

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Child and Family Services Agency COVID-19 Response Roundtable

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee on Human Services
Brianna K. Nadeau, Chair
Council of the District of Columbia

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by
WebEx



Good morning, Councilmember Nadeau, members of the Committee, and Committee staff. I am Brenda Donald, Director of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), and I am pleased to testify before you today on the agency's response to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

The COVID-19 global pandemic and public health emergency has changed our lives in fundamental ways that uniquely impact vulnerable populations. However, CFSA's mission to investigate alleged child abuse and neglect reports; and coordinate public and private partnerships to preserve families through foster care, reunification, adoption and guardianship remains unchanged. Since March 16th, when Mayor Bowser issued the stay at home order, CFSA immediately geared up and altered the way we operate to ensure we can continue to provide the critical high-quality services that our children and families deserve. During this unprecedented time, we reacted to this new normal and have made necessary adjustments that will sustain CFSA and our youth and families.

Mayor Bowser, the DC Council, and this Committee are critical allies in our effort to support the District's most vulnerable children and their families. Through the years, your investments and support have made it possible for us to create innovative and efficient ways for CFSA to serve children and families.

Your feedback always allows us the opportunity to further strengthen our initiatives so that positive outcomes for children in our care can be achieved. For these reasons, along with our dedicated workforce and community partners, we found that we have been fully prepared to handle this crisis and are confident that our investments will continue to pay off during the public health emergency and following the reopening periods in the District and surrounding jurisdictions.

My testimony today will highlight CFSA's response to the COVID-19 public health emergency through adjustments made in several areas of practice, programming and operations.

CFSA's COVID-19 Adjustments

Along with the rest of District government, CFSA remains open as an essential agency. We provide several vital services that require some staff to continue to report to work in-person or in the field, while other functions can be performed remotely by our workforce. As a result, at the beginning of the pandemic, we quickly mobilized, and implemented full and partial telework for approximately 700 employees across the agency.

During the public health emergency, our Child Protection Services (CPS) Hotline referral and investigation functions and processes remained unchanged. The CPS Hotline has continued 24/7 operations throughout the pandemic with staff working remotely. Our social workers continued to do in-person investigations of allegations of abuse and neglect and assess for safety.

To the greatest extent possible, home visits for the purposes of either case management or licensing were transitioned into virtual visits, defined as electronic communication with a visual component. Managers in each client-facing program area (in-home, child protective services, foster care, nursing, lead inspections, kinship licensing, traditional home licensing and facility licensing) made case-by-case determinations about whether an in-person visit would be required to assess safety and/or well-being. In those instances, pre-visit verbal health screens were conducted and DC Health-recommended procedures for social distancing were followed. Beginning in August, we gradually increased in person visits with families and our community presence. To ensure staff safety, CFSA provides staff with safety supplies for any in-person visits for themselves and for clients as needed. To ensure our mission-critical work is accomplished, we implemented practice guidance and adjusted business processes as needed.

CFSA made policy adjustments specifically in the areas of the Child Protection Register, the Grandparent and Close Relative Caregiver Programs, and Fair Hearings, moving from majority in person processes to use of online portals for the submission of documents. We have added the online forms to CFSA's webpage at CFSA.dc.gov. We are currently updating the vital records policy to create an online request process. We also waived the six-month eligibility requirements for our Grandparent and Close Relative Caregiver Programs so that grandparents and close relative caregivers can have access to much needed services and financial assistance sooner. We intend to make those changes permanent at the end of the public health emergency. During the pandemic, CFSA began conducting virtual Fair Hearings so that CFSA clients may continue to challenge agency determinations without experiencing delay.

Prior to any child/youth's placement (initial, re-entry, return from abscondence, etc.), the standard, mandatory physical and mental health screenings continue to be conducted. In addition, these screenings now include a COVID-19 assessment. For any placement, and/or following significant Coronavirus exposure for a child/youth or household member, foster homes and congregate facilities are following DC Health-recommended procedures for social distancing, quarantining, and sanitization.

