

Testimony of Margie Chalofsky,  
Director of the Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center (FAPAC)  
Confirmation Hearing of Dr. Sharlynn Bobo  
Before the DC Committee on Human Services  
November 8, 2007

Good afternoon, Chairperson Wells and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Margie Chalofsky and I am the Director of the Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center, commonly known as FAPAC.

As you know, FAPAC is a grass-roots organization that works in a focused manner towards systemic reform of the District child welfare system. We work in a dual role of advocacy and partnership with Child and Family Services Agency as well as the other DC government agencies and private organizations that serve our children. In this capacity, we have worked with Dr. Sharlynn Bobo since she first came to CFSA in 2002.

I am here this afternoon to testify in support of Dr. Bobo's confirmation as Director of the Child and Family Services Agency. I would like to mention some of the primary reasons that FAPAC is supporting this confirmation.

First and foremost, Dr. Bobo is truly committed to the District of Columbia and her past experience is inclusive of the District's private and public sectors. We believe that it is critical for the District to stop this revolving door that has represented the CFSA Director's position in the last many years. In our opinion, the most recent past directors came and went too quickly to address the most challenging and deeper issues that must be our current priorities. We believe that Dr. Bobo is committed to this city, to this job, and to our children, and her appointment would respond to the crying need we have for consistent leadership.

Second, we have found Dr. Bobo to be very transparent and honest in her dealings with the stakeholder community. Even when we may not agree with one of her decisions, we believe that it comes from a standpoint of integrity. Additionally, we never feel that she shuts down dialog even when our perspective is different from hers. Very significantly, we trust her word.

Additionally, we find Dr. Bobo to be responsive and accessible to the stakeholder community, which we believe is a crucial criteria for this position.

We are anxious to see this appointment be confirmed so that Dr. Bobo can move on full force to address the hard work ahead. At this point I would like to discuss some of these issues that we see as most critical and that we hope will become some of Dr. Bobo's most urgent priorities.

- Our children are moved much too often, in a way that is disturbingly routine practice, in both CFSA and the private sector. Past efforts to resolve this serious systemic failure have been piecemeal and have not addressed the deeper issues of professional culture and practice that impact the decisions to move children around. It perplexes us that with the

plethora of professional literature that speaks to the damaging impact of multiple moves, we still find that moving DC's children in the foster care system is seen as a routine option instead of a last resort. We have observed inadequate and inconsistent attention directed at significant attempts to make placements work, and our children sadly learn that if there is a problem, move on. In our opinion, underneath this practice is a framework that allows workers to judge families based upon their own subjective standards and then to keep moving children in search of placements that meet those subjective standards. We advocate for CFSA to develop a professional code of behavior for itself and for the private agencies which would make it impossible except in cases of emergency to consider moving any child without clear indication that this move has been weighed in the context of its potential damaging long-term impact. This must also include a plan of how to go about providing therapeutic services to children who are in foster homes through agencies who don't have therapeutic contracts, as well as in CFSA foster homes. A child should not have to be moved from a loving and willing home if his or her status changes from traditional to therapeutic and we must find a way to provide the additional training and support. We advocate that except in cases of emergency no worker should be permitted to remove or move a child from his or her family.....birth, kin, foster, or adoptive..... without answering the question as to whether everything has been done that is humanly possible to bring necessary services into the placement to prevent the disruption. Although Family Team Meetings have the potential to provide a framework for this process, we find that workers often come to the meetings to plan the disruption rather than to plan to support the placement, and we also find that there is much inconsistency in the private sector about actually hosting Family Team Meetings for replacements at all.

- Despite significant improvements in policy, we are very concerned about the ability of CFSA and the private sector to actually implement policy changes. An example continues to be the Placement Information Packages which are supposed to be given to foster parents at placement so they can best care for the children in their homes. Although this has been in CFSA policy for over four years, we are still not seeing consistent compliance inside of either the public or the private sector.
- As a foster parent advocacy organization, we have been successful in helping to guide many positive systemic changes. However, one way we have not been successful has been getting the District child welfare agencies to really act in a significant manner to improve foster parent retention. As requirements for monitoring and visitation increase to meet compliance standards, we often hear from our families that they feel more policed by the increase in visits but not more supported. Although past directors have given verbal commitment to addressing the complex issues of retention, there has been no major initiative despite the fact that we have clear indication both locally and nationally about why foster parents quit. We continue to state for the record that unless CFSA and the private sector come together for a real, meaningful and comprehensive retention initiative, all their recruitment efforts are recruiting into a leaky bucket, and foster parents for the District of Columbia may become an endangered species. We are pleased that Dr. Bobo and Audrey Sutton have started the beginning stages of work in this arena and we hope that we will see this work developed into a major campaign and initiative.

- There is a serious lack of accountability for social workers, supervisors, managers, administrators and agencies who make egregious decisions. Many of our families feel that when they make a mistake the consequences can be extremely serious but when workers or agencies make mistakes they are not held accountable. This double standard makes foster families feel devalued, but even more significantly, does not hold workers in the public or private sector responsible to practice in alignment with CFSA practice standards, CFSA policies, or District law.

There has been a lot of work accomplished in the last many years. We applaud the District, especially but not exclusively CFSA, for the significantly improved results on the recent Child and Family Service Review. However, we have not even begun to address the “high hanging fruit” of organizational culture change that we must confront in order to really turn around practice to support and heal our children. Organizational culture change requires a stable and dedicated leadership. We believe that Dr. Bobo is up to this challenge and trust in her ability to lead CFSA and the private sector forward towards developing practice that is in clearer alignment with vision and best practice standards. However, neither Dr. Bobo nor CFSA can possibly reform a system by themselves. We request of this Council that you help to assure the District’s commitment to reform by insisting that other District agencies also do their parts to work with CFSA in order to best serve our children and families.

Thank you.