

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Child and Family Services Agency



Fiscal Year 2017 Performance Oversight Hearing

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

John A. Wilson Building
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10:00 a.m.

Good morning, Chairwoman Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. I am Brenda Donald, acting director of the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). Thank you for inviting me to testify on the activities and accomplishments of CFSA in Fiscal Year 2016 and 2017 Year-to-Date on behalf of Mayor Muriel Bowser.

Mayor Bowser's administration is committed to investing in pathways to the middle class by investing in education, infrastructure, public safety, and people. The Fair Shot Budget for fiscal year 2017 (FY2017) was the first budget developed wholly under Budget Autonomy. For the first time since Home Rule was passed in 1973, the District was able to spend our local dollars without having to wait on Congress to pass the federal budget. This brings us one step closer to operating like the 51st state. I am honored to testify before you today on the ways in which the Child and Family Services Administration has worked to achieve a fair shot for all of our residents, especially for our children.

Every one of the thousands of children and youth CFSA serves each year has a compelling story. We're not unlike a hospital emergency room. People come to our door in crisis, and it's our job to help them stabilize. Protection from abuse and neglect comes first. After that, our work is all about healing real people in complicated situations. The stakes are high, but the successes are priceless.

Most of our work is not optional. A large body of Federal and associated local laws mandate that child welfare agencies must ensure safety, permanence and well-being for the children in our care. In addition, the District has specific benchmarks under the *LaShawn* consent decree, and we have a self-imposed strategic agenda and set of performance measures known as the Four Pillars. The ultimate intent of all these requirements is to break the cycle of abuse and neglect one child and one family at a time.

Background: Four Core Mandates

I want to set the stage with a quick overview of child welfare requirements. All child welfare agencies in the U.S. have four core mandates that stem from federal laws and regulations.

- The first is to *Take and Respond to Reports*. CFSA operates the District's 24-hour hotline for reporting child abuse and neglect at 202-671-SAFE. In order to act, the agency must receive a report of child abuse and/or neglect. Calls about situations that fall within the District's legal definition of child abuse and neglect trigger a response from CFSA.
- Our second mandate is to *Help Families*. When child victims and those at risk come to our attention, we must have services available to help parents overcome difficulties and keep their children safe.
- Third, for children who can't be safe with their parents, we must *Maintain Alternative Safe Havens*. Whenever appropriate, kinship care and family-based foster homes in the District are the first choices. And while children and youth are in foster care, we have a critical obligation to address their needs and to provide quality care that improves their wellbeing.



- Finally, the fourth mandate is to Reinstate a Permanent Home. We have an obligation to provide children with a safe, permanent home as quickly as possible—with their parents, with a legal guardian (who is often a relative), or with a new adoptive family.

Another piece of important context to know about CFSA and our services is that due to the unique status of the District, both state and local child welfare functions are under our roof. In addition, CFSA is the child welfare **agency that is part of a** broader local safety net (or child welfare *system*) composed of concerned citizens, mandated reporters, private providers, other District Government agencies that provide critical services, non-profit community-based organizations, and others serving children and families. I especially want to highlight the critical role that foster parents play in the safety net. CFSA would be unable to protect children and help families without all these partnerships.

Trends and Needs

Child welfare rolls in the District have declined for a decade, dropping below 1,000 children in foster care for the first time in August 2016. Overall, CFSA is currently serving 2,675 children and youth: 951 (36 percent) are served in foster care and 1,724 (64 percent) are served in their own homes. Keeping families together safely and serving them in their homes is now firmly established as our growth area.

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

- After many years, we are at the end of the groundswell of youth ages 12 to 21 in care. This group peaked at 62 percent of the foster care population in 2007, and is now down to 49 percent. Decline in the number of youth aging out of care each year is another indicator of this trend. In FY2012, 199 youth exited at age 21, and that number dropped to 91 in FY2016 with 62 expected to age out this fiscal year.
- A second shift stems from changing demographics in our city. A decade ago, CFSA was serving children and families from Wards 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. Today, three quarters of children in District foster care come from Wards 7 and 8, and 80 percent of families with an in-home case live in Wards 5, 7, and 8.

