

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Public Hearing on
B26-399 – Support, Opportunity, Unity, Legal Relationship (SOUL)
Amendment Act of 2025

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee on Youth Affairs
The Honorable Zachary Parker, Chairperson

and

Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
The Honorable Brooke Pinto, Chairwoman

Council of the District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building,
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

November 13, 2025
9:00 a.m.
Hearing Room 123

Good morning, Councilmember Parker, Councilmember Pinto, members of the Committee on Youth Affairs, the Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety, and committee staff.

My name is Ann Reilly, Deputy Director for In-Home and Out-of-Home Care at the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). I am here to testify on bill B26-0399, the Support, Opportunity, Unity, Legal Relationships Amendment Act of 2025, also known as the SOUL Act. CFSA supports the intent behind the Bill; however, given the current fiscal climate – the Executive will need to assess the fiscal impact of the Bill before determining whether it can be funded in the FY27 budget.

As a proud Social Worker and a 17-year veteran of CFSA, I have managed various parts of the foster care program and the Child Protective Services hotline. For over six years, I have served as Deputy Director, managing foster care and overseeing in-home community case management, kinship, Parent Engagement, Education and Resource Support (PEER), placement, and resource parent support. My experience has shaped my views on CFSA’s critical work in supporting the District’s most vulnerable children and families.

CFSA operates at the deep end of the child and family well-being system. While critical for safety, the intervention—separating a child or youth from their family and placing them in foster care—is often re-traumatizing, especially the separation itself. While we celebrate successes with older youth (16+) who attend college or find employment, we must expand our work in permanency.

Nationally, 8% of children in foster care “age out,” or emancipate from the system. In the District, this rate is 16%—twice the national average. CFSA currently serves approximately 525 children in foster care, with 150 (nearly 30%) aged 16-21. In Fiscal Year 2025, 65 older youth exited foster care. Of these:

- 16 reunified with parents or caregivers;
- 9 achieved legal guardianship or custody;
- 3 were adopted; and
- 37—just over half—aged out of our system.

Aging out means that during a youth's time in foster care, we were unable to achieve reunification or find an adoptive or legal guardian before age 21. As a result, these 37 young adults began their adult lives without a permanent family and the sustained support system everyone needs to succeed. Unsurprisingly, outcomes for youth who age out—the majority of whom are Black and Brown youth—are often poor; they struggle with stability, mental health, housing, and employment. While some overcome these challenges, as you heard today, as a city, we must do better by connecting all youth to the sustained love and support needed to navigate adulthood.

Bill 26-399 would establish an additional, legal, and supported pathway out of foster care, beyond the current options of reunification, adoption, guardianship, or aging out. These current options do not meet the needs of all youth. The bill seeks a youth-driven permanency goal for older youth that legally recognizes and supports the circle of committed adults in their lives. Developed by young people with foster care experience over two years, this option aims to heal and prevent harms caused by the current system. With SOUL, youth are empowered to choose their pathway, build their chosen families, maintain legal relationships with birth parents and siblings, and exit foster care positioned for success. SOUL permanency will be ordered by DC Superior Court and supported by CFSA through case management, planning, and subsidy payments.

A key element of SOUL is that CFSA will obtain clearances (local police, FBI, and child protection register) for SOUL caregivers, similar to our other permanency options. We will share any criminal or child neglect history with the Court and explain the mitigation efforts that support our confidence in the caregiver.

Since June 2023, CFSA and community advocates have partnered with our city's LEx (youth and young adults with lived experience in foster care) to bring SOUL to DC. This partnership—with SOUL working committees co-chaired by a professional and a LEx member—has guided two years of policy enhancements and strategy, keeping the youth experience central and authentic.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this legislation. I welcome any questions.