and tiered training opportunities for parents to continually build their skill level. We applaud CWTA and the leadership of Ms. Brooks for this very positive direction. Now, CFSA and NCCF practice must accompany this increased training with better placement processes that match a youth’s needs with a foster parent’s capacity to meet those needs. Equally significant, finding even decent therapy for the youth with the most complex needs is sometimes impossible. Sadly, foster parents who can’t get services for youth in their homes may be much more likely to disrupt their placements, not only because of behavior that they don’t know how to deal with, but out of despair that they as parents are not “good enough” to know how to help. For these youth, their original wounds may have been caused by neglect and abuse at home; however the system is now also complicit, as we have compounded their issues due to our systemic failures that have led to multiple placements and disruptions.

Some of our foster parents also share about older youth who have aged out of CFSA care and are arriving back on their doorsteps without services. Last year, the contract for aftercare services was

moved from the Collaboratives to the Young Women's Project. However, the foster parent community has not been informed about what services youth should be receiving from YWP or what to do to help them to get services. Therefore, they cannot be useful as referral sources. We would like to request that this committee host a roundtable about aftercare services so that we can all help to assess what is being offered and what gaps may still exist.

We have heard from Director Donald that now that the technical aspects of the redesign are well on the way, the next stage will be deeply focused on improved practice. We hope that these issues we have discussed today will be on the table as critical to these next steps and that the input of external community partners will continue to be integral as practice moves forward. We appreciate Director Donald's long-term commitment to the children of this city and have confidence in her and her team's ability to move us forward with a whole system approach.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today. Thank you.

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