CFSA's declining foster care population is a fortuitous departure from the national trend. So far, the District has avoided the methamphetamine and opioid epidemics that are swelling foster care populations across the midwest, south, and southwest. Still, in working to help child victims and struggling families in the District, we face a host of social issues, daily.

In FY2016 and so far in FY2017, the top five factors in substantiations of child abuse and neglect are: inadequate supervision, physical abuse, parental incarceration, educational neglect, and domestic violence. Additionally for school year 2015-2016, the substantiation rate for educational neglect was three percent and for school year 2016-2017 thus far the educational neglect substantiation rate is seven percent. Dig deeper, and 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 a lack of education, 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. Meaning that long before getting involved with CFSA, both the children and parents had already faced a number of traumatic events.

- Think of a young woman, age 20, with a two-year-old son, an untreated mental health issue, limited family support, unemployment, chronic homelessness, and a lot of anger and fear stemming from traumatic experiences.
- Think of a two-parent family with four children, ages 12 to 17, where the father is seasonally and marginally employed, where domestic violence took place for years, and where housing and food insecurity are ever-present. The two youngest boys have special needs, with which their parents constantly struggle to cope. Faced with the insecure environment in their home, the older two teens have taken matters into their own hands. This has led to pregnancy for the 15-year-old girl and appearances in Juvenile Court for her 17-year-old brother.

In both instances, a single report about child neglect identified these families to CFSA. But when our social workers responded, they found a host of difficult issues in need of attention. While these two cases are merely glimpses, they are true examples of the complicated situations we typically encounter on the front lines of child welfare in the District today.

FY2016 Performance

In the face of challenges like these, how well is CFSA performing? As a preface to answering that question, I want to touch on some of the many ways we are continually monitoring and tracking performance at CFSA.

- At the most granular level, we have dashboards that show a social worker's individual caseload, what major actions the worker has accomplished, and what remains to be done with deadlines. The data are visible to the social worker and his/her chain of command, and it's possible to pull aggregated reports for work units or administrations.
- Our automated case management system FACES. NET compiles hundreds of management information reports—some daily, others weekly, bi-monthly, monthly, or on demand.
- Among many monitoring tasks, CFSA's Agency Performance Unit runs a daily report of key indicators regarding children and families we're currently serving. Agency Performance also does quarterly tracking of 36 CFSA-imposed performance measures aligned with our Four Pillars strategic agenda.
- For several of our larger programs, we engage independent evaluators to review and assess how well things are going.
- Semi-annually, the Court Monitor for the *LaShawn* consent decree tracks District performance against 88 benchmarks under the court-ordered Implementation and Exit Plan (IEP).



- And finally, as the primary administrator of federal child welfare funding, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families conducts periodic reviews of child welfare systems in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) rates child welfare performance against seven national standards and seven systemic factors. We just had our third federal review in June of 2016.

Based on all the collected data, CFSA's performance is high and stable in a number of important areas and proficient in many others. Several areas continue to need improvement, with some promising strategies underway and much potential for performance leaps, the achievement of which is high on my agenda as the incoming CFSA Director. The agency isn't perfect; no child welfare agency is. But overall CFSA today is functional, capable, and competent, and provides critical and effective support to District children and families.

Achievements

Here are the major areas where CFSA's performance is strong.

- The federal reviewers who conducted the Child and Family Services Review were very complementary about the District's array of services. They commented that our social workers are creative in applying services available to meet child and family needs.
- Unlike many child welfare agencies across the nation, CFSA social workers have low caseloads—well within national standards for the most part. This is an important foundation for improving the quality of practice.
- When we must remove children to keep them safe, we place most of them—84 percent—in a family setting. Federal reviewers noted that CFSA is extremely good at keeping siblings together and maintaining other family connections for children in care. Our use of congregate care is very low—five percent.
- Of the 88 benchmarks under the *LaShawn* Implementation and Exit Plan, the District has met 72 (82 percent).
- CFSA has implemented a host of best practices—for example, Differential Response in Entry Services; the consultation and information sharing framework (R.E.D. Teams provide structured critical thinking at key decision points in the life of a case); and regular Quality Service Reviews as a means of assessing the quality of practice.
- Since introducing and elevating the concept of well-being four years ago, CFSA has made significant progress in taking better care of children and youth—especially those in foster care. This includes looking after their physical, mental, and behavioral health and academic progress. Following are some of the impressive statistics from FY2016:
 - Ninety-six percent of children got a health screening at our in-house Healthy Horizons Assessment Center before entering or re-entering foster care.



