

Testimony before the Council of the District of Columbia

Committee on Human Services

February 25, 2021

Child and Family Services Agency Oversight Hearing

Margie Chalofsky

Director of Advocacy

Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center (FAPAC)

Good afternoon, Chairperson Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. I am Margie Chalofsky, the Director of Advocacy of the Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center, commonly known as FAPAC. At the beginning of this month, we were excited to welcome Najiba Hlemi as our second Executive Director and to create a new position that allows for me to continue working on individual and systemic needs of DC's families. I am also the parent of a 27-year-old son adopted from CFSA over 20 years ago, and the proud grandmother of his five-year old daughter who has helped me to maintain at least a little equilibrium during this very challenging year.

FAPAC is an organization founded by foster parents in October 2000 to elevate their voices at tables of system reform. We were founded not as a membership organization, but as one open to all foster, kinship and adoptive families (commonly referred to as "resource" families) caring for DC's children. As a very small organization sometimes known as the "little engine that could," FAPAC has grown significantly in scope in order to respond to evolving community need. An expansion of our scope beyond our founding purpose (and name) is our Families Growing Stronger Together program (FGST) a comprehensive primary prevention parenting program that we host through a partnership with the Georgia Ave Family Support Collaborative and CFSA. Our current programs for resource parents include individual support, group/peer support, trainings, assistance in building shared parenting to strengthen relationships between foster parents and birth parents, and providing referrals to other community organizations and resources. All of our work with families informs our systemic advocacy, in which we work in a duality of advocacy and partnership with CFSA and other agencies to improve policies and practices impacting the children and families we serve.

Progress and Issues

What a traumatic year this has been for everyone. This pandemic has impacted all families. But the families we are here about today--those involved in the child welfare system-- don't have the autonomy to make decisions unilaterally inside their own "bubbles" as many other families do. From foster families who had to learn on a dime the new technologies needed to host virtual visits with birth families while schooling often multiple children at home; to birth parents who have to deal with the loss caused from foregoing hugs and kisses to accept virtual or distanced visits with their children; to agency workers who have to navigate the safety of their own families with the need to lay eyes on the children in their care.... all of our decisions have impacted each other. If it was not clear before, it must be clear now, how our lives are so intertwined and how the success or failure of a child welfare system falls on our ability to work together and support each other as a community.

This has all been and continues to be a huge undertaking, and we need to give gratitude to everyone who has hung in to do their best.

As it became clear that we were all living in a new reality, some of the issues we were previously focused on were pushed to the side as COVID needs jumped to the forefront.

A primary example of an urgent COVID-related issue was the need to address the inherent stress about visitations and to balance the critical importance and value of birth parent/child visits without trampling on the safety needs of either family. After a bit of a bumpy start, we were able to gather input to give to CFSA management to

inform visit guidelines, and to help develop a process to elevate concerns from both workers and families. We want to thank CFSA, especially Principal Deputy Robert Matthews, Deputy Director Ann Reilly and Program Administrator Tamitha Davis-Rama, for taking the time to listen and work with us to develop processes that valued everyone's input.

Before I leave the COVID-specific discussion, I would like to point out that CFSA alone cannot resolve all the issues related to the children under their care. Two areas that have been brought to our attention that fall under other DC functions are food and vaccines. For some of our families, the added cost of food for youth who eat continually all day long now that they are not getting any meals in school nor leaving the house, has been a financial challenge. It has been suggested that our families with school age children who qualify for the free lunch program might be eligible to receive the support that the Federal Government deemed as relevant to the amount per child in each household. However, as far as we know, families have not had success in requesting this consideration.

Our second issue outside of CFSA's purview is about the COVID vaccine. Many foster families have been understandably hesitant to take children during COVID. One recommendation would be for those foster parents who take placements at this time to be considered by the DC Health Department to be in the same priority category as their social workers for the vaccine. We are not sure how to advocate for this, so we are putting it out here as a start.

Moving forward, I want to acknowledge some very positive steps CFSA has taken since the last hearing:

- Outreach to families to ensure that they had the necessary technology to convert to virtual visitation;
- Creation of a small cadre of Educational Pods for foster families;
- Development of a wide breath of quality online in-service trainings;
- Initiation of a monthly Fellowship and Feedback session to provide a safe and effective way for foster parents to bring up concerns;
- Reconstitution of the Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) to include the spectrum of birth and foster parents and youth in the hopes of becoming a viable family-led advisory committee.

I will use the rest of my time to touch on a most critical issue raised in the Council's questions to CFSA, the futures of our youth when they leave our homes and CFSA's care. For years now, some of our most dedicated foster parents have told us that the many barriers to ensuring a better future for the older youth in their homes caused their hearts to break to the point that they stopped fostering. It is time to confront this.

We acknowledge that CFSA's Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE) has a lot of great programs.

However,

- Some youth refuse to use these programs.
- Families express that the agency does not consistently help to create a culture of accountability for taking advantage of services.

- Foster parents are expected to "parent" but unlike other parents, are often not able to set accountability for basic responsibilities such as attending school or work because they do not always get the back-up of the agency to do so.
- Sometimes after youth leave care and find themselves at loose ends, they will return to the home of the foster parent where they felt most comfortable and loved. Despite wanting to help, their foster parents may not have a vacancy. They may try to help make connections to services, but sometimes it is too late. Sometimes the youth asks, "Why didn't you make me" (go to classes, take my medicine, etc.) But foster parents are not empowered to do this.
- As the District has extended the time for youth to stay in care during the pandemic, (which we support), the questions of how to (1) structure an adult to live in your home and (2) prepare an over 21-year-old to leave your home with the ability to succeed are critical. Some foster parents have shared that the mindsets of youth change when youth turn 21 and have all the legal rights as an adult, and that parenting becomes even more challenging, especially with someone who did not grow up in your home. We believe that if a youth's care is extended, it is critical for conversations between the youth, the foster parent and the social worker to occur about the expectation of activities during this time. If we don't put out any expectations, when it is again time to leave, our youth are still sent into the world unprepared.
- We believe that there may be a number of youth who find housing with a friend or relative the day they leave care, but that a year later, they are lost and not stable in housing or employment. We recommend that CFSA track that data for at least a year so that they can accurately assess the success of the programs and interventions they have offered while the youth are in care. Otherwise, we really don't know if what we are offering has worked.

We know that what we are now discussing is a very complicated and multi-layered issue that requires a deep dive into differing perspectives. Over the years, there have been many related conversations started and stopped in various forums. However, we are presently seeing progress at CFSA on some of our longer-term issues, thus we have more hope that we will be soon be able to delve into this most critical conversation more productively together as a community.

Our youth deserve this from us.

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