
Government of the District of Columbia



Child and Family Services Agency

Testimony of
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Hearing
***“Child and Family Services Agency
Performance Oversight,
Fiscal Year 2017-2018”***

Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on Human Services
Brienne Nadeau, Chair

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Good morning, Chairwoman Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. I am Brenda Donald, director of the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). I appreciate this opportunity to discuss CFSA's performance over the past year with you. In FY2017, we made important strides in enhancing our Entry Services, strategically redesigning our community-based services for families, and realigning our foster care provider network. As a result, our performance data indicate that we continue to improve the quality of services we deliver to children and families. I will share details about these achievements throughout my testimony.

Trends and Needs

Child welfare rolls in the District have declined for a decade, dropping below 1,000 children for the first time in August 2016. As of February 8, 2018, CFSA is currently serving 2,216 children and youth, 1,342 (61 percent) in their own homes and 874 (39 percent) in foster care. This progress has been driven by the agency's focus on keeping families together safely and serving families in their homes when possible.

Locally, we are seeing two other notable shifts in our overall population.

- After many years, we no longer have a concentration of youth ages 12 to 21 in care. This group peaked at 63 percent of the foster care population in 2007, and has since fallen to 48 percent. The decline in the number of youth aging out of care each year is another indicator of this trend. In FY2012, 200 youth exited at age 21; that number dropped to 70 in FY2017.
- A second shift stems from changing demographics in our city. A decade ago, a majority of children and families CFSA served lived in Wards 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. In FY2017, 63 percent of removals were from Wards 8, 7, and 5—25 percent from Ward 8, 24 percent from Ward 7, and 14 percent from Ward 5. Fully 80 percent of families with an in-home case also lived in these wards.

CFSA's declining foster care population is a departure from the national trend. The District is one of only two or three jurisdictions avoiding a steep increase in foster care. Still, in working to help child victims and struggling families in the District, we face a host of social issues daily. Even as the overall number of children and families served declines, the needs of those who come to our attention remain acute. CFSA received just over 25,000 calls to the 24-hour hotline for reporting child abuse and neglect in FY2017.

For several years and continuing in FY2017, the top five factors in substantiations of child abuse and neglect were: inadequate supervision; physical abuse; educational neglect; domestic violence; and parental inability to provide care due to hospitalization, incarceration, or another issue. CFSA continues to observe that most local instances of child abuse and neglect are rooted in parental substance abuse (usually PCP, heroin, or K2) and/or untreated mental health issues. These difficulties are frequently exacerbated by chronic unemployment, unstable housing or homelessness, and social isolation. Families we serve are typically the second or third generation struggling in similar ways with similar issues.

Long before involvement with CFSA, many children and parents have already faced a number of traumatic events. CFSA is focused on meeting changing local needs while also continuing to improve in delivering the positive outcomes District children and families deserve.

FY2017 Performance

FY2017 was my first full year back at the helm of CFSA. I added some key hires to people already on board, resulting in a strong and skilled leadership team that's getting results. To summarize what we accomplished: we strengthened performance in critical areas and more closely aligned key functions to reflect changes in our population. These gains put the agency in a good position for continued performance improvement. I want to highlight four specific achievements.

Improvements at the Front Door

CFSA Entry Services includes the 24-hour hotline for reporting child abuse and neglect in the District and the Child Protective Services functions of family assessment and investigations. In June 2017, we strengthened our policy and practice to routinely screen in all reports of infants born with positive toxicology. A screen in means that these infants and their families receive home visits to assess for safety and risk, referral to a CFSA nurse, and development of an intervention plan that includes the Plan of Safe Care that a recent amendment to the federal Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act (CARA) requires.

Also in FY2017, Entry Services achieved full staffing and added an extra unit to ensure caseloads that meet *LaShawn* standards. The new Deputy Director, who came on board a year ago, realigned responsibilities of two administrations for smoother day-to-day operations. We also moved our talented and effective Diligent Search Unit into Entry Services to help in locating families when necessary.

