

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
Child and Family Services Agency**



**Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Oversight Hearing**

Testimony of  
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Director

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

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by  
WebEx



Good morning, Councilmember Nadeau, members of the Committee, and Committee staff. I am Brenda Donald, director of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), and I am pleased to testify before you today.

One week ago, Mayor Bowser presented #DCHOPE, the Fiscal Year 2021 (FY2021) Budget and Financial Plan, the District's 25th consecutive balanced budget. This budget comes at a challenging time for the District, as we find ourselves in the middle of a global pandemic and public health emergency that has brought our city to a standstill. Despite this, we find ourselves fully prepared to handle this crisis because of our years of economic prosperity and fiscal responsibility.

The Mayor's proposed budget for CFSA, which I will present today, demonstrates her leadership and continued commitment to ensuring the agency is well-equipped to provide preventative and supportive programs and services, including critical and strategic community-based services to help families keep their children out of foster care; ensure that safe, supportive, and loving placements are available for children in care who are not safe at home; and to create forever homes and positive, life-long connections for children who cannot be reunited with their birth families.

Before presenting our budget overview, I want to acknowledge May 2020 as Foster Parent Appreciation Month. Our foster parents have been amazing during this public health emergency. They have stepped up and leaned in to make sure our kids are safe and stable during the pandemic. While we cannot host our normal in-person activities, we are pleased to join with our Parent Advisory Council to sponsor a number of virtual activities to celebrate and honor the committed families in DC and Maryland who welcome our children into their homes and into their hearts.

### **FY2021 Focus and Priorities**

CFSA's proposed FY2021 budget reflects the District's longstanding commitment to child welfare prevention and early intervention services, quality services for children in foster care, as well the final push to exit the *LaShawn v. Bowser* lawsuit.

These investments are even more critical now during the global pandemic and what will be a long post-recovery period for many of the families we serve.

My testimony today will provide an overview of what CFSA's FY2021 budget supports, where we have made important investments, and where we have made strategic reductions that needed to be made in the wake of the COVID-19 economic tsunami.

### **CFSA's COVID-19 Response**

COVID-19 has changed just about every aspect of our daily lives. As soon as the Mayor issued the stay at home order for the city and specifically, closed school buildings for the shift to a distance learning model, we at CFSA began preparing to move the overwhelming majority of our staff to telework, implement practice guidance for ensuring our daily mission-critical work is accomplished, and respond to an anticipated decline in the number of calls to our child abuse and neglect hotline. The resulting 62% drop in calls does not mean that abuse and/or neglect has also declined, so we have been working to strengthen partnerships around the city with other agencies and community organizations like the Healthy Families Thriving Communities Collaboratives, issuing a clarion call for additional sets of eyes and ears on children. During this time when stress for families is at a high, we have also been able to push out the message through Twitter town halls, social media posts, and my appearance on the Kojo Nnamdi Show that neighbors and relatives need to be vigilant. Even this testimony is an opportunity to get the broader DC community involved in watching out for children at a time when lack of contact with traditional mandated reporters puts them at greater risk.

In addition, as we moved to a partial telework status, we have had to modify much of our practice to ensure the safety of children and families, but also to ensure the safety of our staff. To this end, we converted client visiting to virtual platforms to the extent possible, moved all training online, adjusted protocols for collaboration with schools for students they have been unable to contact, established a dedicated, community-based respite center for COVID-positive/exposed children and youth, and we are using case reviews to monitor COVID-19 impact on permanency processes (e.g., court delays).

We have also worked with you and advocates to allow older youth to remain in care beyond their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. In addition, we continue to engage our community stakeholders and oversight bodies regularly to make certain all are aware that we are open for business.

Our message remains, while most staff are remote, CFSA is operating through the pandemic, our hotline accepts calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week and we remain ready and able to rapidly investigate alleged child abuse or neglect.

### **Proposed Budget Overview**

The overall FY2021 budget request for CFSA is \$219.5 million, which includes \$152.8 million in local and special purpose funds, \$64.0 million in federal funds, and \$2.7 million in private and intra-District funds. This budget, with only a net reduction of \$784 thousand, reflects our ability to make proactive and thoughtful adjustments to the resources we need to support our children and families within the context of the District's current budget situation.

Last year, we started the discussion on the CFSA proposed budget within the context of our transition from the Federal Title IV-E Foster Care Waiver Demonstration Project, which ended on September 30, 2019 to the start-up of our activities under the Family First Prevention Services Act, which began on October 1, 2019. Recognizing that the end of the Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration meant a significant loss in federal funding from FY2019 to FY2020 for former waiver jurisdictions, the federal government passed and is in the process of implementing the Family First Transition Act. This attempt by Congress to keep states whole as they gear up to implement the new claiming opportunities under the Family First legislation will mostly be realized in FY2021, which results in an important source of revenue for the District in these dire budgetary times. Therefore, while our year over year local budget has gone down by \$8.5 million, we were able to avoid the draconian cuts to non-essential programs and keep them mostly intact.

