

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Child and Family Services Agency



**Director of the Child and Family Services Agency,
Confirmation Public Roundtable Hearing**

Testimony of
Robert L. Matthews
Acting Director

Before the
Committee on Human Services
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Brianne Nadeau, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building
Room 500
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Washington, DC 20004

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Virtual Public Hearing

<https://www.brianneknadeau.com/committee>

Good morning, Chairwoman Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. I am Robert L. Matthews, Acting Director for the DC Child and Family Services Agency—or CFSA. Today, I am honored and privileged to testify before you as Mayor Muriel Bowser's nominee for Director of CFSA.

I am so grateful that Mayor Bowser has expressed her confidence in me leading CFSA. This job can be a heavy one, but I know that my experience, my compassion, and my spirit have brought me here and prepared me to lead this dynamic agency at this time. My career is grounded in serving children and families. While in under-graduate school pursuing my degree in social science, I was an early childhood educator in Tennessee. In that role, I oversaw a before and aftercare program in a high-poverty area. Many of the families were system-involved, and even more of them were involved with Tennessee's child welfare system. During that time, I took a course, Child Abuse and Neglect, and I learned about the issues that plagued families: poverty, substance abuse, untreated mental illness, and homelessness. And I was able to apply what I was learning in real time, because what I was seeing in my classroom were families who lacked resources to overcome those challenges. They weren't exposed to resources outside of their environment and neighborhood, and services were disparate. That experience put me on a path to pursue a career in social and human services where I could create programming to help families tackle those issues so their children would have an opportunity to thrive.

And for almost two decades, I have done just that. Prior to joining the CFSA team in 2012, I worked in various social services leadership positions in the states of Tennessee and Maryland. As Director of the Relative Caregiver Program for the Tennessee Department of Children's Services, I led the effort in expanding the Relative Caregiver Program to all ninety-five counties within the state to help prevent children from entering custody and increase reunification. It was during my time as Assistant Commissioner of Adult and Family Services for the Tennessee Department of Human Services that I managed all areas of public assistance including the refugee program, community services block grant, the summer feeding program, childcare licensing and monitoring, adult protective services, SNAP and housing assistance. While there I assisted with ensuring equity for delivery of services no matter a family's social economic status. While serving as the Chief of Staff for Maryland's Social Services Administration, I developed a youth engagement model that increased internal teaming along with public and private sector partnerships to improve outcomes for older youth. In line with my previous experience, I also established a kinship navigator program to assist formal and informal relative caregivers.

When I arrived at CFSA almost 10 years ago, it was clear that the agency stood by a fundamental belief that the District's families want what's best for their children. And my experience supporting families meant I was well qualified to take over the Placement and Kinship Services Administration where I immediately set to work shifting the agency's front-end child protective services investigative work to a model where we make every effort to identify, engage, and support families to take care of their own. My foundational efforts within kinship programming have contributed to a reduction in the number of District children in foster care from about 1,800 at the start of 2012 to a little more than 600 today.

In 2014, I left CFSA to venture into the national philanthropic child welfare space providing consultation on reform initiatives to jurisdictions within the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Tennessee, and Georgia. And while I was pleased to be influencing at such a high level, much like my immediate predecessor, Brenda Donald, has expressed, CFSA had a hold on my heart. I returned to the agency in 2016 to serve as the Deputy Director of Community Partnerships. In this role, I oversaw social work units directly handling in-home cases, implementation of the Title IV-E Waiver, and coordination of community-based preventions services and housing assistance programs. By the time I accepted the role of Deputy Director of Entry Services in 2018, my knowledge of and experience at CFSA was deep. Through the consistent tracking, monitoring, and analyzing of data, I improved the quality of CPS investigations, caseloads, response time, and closures.

The centerpiece of my work upon my return occurred after I took on the role of Principal Deputy Director in 2019 has been the implementation of the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) practice known as "The Finish Line" that allowed the agency to meet the performance standards required to exit Federal Court oversight via the District's 32-year LaShawn A. v. Bowser class-action lawsuit. This past June, I was excited to have played such an important role in helping CFSA demonstrate the steadfast dedication to prevention, accountability, and transparency to end LaShawn. We all know that the work of keeping kids safe doesn't stop, but I am fortunate to be leading CFSA at a time when it has proven to be a self-regulating, self-correcting agency driven by data, quality, and evidence-based practice.

As Principal Deputy Director, I also oversaw the agency's clinical practice, programmatic operations including Entry Services, Program Operations and the Office of Well-Being. That role was charged with all case-carrying functions and being able to lead interdepartmental coordination and collaboration between CFSA's most critical internal stakeholders—our social workers—positioned me to help shape our practice into a model that jurisdictions across the country look to as they seek to also transform from foster care agencies to child and family well-being systems. It is a wonderful thing to know that CFSA's reform journey is influencing positive change at the national level. But for me, as a proud Ward 7 resident living in the neighborhoods where many of our clients live and now receive services, there is no greater satisfaction or motivation than encountering a family—their children safely residing in the home where they belong—and hearing them say that the work we do made a difference in their lives.

For more than 10 years, one of CFSA's top priorities has been prevention. I want to assure everyone today that I will continue to prioritize supporting families, so they don't have to be a part of the formal child welfare system. Those words, "the work you do made a difference," drive me to do more work, give more support, and provide more services to ensure we're underpinning an infrastructure that gets families what they need before they're involved in a Child Protective Services investigation, before the report is taken, before the allegation is made, and most importantly, before an incident even happens.

For the past five months since taking over as Acting Director, I have been focused on closing out FY 2021 strong, driving performance improvements, identifying fiscal efficiencies, nurturing

staff morale, and strengthening relationships with key stakeholders which includes our resource families, community partners, and advocates. As an agency, we are also refining our new normal as our programming and services evolve to ensure we are meeting the needs of DC's children and families during the pandemic and beyond.

With very few adjustments as Acting Director, I have inherited a mighty leadership team. I'm pleased to share that those sitting at the helm of CFSA's practice and program areas are trained and licensed social workers who bring years of experience along with innovation and passion to the table. And together, alongside our colleagues in the agency's administrative functions like human resources, information technology, finance, facilities, we're all privileged to lead a strong staff committed to improving outcomes for the District's children and their families.

As we move further into Fiscal Year 2022, in addition to prevention and the final commitments of the LaShawn settlement agreement, I will be focused on improving permanency while ensuring children and youth have a positive experience while in out of home placement, increasing kinship opportunities for grandparents and relative caregivers, and enhancing supports for older youth with new programming and investments like credible messengers, hiring a specialist to link youth to vocational opportunities, and more access to financial literacy and resources. And as our city, along with most urban jurisdictions, grapples with the realities of race and disproportionate reports and removals, I'm grateful to have a resource in the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity along with our partnership with The Capacity Building Center for States to help address race and equity in child welfare.

Throughout the field of child welfare, we know that when families thrive, children are safer. And at CFSA, we know that we cannot do it alone. I'm so appreciative to have the commitment of our Mayor, CFSA's sister agencies within the Health and Human Services Cluster, and the DC Council to partner with us to support communities, strengthen families, and protect children.

Being able to do this work on behalf of the children and families of Washington DC is a privilege. With the confirmation that I respectfully ask of you today, I look forward to taking the District's child welfare agency into its next phase as a child and family well-being system. Thank you.