

**Testimony before the
District of Columbia Council
Committee on Human Services**

Public Oversight Roundtable Hearing

**The Adequacy of the District's Response in the
tragedy of the Jacks children**

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Good afternoon, Chairman Wells and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Marilyn Egerton, and I am the Deputy Director of The Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center in Washington DC. I am a life-long resident of the District of Columbia. Additionally, my husband and I have been foster and adoptive parents for the District for over 25 children in the last 15 years. I am testifying today on behalf of The Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center, in response to the tragic deaths of the Jacks children. Additionally, we have been given permission to testify on behalf of the DC Metropolitan Foster & Adoptive Parent Association.

As a foster and adoptive parent, I have always been committed to working with birth families. I have been privileged to have strong relationships with most of the birth families of the children in my home and I know firsthand that the District has set many of our families up to fail by putting far fewer resources into the types of services our families need to prevent children from entering into foster care and to encourage reunification. The District's families need quality and family focused mental health services. They need substance abuse services that are available without having to be on a waiting list. They need housing they can afford. They need a city that shows it values children and families by making the quality of life for the District's families a priority for every city agency, not just CFSA.

It is often a tragedy that captures our attention and forces us to confront the failures of our communities and our society. In our own city, Brianna Blackmond's death led to

crucial reform of the Family Court. In more recent times, the terrible tragedy at Virginia Tech is leading to an overhaul of the mental health system in Virginia. These are both examples of positive action that grew out of the attention placed on the systemic gaps in light of tragedy.

We strongly believe that the failure that led to the deaths of the Jacks children was a failure of our entire community. That includes the government agencies such as the Housing Authority, the Department of Mental Health, APRA, the Executive Branch, the Legislative Branch, the DC Police Dept, and the schools. If we are to hold responsible everyone whose hands touched this case, then we are **all** to blame, collectively.

But right now, the information that has been released to the public focuses the whole of the responsibility on CFSA. I am fearful that placing our community failures solely on the back of CFSA allows the rest of our leaders and our community to walk away from responsibility and allow underlying issues to be unaddressed, still placing more children at risk. We must all share in the blame and we must all share in the solutions.

We believe that the following recommendations should frame the city's response to this tragedy.

- 1) Assure that the District focus immediate attention and resources on a city-wide abuse and neglect prevention plan. We need to strengthen the safety net for all families throughout the city, and develop the District into a city where people can

- access with dignity the family focused resources they need; including proven programs such as family focused substance and mental health treatment as well as an increased home visiting program.
- 2) Develop ways to ensure accountability for professional action without creating a climate of fear that will ultimately harm the District's ability to recruit and retain its social workers, especially very critical in the Intake and Investigation Unit.
 - 3) Follow the blueprint that has already been created in the Amended Implementation Plan (AIP) regarding improvement of the Intake and Investigation procedures at CFSA. Additionally, work to enhance the AIP by translating the output focused recommendations into child and family outcomes.
 - 4) Improve accountability by focused reviews of critical cases such as the ChildSTAT program utilized in New York City.
 - 5) Protect against a backlash from this tragedy that may cause workers to be afraid to keep children in their birth homes and thus would put many children -- who could safely be maintained in their families -- into the foster care system.
 - 6) Commit the District to a comprehensive anti-poverty initiative.

This tragedy has riveted all of our attention. Our failure to protect this family has the entire city suffering from guilt and remorse. Let's commit to using this tragedy to making changes that will prevent families from falling between the cracks of the District's available services, and let's build a safety net so that family crisis does not have to turn into family tragedy. Council Chairman Wells, we ask that you hold another hearing in six

months so that as a city we can evaluate the progress we have made in building our prevention plan, improving coordination among agencies, providing needed legal tools, and improving the quality of our initial interventions. If we do not follow through we will have failed the Jacks children a second time.

As advocates, we are standing by to hold the city to the commitments it has made to change, and to help Dr. Bobo, the Mayor and the Council in moving this critical work forward.

Thank you