

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Performance Oversight Hearing Fiscal Year 2020
Child and Family Services Agency

Testimony of
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Director

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

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Good morning Chairwoman Nadeau, members of the Committee on Human Services, and Committee Staff. I am Brenda Donald, Director of the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), and I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today and share with you CFSA's performance over the past year.

CFSA hit the ground running in FY 2020, beginning the year with the approval of our Federal Title IV-E Prevention Plan under the Family First Prevention Services Act. None of us could have predicted what life had in store for families in DC just a few months later. The global health pandemic has altered our country, our city, and so many of our lives. In addition to sharing outcomes, my testimony today will highlight the impact of the pandemic on CFSA and the adjustments we made last year to ensure we could continue providing the high-quality services our children and families deserve. Additionally, I will also provide an update on CFSA's progress in the *LaShawn A. v. Bowser* lawsuit as well as outline the agency's advancements in expanding upstream prevention services.

COVID-19 IMPACT AND ADJUSTMENTS

I would like to begin speaking about CFSA's COVID-19 adjustments with a heartfelt thank you to Councilmember Nadeau for her leadership in supporting one of our most important and impactful initiatives. On March 11, 2020, well ahead of most jurisdictions throughout the country, 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. As a result, 23 of the 33 youth scheduled to emancipate are remaining in extended care.

Despite the devastating effects the pandemic has had on the many families, CFSA is pleased to report that our children have continued to achieve positive permanence through the public health emergency. In FY20, **99 adoptions** were finalized, **43 guardianships** were completed, and **129 reunifications** took place. Although our operations have changed, our commitment to ensure permanence of the children we serve remains steadfast.

Since March 16, 2020, CFSA has remained open as an essential agency. While 75% of the agency's operations have been shifted to function virtually, we provide several vital services that require some staff to continue to report to work in-person or in the field. CFSA's Child Protection Services (CPS) Hotline referrals and investigations processes continue to function seamlessly. From the beginning of the public health emergency through the end of School Year 2019-2020, CFSA experienced a decline in hotline reports of abuse and neglect by **62 percent** compared to last year's data for the same period. We received **1,972 hotline calls**, with **464 (24%) of those referrals** being made by school personnel. For the same time frame in 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, and we understood that the decrease in reports did not mean that potential 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 virtual learning period. We also developed guidance to help educators assess student safety and well-being in a virtual learning environment.

While the hotline data for the summer months of 2020 were comparable to 2019's numbers, we have seen an uptick in the number of hotline reports this school year since the implementation of the new guidance. 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**.

In response, CFSA leaned on our partnerships with agencies and community groups around the city more than ever to be additional sets of eyes and ears. The Metropolitan Police Department and organizations like our Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative partners and Family Success Center grantees have been on the ground supporting families in many ways, including checking in on the welfare of children while they are home. As an agency, we've also used Twitter town halls and social media as well as traditional media outlets to implore the public, neighbors, and family members to be extra vigilant and help us keep children safe. We would like to use this opportunity to remind the public that CFSA's hotline accepts calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In April 2020, the District opened a community respite center for COVID-19 positive/exposed community and foster care children who needed a safe place to quarantine and/or recuperate. A total of **15 children** utilized the respite facility in FY20. By the end of FY20, the District closed

the initial respite shelter location, and we continue to offer respite shelter care for impacted children and families at another location with the ability to increase capacity if needed.

LASHAWN A. v. BOWSER

After FY19's success in negotiating a significantly reduced exit and sustainability plan for the *LaShawn* lawsuit, we focused on improvements around investigations, visitation, placement, and permanency. In June, following even more progress against the remaining measures, CFSA informed Federal District Court Judge Thomas Hogan, the Court Monitor, and the Plaintiff's Counsel that we believed it was time that CFSA exits *LaShawn A. v. Bowser*. With the encouragement of Judge Hogan, the parties came together over the summer to reach a mutual agreement on exit commitments and timelines, and in August 2020, Judge Hogan signed a preliminary settlement agreement that will allow CFSA to exit court oversight by **June 1, 2021**. This Settlement Agreement includes additional commitments to build and maintain a foster placement surplus, continue increased clinical and therapeutic services, and contract for a specialized psychiatric treatment option. Additionally, we will maintain our commitment to caseload standards as well as our commitments toward self-monitoring and public reporting.

As we turn the final corner in moving out from under the cloud that has been hanging over our heads for 31 years, I am proud to report that CFSA has proven to be a self-regulating, self-correcting agency driven by data, quality, and evidence-based practice. With the continued perseverance of CFSA staff and our community and government partners, our June 2021 fairness hearing will mark the end of the *LaShawn* lawsuit.

