

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



**Performance Oversight Hearing Fiscal Year 2021**  
**Child and Family Services Agency**

Testimony of  
Robert L. Matthews  
Director

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

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via  
WebEx Virtual Meeting



Good morning, Chairwoman Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services, and Committee Staff. My name is Robert L. Matthews, Director for the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), and I am grateful for the opportunity to testify before you today for the first time in the director's capacity as I share CFSA's performance over the past year.

My testimony will provide updates on the agency's data trends along with our continued efforts to stabilize children and improve the agency's supports and services to our children and families. I will also provide an update on CFSA's final steps in the *LaShawn A. v. Bowser* settlement agreement as well as outline the agency's advancements in expanding our upstream prevention model. And it is with enthusiasm that I highlight what my team and I have identified as CFSA's priorities for FY 2022.

## **CRITICAL DATA**

### Hotline stabilization:

In FY 2019, we received 19,216 **hotline calls**, and 8,314 (**43%**) **of those referrals** were made by school personnel. During the first year of the pandemic, FY 2020, CFSA experienced a significant decrease in the number of reports of abuse and neglect to our Child Protective Services (CPS) Hotline. While our referral and investigative functions and processes have remained steady, we have understood throughout this pandemic that a decrease in reports does not mean that abuse and/or neglect also declined. Under the direction of the Deputy Mayor for Education, CFSA, DC Public Schools, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), and DC public charter schools developed an abuse and neglect referral protocol for teachers and school staff to utilize when they are unable to successfully maintain contact with students during the school year. This partnership also helped to inform an order that allowed CFSA to assess for and rule out educational neglect and provide recourse for parents who were keeping children home due to COVID-19 concerns and needed virtual learning options. CFSA's guidance also supported educators in assessing student safety and well-being in virtual learning environments. These

efforts resulted in a rebound for calls to our hotline in FY 2021—we received **16,998 hotline calls**, with **8,397 (49%) of those referrals** being made by school personnel.

Even with our government colleagues in DC schools working tirelessly to ensure that children can learn in-person as safely as possible, CFSA continues to lean on our partnerships with other agencies and community groups around the city to help keep an eye on children. The Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and organizations like our Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives along with our Family Success Center grantees have been supportive in alerting us when they see a family that may be in crisis. And it is imperative that the public knows that CFSA’s hotline accepts calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

### Placement

In the beginning of FY 2020, CFSA experienced what could be referred to as a “placement crisis”. At the time, very few of our resource homes were equipped to manage the unique behavioral needs of a number of children and youth needing placement. That lack of specialized resources resulted in numerous placement disruptions, overnight stays at CFSA’s headquarters, and on several occasions, emergency placements lasting longer than 30 days. Throughout FY 2021, CFSA made sound investments in our placement array, including **four** additional Trauma Informed Professional Parents (TIPPs), a contract with Catholic Charities that provides local, intensive residential treatment, and we are currently in the process of securing out-of-state specialized commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) services for children who are victims of sex trafficking. The combined impact of these investments has resulted in a **38 percent bed surplus** which exceeds the 10 percent requirement per our Lashawn settlement commitment. Last year, we significantly reduced the number of children and youth who have stayed overnight at CFSA headquarters, and we came close to eliminating the need for emergency placement beyond 30 days. We have also made progress on limiting placement disruptions. While the placement crisis has been abated, we will continue to assess and diversify our placement array to ensure that we can

provide appropriate placement settings to address even the most unique needs of our children and youth. I want to be clear: having a surplus bed capacity alone is not adequate—our goal is to maintain a diversified placement array that meets the needs of children and youth who come into our care placement options that correspond precisely to the needs of the young people who come into our care, and I am committed to further expanding our placement options to achieve that.

#### Reduction of children in out-of-home foster care:

At the end of FY 2021, CFSA was serving **614 children** in foster care and **1,290 in-home** with their families. Of the children who entered care in FY 2021, **46 percent** were ages zero to five; **30 percent** were ages six to 12; and **24 percent** were 13 to 17 years old. Eighty percent were Black or African American, 12 percent were Hispanic, 1 percent was white. Over half of the children we serve continued to come from Wards 7 and 8.

