

---

**Government of the District of Columbia**



**Child and Family Services Agency**

---

***Performance Oversight Hearing Fiscal Year 2018-2019***

***“Child and Family Services Agency***

Testimony of  
**Brenda Donald**  
Director

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

February 26, 2019

John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW ■ Room 123  
Washington, DC 20510-6250  
10 a.m.

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 join you once again to share with you CFSA's performance over the past year.

Mayor Bowser's Fiscal Year 2018 budget made investments that supported our efforts to deliver on the promise of our shared DC values. These efforts include creating economic opportunity, making our neighborhoods safer, and providing more effective and efficient government services. We continue that effort as we work each day to fulfill our commitment to provide every District resident a fair shot at opportunity.

Specifically, in FY2018, we continued to make significant progress in the delivery of services for our children and families. We improved child-parent visits, reduced the average time for child/parent reunifications, and saw a decrease in the percentage of youth who age out of care. We strengthened our community-based prevention programs and services with community partners, and we launched efforts to begin planning for the implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act. Throughout my testimony, I will share more details about our progress and areas of focus for 2019.

### **CRITICAL TREND DATA**

At the end of FY2018, CFSA was serving 839 children in foster care and 1,366 in-home with their families. Of the children who entered care, 44 percent were ages zero to five; 31 percent were ages six to 12; and 25 percent were 13 to 17 years old. Three quarters of the children we serve continued to come from Wards 7 and 8.

## **FY2018 PERFORMANCE**

Last year was my second full year back at CFSA, and our focus was on “back to basics.” We took a deep look at our core agency functions and the underlying strategies needed to accomplish our Four Pillars values:

- **Narrowing the Front Door** – ensuring more children grow up with their families and are removed from their homes only when it is necessary to keep them safe;
- **Temporary Safe Haven** – ensuring that the interim placements are safe and suitable while permanent placement with a safe and nurturing family is arranged;
- **Well-Being** – providing children with a nurturing environment that supports healthy growth, development, good physical and mental health, and academic achievement; and
- **Exit to Permanence** – ensuring that every child and youth leaves foster care as soon as possible for a safe, permanent home or life-long contacts, and ensuring older youth are equipped with the skills needed to succeed in life as they leave foster care.

We identified priority areas that we call the “Four P’s” – Prevention, Practice, Placement Stability, and Permanence - to help achieve our goals. Implementation of these strategies, which are informed by our values, helped move the agency forward on a number of fronts.

**Temporary Safe Haven Redesign.** Last year, CFSA successfully transitioned all of the children placed with seven providers in Maryland to one provider, the National Center for Children and Families (NCCF). After completing the transition last year, we began working collaboratively with NCCF to identify the types of placements and services necessary to meet the needs of our children placed in Maryland.

We hold regular management meetings with NCCF to problem solve and to provide continuous review of progress. We are working with them to address any issues as they arise and are moving in the right direction to ensure that we consistently deliver stability, quality, and permanence for District children in care.

We also made improvements in how we engage families in their communities through the continuation of our partnerships with the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives and the extension of the Title IV-E waiver funds to provide a suite of community-based prevention services known as our Safe and Stable Families programs. CFSA took steps to assess and continue building on FY2017 work, including upstream and community-based capacity-building services to enhance the capacity of smaller nonprofit partners to reach families with critical family strengthening supports. We now are preparing to transition how we provide community-based prevention services from the Title IV-E waiver to a city-wide approach under the Family First Prevention Services Act. We kicked off these planning efforts in June 2018 with the creation of the Family First Prevention Work Group.

When a child enters foster care, focus on the goal of “Exit to Permanence” is critical from day one. We hit our benchmarks on a number of performance outcomes last year. In one important area, we reached our highest levels for positive permanency in five years, with the number of youth aging out dropping to the lowest levels, and reunification and guardianships reaching an all-time high for youth 18 and older. We increased youth graduation and college completion rates from 12 to 19 percent, and we also increased the number of youth in career pathways programs. I am proud to report that 98 percent of youth who aged out exited care with stable housing, a testament to the array of housing supports we have invested in for our older youth.

We also saw more children exit care than enter during FY2018 – with a total of 360 children entering and 425 exiting foster care.

Also of note, to date, we have achieved 74 of the 88 (84 percent) Exit Standards in the *LaShawn A. v. Bowser* Implementation and Exit Plan. We have improved our ability to initiate and complete timely investigations, resolved issues with caseload levels, and improved the consistency of our visits with children and parents, as well as siblings. This is on top of our noteworthy achievement of meeting all of the *LaShawn* health care standards. This progress is due to the hard work of our dedicated front-line workers and the laser focus of our managers.

It is important to emphasize that CFSA is increasingly being recognized around the country as a high-performing agency that other states want to emulate. Our primary tasks in the coming months will be to demonstrate, without a doubt, that we can consistently sustain the progress we have achieved and continue to focus on the quality of our practice.

### **FY2019 Focus**

This is all good news, but we know that much work remains to be done, and there are more benchmarks to be met, including the time it takes to move our children to reunification, guardianship, or adoption. Therefore, in the year ahead, we are staying the course, and we will continue to build on the progress made thus far on our current priority agenda - our Four Pillars values, the Four P's strategies for implementing those values, and the *LaShawn* exit measures.

Last month, we began restructuring the Entry Services Administration to improve the quality of investigations and provide greater support to children who are subjected to educational neglect and institutional abuse. We have also begun consolidating the Family Assessment unit with Child Protective Services Investigations to create a one-track system that will allow CFSA to have more consistent clinical practice, greater continuity among its business processes, and better child protection outcomes.

We are also instituting a new practice model to improve our response to accepted educational neglect referrals. In order to better address educational neglect and chronic absenteeism, CFSA and DC Public Schools and Public Charter Schools are in the beginning stages of developing a new process aimed at expanding capacity and increasing teaming efforts through early intervention and meaningful referrals. CFSA is creating a dedicated social work unit to better respond to educational neglect referrals. The social workers will be assigned to a cluster of schools to serve as the point of contact for attendance coordinators. They will also serve as members of the student support team, when appropriate, as an early intervention strategy, making the referral process seamless and not punitive.

Challenges with placement stability continue to be a top priority for the agency. While there's no quick-fix approach to placements, given the complexity of the needs of our children and the inter-relatedness of practice and systems issues, we have identified three areas of focus that we believe will drive improvements:

- 1) Placing greater focus on increasing first placements with kin;
- 2) Increasing placement resources and refining our placement matching tool to ensure that the first placement is the best placement; and

- 3) Stepping up supports to our foster parents, including mental health and crisis stabilization services, better and more frequent communications, and more focused training to strengthen their capacity to care for our children.

In March, CFSA will submit our Family First Prevention Plan to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for implementation in October. In concert with our federal Prevention Plan submission, we are also partnering with DC's Health and Human Services cluster agencies and other partners to implement a citywide prevention strategy that goes further upstream with primary prevention services. We will remain active in city-wide efforts to coordinate services to meet families' needs, including participation in the Home Visitation Council and other initiatives. Our goals are not just to reduce the number of children in foster care, but to reduce child abuse and neglect overall, and to strengthen and stabilize families.

### **Conclusion**

While CFSA is at the forefront of the "village" that cares for children who need our help, we recognize the important role that all of our partners play in making this system one of the best in the nation. On behalf of the entire staff at CFSA, I want to thank Mayor Muriel Bowser for making CFSA an Administration priority and the Council of the District of Columbia for your continuous support of our work on behalf of children in the District of Columbia.

This concludes my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.