The Mayor's FY2021 budget for CFSA continues to be driven by our ongoing rightsizing and realignment of the budget as the number of children in care continues to drop, the dedication to prevention endures, and the truly final push to exit *LaShawn* is underway.

Let me now provide you with more context on the three critical factors.

## **Ongoing Rightsizing and Realignment**

Similar to FY2019 and FY2020, we are staying the course on rightsizing our budget and increasing our focus on prevention as the number of children we serve out of home continues to decline. You can see that in addition to the federal revenue increases I just described, we have increased both our private funds through our partnership on transitioning older youth with Youth Villages and to our intra-District funds showing an increase to our Medicaid revenue. The partnership with Youth Villages has also allowed us to move our aftercare services in house and realize a contractual savings of almost \$700 thousand.

With the decline in the number of children in care and the natural rebid of the Temporary Safe Haven contract, we expect to be able to support cuts both to our private agency contracts that serve children placed in Maryland as well as to our need for flexible funds to support families.

While the Mayor's submission reflects a cut of over \$1 million to the Collaboratives and an almost equal amount to the overall Families First DC budget, we do not expect to see any reduction in services to prevent child abuse and neglect and will continue to support these activities with available federal funds.

Finally, as we do every year, we have analyzed our projections on the number of families who will need to receive adoption and guardianship subsidy payments based on the anticipated number of new cases against those closing for a savings of \$2.2 million in Local funds. Through the use of federal vouchers, we are able to augment our housing subsidies for youth aging out and families who are reunifying, so we were able to reduce our locally funded Rapid Housing budget by \$260 thousand.

It is important to note two things from the budget chapter. The first is that due to the sunset of Family Assessment, we collapsed the activity lines in our Community (or Entry) Services Program. This could be misinterpreted as an \$8.5 million cut to Child Protection Services. I would like to clarify that it is in fact, the combining of these two programs into one.

Additionally, over the past fiscal year, we have overspent our Grandparent Caregivers Subsidy program in an attempt to meet the increased demand. In FY2021, we will be unable to expand beyond the program's budget and may have to begin a waitlist for new applicants until participants whose grandchildren are aging out exit from the program.

In addition to the programmatic rightsizing, our FY2021 proposed budget continues to include the adjusted capital and staffing support for the replacement of our federally approved Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS). Specifically, there is an increase in our overall full time equivalent (FTE) count and requisite move of non-personal services funding to personal services funding to accommodate the need for temporary staff to support CCWIS implementation. It continues to be our plan to deploy the system on an incremental basis and transition to the new CCWIS with a completion goal date of FY2024.

### **Dedication to Prevention through Family First and Families First DC**

While, in practice, the *Family First Prevention Services Act* establishes narrower criteria for reimbursement than the Title IV-E Waiver did, the District remains committed to using the additional federal money from the *Family First Transition Act* to fund services designed to strengthen families and reduce risk factors for child abuse and neglect. During these unprecedented times, it is imperative that we continue our investments in prevention programs, which have helped to significantly reduce the number of children in foster care.

We have crowed loudly about leading the way with the first federally approved Family First Prevention Plan. While the direct revenue obtained from this Plan is low, the *Family First Transition Act* and other federal grants, along with our partnerships with our sister agencies, will allow us to implement Family First. And our continuous quality improvement framework will enable the Family First Working Group to continuously revise the available service array as needed to meet the needs of our families.

As unemployment in the city rises due to COVID-19 and families face precarious situations, we are pleased that the Mayor's proposed budget includes continued support of the Families First DC initiative in Wards 7 and 8.

The \$3.489 million budget will allow for all 10 Family Success Centers to open their doors while exercising creativity with their community and government partnerships to leverage other sources of funding to fill critical gaps identified by each community. During the FY2020 planning phase for Families First DC, residents and community stakeholders have engaged in asset mapping and gap analyses to determine the services to be offered at their center, solidified critical partnerships, and decided how the grant funds will be spent. I also want to point out that each of the ten Families First DC grantees have been front and center in their communities providing needed services to families coping with the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***LaShawn***

Since we last presented to you, we have continued our strategy of constricting the purview of *LaShawn A. v. Bowser*. We were excited to start the fiscal year with a new, limited agreement that contemplated an exit, and the Monitor's forthcoming report will detail our successes in meeting many of the outcomes of that agreement. The Mayor's FY2021 budget will ensure that we are able to build on this progress and continue to be a nationally recognized, first class child welfare agency.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, the FY2021 proposed budget ensures that we can continue to support our performance improvements, meet our mission, and provide critical core services to children and families under our Four Pillars values, the Four P's strategies for implementing those values (Prevention, Practice, Placement Stability, and Permanence), and the *LaShawn v. Bowser* exit measures. Mayor Bowser, the DC Council, and this Committee are critical allies in our efforts to support the District's most vulnerable children and their families. I look forward to our continued partnership to achieve our shared goals and to give all residents a fair shot at benefitting from Washington, D.C.'s continued prosperity.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am prepared to answer your questions.