#### Older Youth:

In March 2020, the foresight of the DC Council allowed for the District to lead the way for other jurisdictions to ensure that older youth would be supported through the COVID-19 pandemic. In FY 2021, emergency legislation permitted youth who were turning 21 to remain in foster care up to 90 days after the end of public health emergency. Until this legislation was passed, these individuals would have aged out of foster care in the midst of an extremely precarious local and global situation. As a result of the measure, **26 youth** scheduled to emancipate were able to remain in extended care.

#### Permanency Outcomes:

While there is no denying that the public health emergency continues to present limitations to coordinating permanency for our kids, CFSA is pleased to report that our staff, providers, community partners, and resource parents succeeded in helping children achieve positive outcomes over the course of the pandemic. Increased teaming among these groups led to improved permanency numbers over FY

2020, and in FY 2021, **112 adoptions** were finalized, **40 guardianships** were completed, and **132 reunifications** took place.

Diversions:

For the past three years, there has been much discussion surrounding CFSA's policy on diversion. As an expert on kinship practice, since taking this position, I have prioritized reviewing CFSA's practice to ensure that it aligns with our policy and importantly, our beliefs. My review has included analysis of other jurisdictions' diversion policies and conversations with other child welfare leaders around the country. CFSA's practice differs from the more broadly accepted description and definition of diversion which considers diversion to be a formal placement option. In DC, diversion is not a formal placement option. One of the most important components of our practice, and something that sets us apart from other states, is that we take measures to rule out danger and assess safety prior to allowing families to plan for their children to reside with relatives without court involvement.

CFSA's top priority toward families and their children is working to ensure the safety of those children. An effective tool to facilitate and promote the family's efforts to keep their child or children safe is a formal, signed safety plan. Safety plans often involve the support of relatives and are frequently mistaken for diversion. A safety plan should clearly describe immediate threats to the child(ren)'s safety and detail how those threats will be managed to mitigate, or ultimately, eliminate, the child's risk of being unsafe. When used appropriately, safety plans are time-limited and require consistent re-evaluation of the plan's participants. In FY 2021, my team and I have taken note of the concerns of CFSA's advocates, and as a result, we have combed through the agency's safety planning practice. We have held internal discussions and focus groups over the course of several months and concluded that FY 2022 should, and will, bring modification to its scope, definition, and training to ensure the most prudent and consistent application of safety planning.

FY 2022 will also see CFSA educate stakeholders and clarify for everyone our practice and position around diversion. CFSA holds as a fundamental value that family voice and family choice matter when it has been assessed that danger is not a concern and safety has not been compromised. CFSA recognizes that families have strengths to draw from, and when they can be supported within their community, families can be empowered to help keep the children in their family stable and loved without the formal involvement of the child welfare agency. This is a practice that CFSA looks forward to growing as we continue to shift supporting families further upstream to identify and mitigate risk early enough to prevent formal agency involvement.

#### **LASHAWN A. v. BOWSER**

FY 2021 marked the year that CFSA proved that it had made sustainable improvements around investigations, visitation, placement, and permanency—areas that encompassed many of the remaining measures of the Exit and Sustainability Plan (ESP) set for the *LaShawn A. v. Bowser* class action lawsuit. As a result of these gains and many other advancements spanning the agency, in June 2021, following a fairness hearing, Federal District Court Judge Thomas Hogan affirmed a settlement agreement between all parties and allowed CFSA to exit federal court oversight. Since reaching that monumental milestone, the agency has been working to fulfill the additional commitments outlined within the settlement agreement. This included building and maintaining a foster placement surplus, continuing to increase clinical and therapeutic services, recruiting more professional foster parents into our placement array, and executing a contract with a specialized psychiatric residential treatment facility in the region, which we have now done. Additionally, we are maintaining our caseload standards as well as our commitments toward self-monitoring and public reporting.