- One-hundred percent of children and youth had a mental health and trauma screening within 60 days of entering foster care.
- Eighty-five percent of children assessed for mental health services were connected with a service provider within seven days of receiving their mental health and trauma screening.
- Ninety-three percent of youth age 11 and older got a substance abuse screening before entering foster care.
- Ninety percent of children between birth and age five received a developmental screening upon entering care.
- The high school graduation rate for youth in foster care increased from 60 percent in FY2015 to 76 percent in FY2016. And youth in care completing vocational training made a performance leap from 46 percent in FY2015 to 69 percent in FY2016.

In Need of Improvement

Turning to performance in need of improvement, CFSA, the Court Monitor, and the federal reviewers all agree that we need better strategies in the following five areas.

- Entry Services: CFSA has improved but is still not meeting standards for timeliness and quality of investigations.
- Placement: Our array of placements and ability to make the first placement the best placement need to be strengthened.
- Permanence: Our ability to quickly provide children and youth with a permanent home has plateaued and needs to be reinvigorated.
- Practice: Our practice needs to move from meeting standard business processes to quality case work involving ongoing assessment and analytical decision-making.

FY2017 Focus

External reviews and our own constant internal monitoring give me confidence that the District child welfare agency and system are headed in the right direction. However, as the number of children and families we serve declines, we must devote our resources to ensuring quality services that really help our most vulnerable families address the complex difficulties they face today.

Since most of our children and families now come from Wards 5, 7, and 8, we will continue to explore how best to ensure adequate resources in those locations. We'll also take some bold steps to gain performance leaps in the critical areas of placement and community-based services.

Safe Haven Redesign

This year happens to be the normal time in the five-year cycle for seeking competitive bids to serve District children placed in Maryland. Today, that's about half of our foster care



population. We are using this opportunity to initiate a Safe Haven Redesign with the goal of improving how our entire system—both CFSA and private providers—delivers on placements and permanence for children who cannot be safe in their birth homes.

In early March 2017, we plan to release a Request for Proposals (RFP) that will take our public-private partnership to the next level. CFSA will provide case management for children and their families and recruitment, retention, and support of foster parents in the District. Instead of seven providers with varying levels of service, performance and outcomes, we will contract with a single provider for all District children placed in family-based homes in Maryland. We'll eliminate the "traditional" and "therapeutic" categories of foster homes. Instead, children, families, and foster parents will receive an array of services and supports designed to promote placement stability, well-being, and permanence. We'll raise the bar for everyone—both CFSA and our partners—with high standards based on national best practices.

As a result, we expect placement stability will increase, length of stay in foster care will decrease, and exits to reunification, guardianship, and adoption will increase. This strategy is designed to improve quality and outcomes for our children and families.

Safe and Stable Families Redesign

The Title IV-E waiver allows fiscal flexibility to use funds normally reserved for foster care for prevention and family-strengthening services. Currently, we're at the mid-point in our Title IV-E waiver, which ends in 2019. It's time to leverage these resources to deepen how we provide community-based prevention and family-strengthening services.

Over the past several years, the number of children served in their own homes has increased, and the number of children coming into foster care has decreased. As a result, we have a unique opportunity to further shift our efforts to prevention—to become a child welfare system where even more children and families are served safely in their own homes.

Our goal is to build a new and higher quality system of community-based supports and services that are accessible and relevant to our families. We expect that more children will be able to remain safely in their own homes and that families will have more options for friendly, effective help in their communities.

Conclusion

In closing, safe, healthy children and strong families are a precious natural resource that our city needs today and for the future. We are proud of the leadership provided by Mayor Muriel Bowser to ensure that the District of Columbia is a national model for child safety and welfare, and all of us at CFSA are proud to engage in this work every day as interventionists—a positive force in working to stop child 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. I would also like to thank you, Chairperson Nadeau, for your leadership and support. As always, CFSA strives to operate with complete transparency, and I will ensure that the communication channels with your staff remain open and productive, so we can remain



partners in this effort. This concludes my testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions the committee may have.

