

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  
Brenda Donald  
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  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004

Wednesday, March 1, 2017  
9:30 a.m.

Good morning, Chairwoman Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. I am Brenda Donald, Mayor Muriel Bowser's nominee for director of the DC Child and Family Services Agency—or CFSA. Today, I'm seeking your confirmation for a tough job that keeps drawing me back. For those keeping count, this is my third tour of duty at the District's child welfare agency.

Until January, I served as the deputy mayor for Health and Human Services, with oversight of eight agencies – including CFSA. So, why did I raise my hand and ask Mayor Bowser to allow me to step down from my deputy mayor role and go back to CFSA? For some, that was a head-scratching move, but for those who know me, it makes perfect sense. By the time I conclude my testimony, I hope it will make sense to you, too.

Last September, I recommended to Mayor Bowser that I serve as interim director while still serving as Deputy Mayor. As Deputy Mayor, I was keenly aware of and actively engaged in the policy and budget decisions of the agency and in tracking and assessing its performance. But as interim director, I was very excited to again be immersed in the work of CFSA on a day to day basis, focusing on driving performance improvements, maintaining fiscal stability, nurturing staff morale, and strengthening relationships with key stakeholders. My assessment after a few weeks as interim director confirmed what already knew: CFSA is a solid organization with strong and committed staff and the right ingredients to get the best outcomes for our kids and families. With this assessment, I began the process of rebuilding the leadership team, of meeting with key stakeholders, getting briefed on all program areas, and working with Mayor Bowser to build a FY 2018 request for CFSA, as well as actively recruit for a permanent director.

As we started the recruitment process, I realized that anyone coming in new to the agency would need at least six months to a year to ramp up, and I came to the conclusion that we just didn't have that much time. Our kids can't wait. At the same time, my passion and love for CFSA was in full effect, and staff and stakeholders were leaning in and asking me to stay. I knew in my heart where I wanted to come to work to everyday. So, I asked the Mayor if I could come back to lead CFSA one more time. And to my amazement, she said yes! I haven't stopped smiling since☺. I am so grateful that our Mayor has the confidence in me to lead the agency.

This job isn't for everyone, but I believe I have the right combination of experience, grit, and passion to do it. I'm a native Washingtonian who grew up in Ward 8, living in the same neighborhoods and attending the same schools as most of the families CFSA serves today. In those days, my brothers and I also benefitted from a cohesive community that regarded all the children in the neighborhood as family—an informal safety net, if you will. I realize things are different now, and many of the families we serve are overwhelmed by poverty, substance abuse, untreated mental health issues, and homelessness. Still, I believe most of these families want the same things all of us want: healthy, happy, and thriving children.

My career of three decades in the public and nonprofit sectors reflects my values of social justice and equity, and my experience is relevant to directing CFSA. For example, my 10 years of city management experience in Little Rock, Arkansas were excellent preparation for managing the

public resources invested in CFSA. While CFSA's core business is children and families, we also have to be mindful that CFSA is \$232 million a year operation that includes the back office functions of human resources, information technology, finance, and facilities. My city management experience included most of those functions and positioned me to be a good fiscal steward - something I take very seriously.

I first came to CFSA in 2001, starting as chief of staff and then becoming director in 2004. I then served as deputy mayor until the end of Mayor Anthony Williams's term. After leaving District Government in 2006, I went on to two experiences that strengthened my capacity to lead CFSA while also redoubling my resolve that government not only *should*, but also *can* perform at a high level.

In January 2007, I joined Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley's cabinet as secretary of the Department of Human Resources. DHR is Maryland's human services agency, which includes child welfare, public benefits (such as TANF and food stamps), and child support enforcement.

The centerpiece of my child welfare work in Maryland was a comprehensive reform agenda called Place Matters. It was built on the core principles that children belong with their families in their own communities and that foster care should be a temporary safe haven on the way back to a permanent home. In just three and a half years, we reduced the number of children in foster care from about 10,300 to fewer than 8,000—a decline of over 20 percent. Most of that reduction was due to a laser beam focus on permanence. During my tenure, nearly 9,000 children and youth reunified with their parents, were adopted into new families, or entered legal guardianships. We also cut the number of youth in group homes by 50 percent.

After Maryland, I joined the Annie E. Casey Foundation as vice president over child welfare and juvenile justice systems reform and evidence-based practices. I also oversaw Casey's direct services operations, which provided therapeutic foster care in New England and Baltimore. We were doing really important work—yet something was missing. I was just too far removed from the people I was serving. I was flying at 30,000 feet, and I wanted to be on the ground improving the lives of children and families in my hometown. At Casey, I was *influencing* change. At CFSA, I am *making* change, and that's what fuels my energy.

So I came back to lead CFSA from 2012 through 2014. During that time, we made significant progress toward ending the long-standing *LaShawn* lawsuit, achieving 16 performance measures, reducing the number of kids in care from 1,750 to 1,100, and laying the groundwork for a comprehensive community-based network of prevention services.

I was honored again to serve as deputy mayor of health and human services under Mayor Bowser. My experience as deputy mayor, leading interagency coordination and collaboration, busting silos, and working across to solve some of our most intrinsic issues, has prepared me to be an even better CFSA Director than I was before.

As the District's child welfare agency, CFSA is the heart of a broader system that is the safety net for our most vulnerable children. At the end of each day, I want to know that I'm leading a winning team who knows that our mission is to keep kids safe and make families stronger.

I am so happy to be back at CFSA, and I respectfully ask for your confirmation so we can move full speed ahead. I look forward to moving ahead to execute CFSA's agenda with exciting priorities that I will describe in my Oversight testimony.  
Thank you.