Free from federal court oversight and in a one-year-period of data validation, CFSA increased self-regulation and self-correction through our new performance measurement framework, which consists of

35 measures of accountability across our Four Pillars. The last year has taken CFSA through an in-depth process where we are identifying our long-term performance measures and meaningful metrics across permanency, placement, and visitation standards. This process utilizes best practice child welfare measures as we align our measures with federal methodology and learn from other jurisdictions around the country. Through robust reporting to our oversight bodies and the general public, we are demonstrating that we can consistently sustain the progress we have achieved and that CFSA is committed to a transparent relationship with stakeholders.

So, after 31 years, the perseverance of CFSA staff, our providers, our community and government partners, and our resource parents helped CFSA prove itself as a self-regulating, self-correcting agency driven by data, quality, and evidence-based practice. Boosted by the parting of the cloud of federal court oversight, post-*LaShawn* will see child welfare in the District redesigned as a *child and family well-being system*. We are making the shifts to engage our community and our families in a different way, and we look forward to including those with lived experience to help co-lead this redesign.

## **PREVENTION**

In FY 2021, Mayor Bowser announced the opening of 10 Family Success Centers in neighborhoods throughout Wards 7 and 8. With the official launch of these centers and the Families First DC companion initiative, CFSA has expanded our prevention array to include a place-based, whole family approach that provides upstream, primary prevention services and neighborhood driven resources. Each center utilizes a family strengthening model to increase protective factors, mitigate trauma, fill gaps in services, and set families up for successful outcomes. They connect families to critical prevention 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. All 10 centers have truly been boots on the ground since their opening, and in FY 2021, collectively served **16,038 families**.

Last fiscal year, we had bold goals to increase our support to kin and close relatives who are raising their minor relatives. In FY 2021, **101 families received resources through CFSA’s Kinship Navigator Program, 33 through the Close Relative Caregiver Program, and 562 through the Grandparent Caregiver Program.** For FY 2022, a greater focus on and increased resources for these programs will provide even more qualified District residents with subsidies and other support services to help them care for the littlest loved ones in their families and prevent entry into the foster system.

In line with our redesign goals, last year saw the District’s induction into the Children's Bureau Systems Change Cohort of the Thriving Families, Safer Children: A National Commitment to Well-being initiative (TFSC). This initiative supports CFSA’s transformative journey 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 TFSC allows 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 are building 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. Over the past fiscal year, we have focused on learning from other jurisdictions within our cohort, and 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. 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.

## **FY 2022 FOCUS**

While we are proud of the agency's transitional success over the past year, CFSA is hyperaware of the road ahead as our city continues to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on our most



vulnerable families. In addition to fulfilling our final commitments to *LaShawn* and bolstering upstream prevention efforts in FY 2022, our priorities will include enhancing services and supports for older youth as they depart care, exiting more children and youth to permanent homes and forever families, and strengthening the Office of CFSA's Ombudsman to work with stakeholders to resolve issues as they arise. On the policy side, our agency will focus on strengthening the way that we track agency performance and child and family outcomes while maintaining transparency through Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). Our attention to Diversity, Race, Inclusion, and Equity for FY 2022 and the years ahead will compel us to address longstanding inequities in child welfare in addition to fostering a more conscious work environment for our staff. We are enthused by the Mayor's commitment to racial equity, and we will continue to build upon our partnership with the Office of Racial Equity to ensure a more equitable child welfare agency for the District. And operationally, after more than 20 years with our current system, FACES, we are excited to move into the next phase of implementation for our new and improved Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System which we have enthusiastically titled STAAND—Stronger Together Against Abuse and Neglect in DC.

## **CONCLUSION**

I speak on behalf of CFSA's staff when I thank Mayor Muriel Bowser for continuing to make our agency an administration priority, and I would also like to extend gratitude to the Council of the District of Columbia for your continuous support of our efforts to improve the lives of the District's most vulnerable children and their families. Your partnership is invaluable, and I look forward to building upon it through FY 2022 and beyond.

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