These changes led to tangible performance improvements. By the last quarter of FY2017:

- One-hundred percent of Investigations caseloads met the standard of 12 investigations per worker. The number of Family Assessment caseloads meeting that standard had improved from 50 percent to 84 percent against a target of 90 percent.
- Entry Services was initiating 93 percent of investigations on time against a target of 95 percent.
- Investigations started but not completed within the required 30 days dropped from 52 to 16.

As the gateway to intervention and protection for abused and neglected children, Entry Services is a critical core function of CFSA. Improvements we made in FY17 resolved some long-standing challenges and put us on a path to continue our progress.

Safe and Stable Families Redesign

CFSA is now well down the road in transitioning from an agency focused on foster care to one that, whenever possible, keeps families together safely while we help them identify and resolve issues placing their children at risk. In FY2017, we covered additional significant ground in this transition.

At this time last year, we were contemplating asking the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives to compete for the first time for contracts they had held on a sole-source basis for 20 years. In response to feedback from many sources, I decided that CFSA would re-negotiate the contracts, providing clarity about target populations and services we considered essential and focusing our resources on areas of greatest need within the city. A major new feature in the contracts, which started in October 2017, is expansion of CFSA-financed Collaborative services to young families experiencing homelessness served by the D.C. Department of Human Services and grandfamilies participating in the CFSA-administered Grandparent Caregiver Program. Because of the value of these programs for families, we have set ambitious projections for the number of families to be served, and we've increase referrals to the Collaboratives. In addition, we've stepped up tracking and monitoring to get a better picture of results as the year goes on.

In FY2017, we also took a hard look at the effectiveness of evidence-based services we had brought on line under the federal Title IV-E waiver demonstration program. As a result, we eliminated the HOMEBUILDERS[®] program, which had low referrals due to narrow requirements of the national model, and expanded Project Connect. Now, In-Home social workers can draw on that intensive service to help stabilize families and keep them together. For some time, we have had Mobile Crisis Stabilization Services to assist children and youth in foster care, and we made that service available to families involved with Entry Services and In-Home.

Temporary Safe Haven Redesign

Children who must enter foster care to be safe deserve the shortest possible stay in a nurturing setting and the quickest possible exit back to a safe, permanent home. Because CFSA is determined to deliver those outcomes, we took a bold leap in FY2017 known as the Temporary Safe Haven Redesign (TSHR). Last September, the Council approved our contract with the National Center for Children and Families (NCCF) as the successful bidder to provide family-based foster care and case management for District children we place in Maryland. This reduced CFSA contracts for family-based foster care in Maryland from seven providers to one, re-establishing a viable business model for the portion of our caseload that is privatized in light of the declining number of District children in care. We also retained our contract with the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) to serve Spanish-speaking children and youth and their parents.

I'm glad to report that meticulous planning and contributions from many people at CFSA, NCCF, and other providers, along with both District- and Maryland-based foster parents, made the transition a success. Through hard work and diligent collaboration, we achieved the two most important objectives of the transition.

- **We maintained placement stability for the majority of children in care.** Of the 316 children potentially affected by this transition, only 17 had to change placements due to the transition. We are managing each of these changes individually with the needs and best interest of the child as our paramount concern.
- **We retained the majority of existing foster parents.** Of the 48 private provider foster homes in the District, 42 chose to join CFSA. Of the 213 Maryland-based foster homes of providers other than NCCF, 156 chose to transfer to NCCF. Most of the 57 homes that won't transfer were caring for children who achieved permanence, were not caring for any children currently, or were not fully certified and chose not to finish the process.

During this transition period, through close collaboration between CFSA and NCCF, we determined that additional time was needed to transfer certifications from all of the provider foster homes willing to join NCCF. As a result, CFSA extended the contracts of two Maryland-based providers (PSI Family Services, Inc. and Seraaj Family Homes, Inc.) through March 31, 2018. This prolongs the transition period slightly to ensure full certification of all foster homes joining NCCF. All of the recertifications are in the pipeline, and we expect to complete them before the end of March.