UPSTREAM PREVENTION

CFSA used the opportunity of the federal Family First Prevention Services Act to expand our prevention array and launch Families First DC, a neighborhood-based, whole family approach to provide upstream, primary prevention services and neighborhood driven resources. After Mayor Bowser announced the Family Success Center grantees in ten neighborhoods in Wards 7 and 8, the planning phase began in earnest. Under CFSA's guidance, each neighborhood established a Community Advisory Council comprising residents and stakeholders in the targeted community to determine which services are offered at the Family Success Centers. Despite the ongoing public health emergency, the centers officially launched in **October 2020**. Each center connects families to critical services that require a greater focus as the District recovers from the pandemic — from employment and education to food security, childcare, and healthcare, including mental health.

Even prior to the grand opening, the Family Success Centers' grantees have been on-the-ground supporting their communities throughout the pandemic. Since **October 1, 2020** the centers have served **hundreds of families** in their neighborhood, meeting them where they are and providing much-needed supplies like groceries, cleaning materials, and protective gear as well as critical services like virtual learning support and counseling.

In line with our prevention work, I am pleased to report that the District has been selected by the Children's Bureau to join the Systems Change Cohort of the Thriving Families, Safer Children: A National Commitment to Well-being initiative. For the past decade, CFSA has been on a journey of transformation, moving purposefully away from a system primarily focused on foster

care to a child and family well-being system that supports and strengthens families in their communities. Our participation in the Thriving Families, Safer Children initiative will allow CFSA and other District agencies to further expand upon the array of services that support families early enough to prevent them from becoming system-involved. Through this initiative, we will continue to build on our cross-sector relationships to address the root causes of maltreatment of children while working to prevent initial and repeat occurrences, avoid needless family disruption, reduce family and child trauma, and interrupt intergenerational cycles of abuse. We look forward to bringing more stakeholders to the table from housing, human services, justice, education, health care, and other fields for new insights and approaches to partnering with and resourcing communities and families. I always say CFSA is the child welfare agency, it is not the child welfare system. This initiative will aid the District in making clear the interdependence of all who play critical roles in keeping children safe and families strong. CFSA is excited to lead this charge for one of the best child welfare systems in the nation.

FY2021 FOCUS

While we are excited about the agency's achievements over the past year, we recognize the hard work ahead of us as the District continues to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on our most vulnerable populations. While boosting upstream prevention will continue to be a focus in FY21, our priorities hold in increasing first placements with kin, evaluating our service array to ensure it is meeting the needs of our children and youth, and stepping up recruitment of and supports to foster parents. Our continued goals of strengthening and supporting kin and close relatives who are raising their minor relatives through CFSA's Kinship Navigator Program, the Close Relative Caregiver Program, and the Grandparent Caregiver Program will provide even

more qualified families with subsidies and other support services. I am also pleased to report that with the addition of new federal funds from the COVID-19 relief bill, we were able to identify funds we believe will end the waiting list for the Grandparents Caregivers Program.

With the anticipated end to the *LaShawn A. v. Bowser* lawsuit, FY21 will see CFSA increasing self-regulation and self-correction through our new performance measurement framework that aligns with the Four Pillars. FY21 will also take CFSA through an in-depth process to identify the long-term performance measures for the agency. This process will utilize best practice child welfare measures and align our measures with federal methodology. Through robust reporting to our oversight bodies and the general public that demonstrates we can consistently sustain the progress we have achieved, CFSA is committed to a transparent relationship with stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

A few months ago, I was invited to author an article for The Children's Bureau monthly publication under the theme "Relentless for Families." My contribution was entitled, "What Relentlessness Looks Like in the Nation's Capital," and as I settled in to write, I began to reflect on the work of CFSA in this unprecedented year. The foundation that has been developed over the last decade and supported by CFSA staff, Mayor Bowser, this Committee, our governmental and community partners, our resource parents, and so many other stakeholders not only allowed for CFSA to continue our efforts to protect children and strengthen families without interruption, but that foundation has made it possible for us to progress. We were prepared to handle this crisis, and we made the necessary adjustments so we could continue to achieve positive permanency for our kids, meet exit standards for the LaShawn lawsuit, build out our upstream

prevention offerings, and many more FY20 accomplishments. We have hard work ahead, but I am proud of the relentlessness our city displays for families every day.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I speak for the staff at CFSA as I thank Mayor Muriel Bowser for making our agency an administration priority, especially through the public health emergency as we work to lessen the impact of this devastating pandemic on the District's most vulnerable children and their families. I would also like to extend gratitude to the Council of the District of Columbia for your continuous support of our efforts. Your partnership is invaluable, and I look forward to building upon it through FY21 and beyond.

With that, I conclude my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions the Committee may have.