

Testimony before the District of Columbia Council

Committee on Human Services

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Child and Family Services Agency Oversight Hearing

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Good afternoon Chairman Graham 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 soon to be 21 year old son.

FAPAC provides training, support and advocacy for foster, kinship and adoptive parents, works to strengthen relationships between birth and foster parents, and works in partnership with CFSA and private agencies to develop solutions to systemic problems in the child welfare system. Currently, we are very excited to announce our partnership with CFSA on the system wide roll out of the Family Link program, based upon a pilot project that we spoke about in our testimony last year. In the roll out, we will facilitate “icebreaker meetings” between birth and foster parents directly after the Family Team meeting. Bringing birth parents and foster parents together at this early point in the process is designed to institutionalize the new practice. Based on national research that shows that children in foster care fare significantly better when the adults who love them can co-parent or at least communicate in a positive way, this program is our effort to build communication and shared parenting from the beginning of what is often a fragile relationship.

When I testified at the CFSA oversight hearing last year, I stated that under Director Donald’s leadership, we were optimistic that practice, policy and outcomes would continue to become more strategically intertwined, and thus we would soon see fewer silos and more alignment throughout the system. I am pleased to testify today that during this past year, we are seeing much more alignment, or “connecting the dots,” not only internally to CFSA but also between CFSA and its agency partners. Of course there was positive change in years past but from our perspective, the systemic change under this current leadership team has increased in leaps and bounds. We firmly believe that each Director and each administration added important value. In trying to identify what is different now, we realized that over the years we have seen great sparks of ideas; good initiatives and definitely the desire to improve; but what are seeing now is the ability and skill to connect these stars in the sky into not only a clear vision but a clear path to action.

Despite or perhaps because of the fast speed of change, we are still challenged with top to bottom consistency. For the families we serve, it is still true that depending upon your entry door, your worker, or your agency, the resources or services offered to you may still be unequal, and this continues to give us concern. However, we are sympathetic to the daunting task of implementing consistent change through each agency and each worker throughout the public and private sectors. Giving credit to this leadership team, we have seen that instead of just accepting the fact that changes might not be trickling down or out, this administration has put into place multiple methods of communication to try to improve consistency. Specifically, regular outreach with updated and clear information is sent from CFSA by email to stakeholders; on-going meetings with private agencies have become more carefully structured to ensure that critical information is passed on in a comprehensive manner; Director Donald holds regular community meetings to share her plans and new programs; and there is much more intentional communication between different administrations at CFSA as well as between CFSA and DBH and other partner agencies.

Very significantly for the families we serve, Director Donald generously gives her time over weekends and evenings to meet with the foster, kinship and adoptive parent community about their concerns and needs. We have been incredibly impressed that at each meeting, the administrative team has returned with updates based upon resolving issues they heard at the prior meeting. This level of direct responsiveness is a significant achievement in itself, and why in our last newsletter, we credited Director Donald with “hearing; listening and acting.” We would like to acknowledge a few specific programs and policies implemented by this strong management team in response to community need and input.

- 1) First and foremost, the new Mobile Crisis Stabilization Program, directly aligned to prevent disruption and multiple placements. This program has the potential to make deep and significant impact on children and families.

- 2) The new allowance policy that makes consistent the allowance amounts and standards for older youth in foster and group homes. We especially want to highlight the extensive work done to engage different voices and perspectives that went into developing this new, well thought out policy.
- 3) Greatly improved resource parent training from CFSAs Child Welfare Training Academy (CWTA), targeting critical areas identified by parents as training gaps.
- 4) New procedures put into place by Health Services Administration to ensure services reach children and families as quickly as possible.
- 5) Soon to be launched new day care initiatives that will decrease barriers to placement caused by insufficient day care options.

Clearly, from our perspective, CFSAs moving forward in very positive motion. In this year to come, FAPAC is committed to increasing our own outreach and support to kinship parents, and to continuing our work with CFSAs, the private agencies and the foster, kinship and adoptive parent community on strategies to improve foster care as the “temporary safe haven” it is meant to be.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.