There have been no placement disruptions due to a child or youth's health status during the pandemic. We have had a small number of foster parents test positive across our system (including private agency foster parents), and in those instances, we have ensured that foster children and youth were tested and have been able to maintain all children in the home with the support of other adult household members. To date, 14 children in care have tested positive for COVID-19. In April, the District opened a community respite center for COVID-19 positive/exposed community and foster care children who need a safe place to quarantine and/or recuperate. A total of 15 children have utilized the respite facility since its inception. In September, the District made adjustments and closed the initial respite shelter. However, the District continues to offer respite shelter care for impacted children and families at another location and has the ability to increase capacity if necessary.

Hotline Reporting

From March 16th, through the end of the last school year (May 29, 2020), when most of the District's schools operated with virtual learning, CFSA experienced a decline in hotline reports of abuse and neglect by 62 percent compared to last year's school data for the same period. We received 1,972 hotline calls, with 464 (24%) of those referrals being made by school personnel.

Between March 16 and May 29, 2019, we received 5,211 hotline calls, and 2,683 (51%) of those referrals were made by school personnel. Normally, three-fourths of the calls into our hotline come from educators and school staff. The decrease in reports did not mean that abuse and/or neglect also declined. To address this challenge, we worked with DC Public Schools, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and DC public charter schools to develop an abuse and neglect referral protocol for teachers and school staff when they are unable to successfully maintain contact with students during the distance learning period. In addition, on August 31, 2020, we finalized guidance to teachers to help them assess student safety and well-being in a virtual learning environment. We also leaned on our partnerships with agencies and community groups around the city to be additional sets of eyes and ears. The Metropolitan Police Department and organizations like our Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative partners are being supportive in checking in on the welfare of children while they are home.

Over the summer months, our hotline reports were comparable to the same period last year. This new school year, most District schools returned to a virtual learning environment.

Since the implementation of the new guidance, we have seen an uptick in the number of hotline reports, although still lower than what we typically receive. From August 31st to September 30th, we received 976 hotline calls. For that same period last year, we received 1,393 hotline calls.

We've also used Twitter town halls, social media posts, and traditional media platforms to implore the public, neighbors and family members to be extra vigilant and help us keep children safe, especially during the public health emergency. CFSA's hotline accepts calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

To support our youth with virtual learning, CFSA has partnered with three resource parents to serve as Network Educators who facilitate satellite Educational/Learning Hubs which will provide in-person support for some of our youth who are having difficulty learning in a virtual environment. DCPS is also supporting this effort and has provided meeting space as needed. In October, we started a small pilot program with about eight children, and if successful, it may be expanded.

During this stressful time, we know that families need easily accessible community supports more than ever.

We are very proud that we were able to successfully facilitate the planning process for Families First DC, and in October, ten new Family Success Centers opened in Wards 7 and 8. The Family Success Centers reinforce CFSA's long-standing prevention and early intervention work by empowering communities, integrating services and focusing on primary prevention.

Legislative Support for Older Youth

On March 11th, the DC Council enacted emergency legislation to allow youth turning 21, who would otherwise age out of foster care, to remain in care up to 90 days after the public health emergency has ended. CFSA conducted case reviews for all youth who would be impacted by the legislation, developed guidance and worked with youth on their options. Since March 16th, of the 23 youth who turned 21, 14 opted to remain in care. Ten more youth will turn 21 through December 31st. CFSA continues to plan in the event the public health emergency extends beyond December 31st.

When the legislation was first enacted, CFSA, as well as some of our child welfare partners, believed it would enable us to effectively support this segment of our population when employment and other opportunities were negatively impacted by the pandemic.

The extended length of the public health emergency was not foreseen, and the change in practice has come with some unanticipated challenges. For some youth who opted to remain in care, this benefit has provided necessary support and resources to help them achieve permanency. About half of these youth have been and remain disengaged and have not used this opportunity to help them maintain stability or assist them with their transition from foster care to adulthood. Rather, they are occupying placements that they use only sporadically, sleeping out of the home for days, returning only to pick up their stipends, and are not compliant with program requirements.

