

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
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Director

Before the
Committee on Facilities and Family Services
Janeese Lewis George, Chair
Council of the District of Columbia

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via
WebEx Virtual Conference



Good morning, Councilmember Lewis George, members of the Committee, and Committee staff. I am Robert L. Matthews, Director of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), and I am honored to testify before you today on our budget plans for Fiscal Year 2024 (FY 2024). Joining me this morning is our Chief of Staff, Tanya Trice, and Agency Fiscal Officer, Justin Kopca.

I would like to begin my testimony with gratitude for Mayor Bowser's leadership over this past year and her commitment to the children and families of the District of Columbia (District). This year's budget is focusing on getting back to basics by improving core CFSA programs and enhancing services to children and families. That strategic determination, along with the support of this Committee and Council, undergirds this year's budget and ensures that CFSA can continue carrying out its mission to protect child victims, support children at risk, assist their families, and advance its vision of "Keeping DC Families Together".

A few weeks ago, Mayor Bowser presented the FY 2024 Budget and Financial Plan, the District's 28th consecutive balanced budget. In the "Fair Shot" budget, the Mayor will continue making major investments to support the city's most vulnerable communities, including the children and families directly served by CFSA, as well as those who benefit from our prevention and early intervention work.

The Mayor's proposed budget for CFSA, which I will present today, demonstrates her continued commitment to ensuring the agency is resourced to provide preventative, supportive, and community-based services that help families keep their children out of foster care; guarantees that appropriate placements are available for children when they are not safe at home; and creates forever homes and positive, life-long connections for children who cannot be reunited with their birth families. This support is critical as CFSA transitions from a child welfare agency to leading the *child and family well-being system* that our community deserves.

My testimony today will provide an overview of what CFSA's FY 2024 budget supports, where the agency has made important investments, and where we have made strategic reductions.

FY 2024 Focus and Priorities

CFSA's proposed FY 2024 budget continues to reflect the District's longstanding commitment to child welfare prevention and early intervention, quality services for children in foster care, and support for program performance improvements. For FY 2024, we will also continue our focus on diversifying our placement array, strengthening supports for staff recruitment and retention, sustaining our kinship navigator program website and mobile application, and *Keeping DC Families Together*. These investments are even more critical now as the most vulnerable children and families of our city recover from the coronavirus' (COVID-19's) impact on their health, education, and economic stability.

Proposed Budget Overview

The overall FY 2024 budget request for CFSA is **\$219.39 million**, with a net decrease of **-\$1.4 million** under our FY 2023 approved budget, includes **\$166.1 million** in local and special purpose funds and **\$53.23 million** in federal funds. The FY 2024 proposed budget includes a reduction of \$745,373 to account for the removal of one-time funding appropriated in FY 2023, which consisted of \$450,000 to support the District's Safe Shores initiative and \$295,373 to support the Child Protective Services Educational Neglect Unit in locating children disconnected from school and reconnecting them to a formal education setting.

Additionally, our FY 2024 proposed budget continues to include the adjusted capital and staffing support for the replacement of our federally approved Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) which we have enthusiastically titled STAAND— Stronger Together Against Abuse and Neglect in DC. We are in the process of deploying the system on an incremental basis. The system's first release went live in February and future releases are being planned. By the end of FY 2024 most of the project should be completed.

Placement Array Investments

We are continuing to diversify our placement array and are finding better ways to ensure that we can provide appropriate placement settings to address even the most unique needs of our children and youth. It is not just about the number of beds, but also ensuring the right supports and resources accompany the placement to ensure placement stability. CFSA has seen a significant decrease in our foster care population compared to pre-pandemic levels. In 2020, our census was 692 and as of February 2023, there were 521 youth in care. Throughout FY 2023, CFSA made sound investments in our placement array, including The Bridge Program with a projected cost of \$900,000, and establishing a Therapeutic Group Home (Sasha Bruce) with a projected cost of \$532,111. The Bridge Program is a nurturing group home environment that will provide immediate short-term placement support: 24-hour board and care, social service supports (wholistic health and education, assessments to help inform long-term placement options). The Bridge Program will be available for up to eight youth (male and female) between the ages of 12-17. A potential vendor has been vetted and is going through the licensing process, which once completed, a contract will be executed. The anticipated opening date is July 31, 2023.

On March 6, 2023, the contract was awarded to Sasha Bruce, a well-respected provider in the District, for the Therapeutic Group Home, which will house six beds. Sasha Bruce is currently going through the facility licensing process. Hiring, onboarding, and training are expected to be completed for youth to be placed by July 2023.

Last year, we significantly reduced the number of children and youth who have stayed overnight at CFSA headquarters, and we continue to do a better job reducing the need for emergency placement beyond 30 days. We have also made progress on reducing placement disruptions. While the placement crisis has abated, we will continue to assess and diversify our placement array.

Educational Investments

In FY 2024, CFSA will continue to collaborate with partners in the community in locating children disconnected from school and connecting them to resources and support. We have

converted four not to exceed employees (NTEs) to full-time equivalent employees (FTEs) to support addressing educational gaps on the front end. CFSA has partnered with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and the high-impact tutoring (HIT) Program, as well as other community-based support, to provide tutoring services for children in foster care.

