



Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center

508 Kennedy Street, NW | Rm. 303 | Washington, DC 20011
Phone: (202) 269-9441 | Fax: (202) 269-9451 | www.dcfapac.org

TESTIMONY DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA COUNCIL'S COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES OVERSIGHT HEARING FOR THE CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES AGENCY

FEBRUARY 17, 2022

Good day Chairperson Nadeau and council members of the Committee on Human Services.

My name is Donna Flenory. I am a veteran CFSA Resource parent of 22 years this coming April; however today, I come before you as Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center (FAPAC).

FAPAC is an organization founded by foster parents 22 years ago this October 2022 with the goal of elevating the voices of foster families in the District. Since our founding, our work has expanded to include various programs for foster families, as well as birth and kinship parents who are seeking parenting training and support. All of our work – which also includes individual advocacy, and our peer support group – informs our systemic advocacy, in which we work in close partnership with CFSA and other organizations to improve the policies and practices that are impacting children and families.

Thank you for the opportunity to deliver testimony today regarding the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). We want to begin by first congratulating Director Robert Matthews on his confirmation as head of CFSA and second by showing gratitude to CFSA for collaborating with FAPAC to address various issues we've brought to their attention throughout the last two decades. Together we've worked to address important issues in the foster care system.



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During last year's oversight hearing, and being in the thick of the Covid-19 pandemic, we mentioned several issues related to COVID-19, and challenges faced by youth aging out of foster care. This year, the foster care community continues to feel the effects of Covid-19, which are further compounding already existing challenges in being a foster parent, particularly in mental and emotional health. We want to take this opportunity to dive deeper into this particular issue because we are finding it to be the root of many issues in our foster homes.

We know that all children in care face some level of trauma, and we believe that CFSA and the Department of Behavioral Health are working to address that trauma in our youth. This is a significant challenge and we want to acknowledge and continue to monitor the progress made on emotional and mental health for youth in care. However, what is not being addressed is the secondary trauma faced by the resource parents who care for children in foster care. We have found that resource parents voluntarily close their homes when they are burned out because their mental and emotional health is not being addressed. Devoting more attention and resources to this issue could help retain resource parents.

FAPAC surveyed resource parents in the District and learned that their emotional and mental health is suffering from the inherent effects of caring for children who have experienced trauma. Most concerning is that there are not many supports available to resource parents to address their strained emotional health caused by the vicarious trauma they experience. Furthermore, the stress of Covid-19 has significantly worsened this issue. 67 resource parents in DC responded to our survey, and these were our findings:



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- Despite Covid-19 concerns, 83% of resource parents kept their homes open during the pandemic and accepted children in care into their homes;
- 62% of resource parents feel their mental and emotional health is affected by fostering youth;
- 72% feel Covid-19 further affected their mental health;
- 69% are aware of the limited emotional support services provided by CFSA or its partners, such as therapy through Adoptions Together or support offered by the Department of Behavioral Health;
- Only 15% of resource parents are actually utilizing those services, and the majority believe that the services are not adequate or effective; 45% utilize their own personal emotional support resources, such as therapy through their own insurance, and the remaining resource parents – 40% – don't use any services at all;
- 81% stated that they would indeed utilize available emotional support services if they were free and confidential, where CFSA could not penalize them for the information they shared with their service providers;
- Finally, the majority of resource parents stated that individual therapy and group counseling from licensed professionals, and respite care for their children in care when they need a break, would be helpful.

Some resource parents added comments to the survey, emphasizing the lack of supports available to them as resources parents, and others stating they were not able to acquire respite care for extended periods of time when they needed a mental health break.



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One respondent stated the following: ***“CFSA taking way too long to find a more appropriate and supportive placement for a child in my care has caused me so much anxiety that I have had to go on anxiety medications for the first time in my life.”***

Another stated: ***“I have found the highest quality and consistent counseling for myself to be accessed through my own means and insurance.”***

Another stated: ***“As a resource parent, I see two limits. First, that mental health isn't being addressed internally, and second, the providers available to families involved in the system are not always the most trained, consistent providers.”***

One previous source of temporary respite for resource parents was Children’s Choice; however, it is our understanding that this resource is no longer available for children in care. This is highly concerning, due to the lack of therapeutic foster placement opportunities in DC. As you know, children in care have substantial needs, and many require a therapeutic placement to help meet those needs. CFSA’s matching tools, which are used to identify appropriate families for each child, are only accurate and thorough if they are utilized. We urge CFSA to invest more time in assessing each child's needs, prior to placement, in order to avoid mismatching children with homes that do not have the bandwidth to properly care for a particular child, which contributes to the repeated removal of children, which in turn further worsens the trauma children in care experience and further diminishes the emotional health of the resource family.



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At FAPAC we believe in collaboration and solutions. Therefore, we want to present some ideas based on survey responses about how to resolve the emotional and mental health issues of resources parents:

- Hiring licensed counseling providers;
- Partnering with agencies to provide confidential licensed group and individual therapy sessions;
- Helping to alleviate the cost of private counseling services;
- Encouraging resource families to take breaks when needed by significantly expanding respite care; and
- Providing deeper assessments of each child's needs as soon as they enter care, thereby ensuring children are matched with resource families who have the appropriate expertise and bandwidth to care for their particular needs.

FAPAC offers our support and partnership to the council and to CFSA to continue to flesh out these ideas, dive deeper into these issues, and implement effective solutions. As we all know, resource parents are more than just a bed, and youth in care are more than just cases. Working together, we can elevate the human aspect of the foster care system for the benefit of youth and families.

Donna
Board

President,

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FAPAC