Since the Mayor has extended the public health emergency to December 31, 2020, it allows older youth to remain in care until at least March 31, 2021. CFSA will continue to support these young adults, but the agency's efforts are limited by their level of participation, and the length of the pandemic is causing unforeseen fiscal challenges, as well as a drain on our placement resources.

Resource Parents

Our resource (foster) parents have been so committed to providing our children with stability through this crisis, and we are so thankful.

CFSA is staying closely connected to resource families through our agency social workers, resource parent support workers, partnering with the Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center (FAPAC), and providing written guidance regarding our work during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are keeping a pulse on both parental and child well-being and providing support as needed. To support virtual visits between parents and children, we have provided tablets to those resource and birth parents who did not have access to a device, and we have provided tip sheets and training to resource parent support workers and social workers on how to hold effective virtual visits.

Currently, placement disruptions are lower than usual and that is due in large part to our resource parents' continued commitment to providing stability through this crisis.

CFSA therapists are available and providing tele-mental health to anyone who needs the service during this challenging time.

We've also moved all our trainings online so that our resource parents, as well as our workforce, experience no disruption in accessing the instruction and support they need in order to care for our children.

Lastly, on October 1, CFSA introduced one of our strategies to ramp up our resource parent recruitment efforts through an agency-wide R.E.A.C.H. (Recruit, Engage, Advocate, Collaborate, Help) campaign. As part of this campaign, we created an Ambassador Program for CFSA staff and resource parents who are passionate, understand the urgency of recruiting new foster parents, and are willing to introduce the agency's call for foster parents into their social networks and organizational affiliations.

Workforce Support

Once the District's adjusted operations were announced in March, CFSA immediately began developing plans to ensure the safety of our staff who are balancing their work with the responsibilities of caring for themselves and their families under extraordinarily challenging circumstances. Since the start of the public health emergency, CFSA has increased funding on enhanced cleaning contracts and supplies. We have increased cleaning and sanitation of our on-site family meeting rooms, work stations and conference rooms. We have purchased safety supplies and distribute them on a continual basis to staff who carry out in-person duties in the field or in CFSA buildings. The safety kits contain disposable masks, hand sanitizer, disinfectant and wipes.

For staff working in the field, non-contact digital thermometers are also supplied. In addition to bi-monthly curbside supply pickup events, safety kits are delivered to CPS leadership for dissemination to staff. To date we have distributed 2,042 kits. Supporting in-person client contact also includes on-going fleet sanitization and vehicle inspection by our fleet services staff.

To decrease the volume of people coming into CFSA's worksites, and minimize exposure for all, CFSA has partnered with DC Parks and Recreation (DPR), to use an otherwise-closed recreation center for family visits that cannot take place outdoors. The DPR site is also subjected to additional cleaning and sanitizing protocols.

Human Resources procedures have been established for staff at risk of, or diagnosed with, COVID-19. To date, 22 CFSA staff have tested positive for COVID-19, and one employee's life was lost. We've launched new internal communication mechanisms such as our all-staff virtual forums and COVID-19 email updates (called "Staying the Course") to keep staff informed about COVID-19 efforts in the District and the agency's programs and operations, and to keep us connected. We've moved our weekly wellness activities for staff to online platforms.

We regularly participate in cross-jurisdictional COVID-19 forums to engage with our colleagues around the country on ways to enhance services and support our staff during this time.

Lastly, since March 16, 2020, we have virtually on-boarded 51 new staff to add to our dedicated workforce.

CFSA is also preparing for the end of the public health emergency and has mobilized its Agency Reopening Team (also known as ART) to create guidance and operational protocols to ensure that staff coming off of partial telework will have a safe place to work.

Conclusion

During these past nine months, as we have delivered services to children and families under a public health emergency, and seen the breadth of the pandemic's effects on our city, our country, and the world, it's become clear to us all that we are not going back to business as usual. Despite this reality, the District's years of strong Executive and Legislative leadership has produced a durable and flexible government infrastructure that will continue to effectively serve our most vulnerable populations.

At CFSA, we are more than ready to take the lessons learned from this pandemic and use them to strengthen the ways we serve and support our children and families.

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