In FY2018, CFSA and NCCF are working to launch a model of public-private partnership that will consistently deliver stability, quality, and permanence for District children in care. I am so grateful for the diligent efforts of so many people who made this possible, and I believe this model will result in better outcomes for the children we serve.

Four Pillars Performance

Finally, as you know, CFSA has a values-based framework known as our Four Pillars. We have a scorecard that tracks 36 indicators tied to these values to see how we're doing.

Final performance data for FY2017 show we continue to improve on the majority of the indicators. We're meeting or exceeding the target on 18 indicators and are very close on an additional 10. Also in FY2017, we surpassed or maintained FY2016 performance on 30 of the 36 indicators.

Especially impressive are declines in the time children are waiting to achieve permanence. Average length of time dropped from 44 to 32 months for adoption, and from 36 to 32 months for guardianship. This is great progress on our way to achieving targets of 24 months for adoption and 18 for guardianship.

Here are some additional performance gains from FY2017:

- The number of children in foster care and re-entries into foster care continue to decrease.
- A five percent decrease in re-referrals of maltreatment for in-home cases indicates we're getting better at supporting families.

- We're improving in conducting timely health screenings and medical evaluations for youth entering care.
- We've made progress in engaging older youth in aftercare services, employment, and post-secondary education.

All of these gains in FY2017 provided a great springboard to the next level of performance in FY2018.

FY2018 Focus

Our constant monitoring of client and community needs, CFSA performance, and overall trends in child welfare have indicated that the best way to build on our progress in FY2017 is to make FY2018 a “back to basics” year. During FY2018, we will be going deeper to improve the core functions of the agency.

The values represented in our Four Pillars remain constant:

- That children grow up best with their families;
- That foster care is temporary and we plan for permanence from Day One;
- That every child is entitled to a safe, nurturing environment that supports growth, development, health, and academic achievement;
- And that every child exits foster care as quickly as possible for a safe permanent home or life-long connections.

To live up to those values, each year we establish strategies that address our most pressing opportunities and issues. For FY2018, our focus is embodied in “Four P’s”—**Prevention, Practice, Placement Stability, and Permanence**. I’ll give just a brief overview of what each of these means.

- **Prevention** speaks to commitment to family stabilization and support. We know where the families in need live in our city, and our goal is to expand effective community-based services available to help in those neighborhoods. People should have access to support before they have to get involved with child welfare. Earlier, I described how CFSA has re-negotiated our relationship with the Collaboratives, and that is very much a part of the prevention strategy.
- For every organization that does casework, improvements in **Practice** are the most direct route to better performance and outcomes. CFSA has invested in solid assessment tools, low caseloads, and comprehensive training of social workers, community partners, and others. Now, our progress lies in going deeper to achieve higher quality and consistency.

CFSA's Principal Deputy Director is overseeing several targeted strategies to improve clinical skills, sharpen case planning, and increase effective teaming.

- When we must remove children to keep them safe, they deserve a quality foster care experience. Our third “P” stands for **Placement Stability**, which is at the core of offsetting trauma for children and youth in care. Our current rate of placement disruptions in our foster care population signals that we must do a better job. Placement stability starts with improved placement matching, with the goal of making the first placement the best placement for each child or youth. Our partnership with NCCF should make a positive difference, along with improvements in mental health services. Better communication, training, and support of foster parents are also key components.
- Finally, the fourth “P” stands for **Permanence**. Every child deserves a forever family, and we cannot allow children to linger or grow up in care. Earlier, I described progress in reducing the time children spend in care—but we still have work to do achieve the goals of 12 months to reunification, 18 months to guardianship, and 24 months to adoption. Renewed focus on increasing kinship care and on authentic engagement of birth parents are just two of several strategies we’re pursuing to speed permanence for more children more consistently.

Conclusion

In closing, safe, healthy children and strong families are a precious resource that our city needs today and for the future. All of us at CFSA are proud to be a positive force in strengthening families and working to stop abuse and neglect one child and one family at a time. Until no one ever hurts a child, this work will remain essential, and we will continue striving to improve our performance. Thank you for your attention, interest, and partnership in this important work. I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.