OSSE is leading a three-year, \$39 million investment in scaling and supporting HIT across the District, with a particular focus on at-risk students and other students who experienced disrupted instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. This investment is a core part of the city's recovery strategy, given the strong body of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of HIT as an intervention that can produce dramatic gains in student learning.

As a means to support schools, CFSA holds weekly office hours with Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to cross-collaborate on educational issues as they arise. LEAs have the opportunity to ask questions about the educational neglect reporting and investigation processes. They can also vocalize concerns about attendance issues with students within their school community and get recommendations for next steps.

Recruitment and Retention of Staff

In FY 2024, CFSA will be expanding its recruitment efforts and ways that we can improve the retention of our staff. CFSA engaged with the Board of Social Work (Board) to consider a proposal to allow CFSA to recruit licensed Bachelor level social workers. The Board and our agency understand the current strain on health and human services agencies due to not having enough licensed Master level social workers in the pool to relieve the current workforce. The Board will be reviewing our proposal and we are optimistic it will be accepted. It is our hope that if our proposal is approved, it will open a pool of social workers that CFSA previously would not have been able to hire. We are continuing to engage local colleges/universities to develop a strong candidate pool and utilizing external job boards to expand and strengthen our recruitment efforts, increasing visibility and talent opportunities. It is our hope that an increase in social workers will lead to a decrease of burnout among our staff and improvement in our social work workforce retention.

Kinship Navigator Program

Kinship caregivers help keep families together, and with the right support, can help provide children a more stable and safer home. The Kinship Navigator Program is designed to provide those supports to children and their relative caregivers in the District.

A component of the Kinship Navigator Program is having access to information and support. On December 8, 2022, CFSA launched the Kinship Navigator website allowing participants to have access to supports and services and the ability to apply online for The Grandparents Caregivers and Close Relative Caregiver subsidy programs. We thank Mayor Bowser for her commitment to permanent funding, so residents will also be able to continue to access assistance for concrete needs such as utility assistance, back rent, food, clothing, and other tangible needs.

As of March 25, 2023, the website has had 1.2K unique visitors and 4K page views. Fifty percent of visitors are utilizing their desktop to navigate the site via their browser, 48 percent are using mobile devices and 2 percent are using their tablets. The user acquisitions are 66.3 percent direct access to the website through the URL, 16.9 percent are referrals from the CFSA website, and 16.8 percent are through search engines.

The mobile application for the Kinship Navigator was recently released in March of this year. The app allows the applicant to access information regarding supports and services and apply for the subsidy programs and emergency financial assistance.

Keeping DC Families Together

In order to successfully implement our transformation from a child welfare agency to a child and family well-being system, we need enhanced coordination among DC government agencies who serve children and families: District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Department of Human Services (DHS), Office of Unified Communications (OUC), Department of Youth Rehabilitation (DYRS), Department of Behavioral Health (DBH), DC Health (DOH), District of Columbia Housing Authority (DCHA), Department of Disability Services (DDS) and the Department of Aging and Community Living (DACL).

CFSA has already seen how this can work through its close partnership with the Office of the Attorney General's (OAG) Family Services Division (FSD.) FSD attorneys have been co-located with CFSA for over 20 years providing legal advice and counsel in court-involved matters involving child abuse and neglect. In its budget submission, FSD has requested an additional manager to support work involving CFSA's in-home population. We support this request as it will build on the partnership already in place and strengthen the efforts to ensure all resources are being accessed to keep children safe and families together.

Through this collaborative approach, children and families will be linked to resources in their communities with the goal of preventing them from coming to the attention of CFSA, unless there is abuse or neglect present.

Integral to our transformation from a child welfare system to a child and family well-being system, is the creation of a city-wide Warmline and Community Response (WL/CR) model, which will voluntarily connect children, families, and individual community members to DC government systems of care and community-based services before they come to the attention of the Child Protective Services (CPS) Hotline. The creation of a citywide WL/CR model fundamentally transforms how we approach child protection and community prevention—by getting ahead of the challenges that individuals and families experience instead of reacting to mitigating, or penalizing crises.

CFSA has also developed a model where families with lived expertise (Lex) can engage with our work to Keeping DC Families Together. The Lived Expertise (Lex) Advisory Council is involved in helping to design, create, inform and implement programs, services and supports beneficial for our DC residents. Our intentionality of engaging people with lived experiences through our Thriving Families, Safer Children initiative is because CFSA understands the value that these individuals and their stories bring to the table as trusted advisors, to inform us on how to better support children and families in the District.

Our vision for this initiative is that we aspire to create a caring, diverse community comprised of residents, non- and for-profit organizations, and government agencies – each with unique

roles and strengths – working together in seamless coordination to ensure that all individuals, children, and families thrive in the District. We would like District agencies to take a unified approach to well-being. With this approach, families are trusted, and their voice is central to decision-making and problem solving.

Conclusion

In closing, the FY 2024 proposed budget makes certain that CFSA can continue to support performance improvements, meet our mission, and provide critical services to children and families. Sufficient funding presents us with the unique opportunity to rethink what is possible for child welfare, and with these investments, CFSA is poised to help improve the lives of those in our community. Mayor Bowser and the DC Council are critical allies in our efforts to support the District's most vulnerable children and to give them and their families a fair shot at recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic as strong as the rest of our great city. I speak on behalf of everyone at CFSA when I say I am grateful for your partnership.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am prepared to answer your questions at this time.