



**U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce,
and the District of Columbia**

**Assessing Foster Care and Family Services in the District of Columbia:
Challenges and Solutions**

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Testimony of

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We at the Young Women's Project thank you for the opportunity to present written testimony as part of this important hearing. This testimony is intended to compliment the personal story of Sarah Ocran, our youth staff member who is presenting her experience of trying to gain permanence in the DC foster care system. In addition to permanence, the testimony highlights several critical issues facing older youth in the DC foster care system.

We are both staff members of the Young Women's Project and have worked since 1999 to develop the leadership and voice of young people in the DC foster care system.

The Young Women's Project (YWP) is a multicultural organization that builds and supports DC teen women and girl leaders so that they can improve their lives and transform their communities. Since 1999, YWP has worked to expand the rights, opportunities, and leadership development of DC foster youth through the Foster Care Campaign (FCC). Each year, we develop 25-35 youth staff (most of whom are foster youth) as leaders, advocates, peer educators and organizers through a year-long program. They work side by side with adult staff to develop and

move an ambitious agenda that seeks to advance foster youth well-being in seven critical areas: education, employment, health, permanence, self-reliance, safety net services, and self advocacy.

We've cultivated dozens of FCC youth leaders, training 100s of foster youth, delivered numerous testimonies to City Council, convened 100s of youth and adults in Leadership Institutes, released two youth-created Handbooks and a documentary, and sponsored several successful youth-led campaigns. In our first campaign in 2000, we worked with the Deputy Mayor's office to write and advocate for foster care group home regulations which became law in September 2001. These regulations created a legal floor for improving the quality of life and enforcing the rights of teens in group homes.

FCC's work is focused primarily on the unmet needs of older youth in the foster care system. Older youth are more than half of the youth in care population. Any meaningful system reform must address the needs of this group. CFSA's inability to meet the basic needs of this group – in terms of providing supportive placements, connecting them to permanent homes, and preparing them to assume the responsibilities of adulthood -- is glaring evidence of its failure to meet its responsibilities as an agency.

Overview

As of 12.31.09, there were 2,103 children in CFSA's care; 1,186 (or 56%) of them are ages 13-21. About a third of these older youth reside in congregate care: 159 in group homes, 162 in Independent Living Programs, and 88 in Residential Treatment Centers. Currently, 683 of these youth have the permanency goal of APPLA (Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) which positions them to emancipate from foster care without a permanent legal relationship like guardianship, adoption, or reunification. Each year, between 150-200 of these youth turn 21 and age out of the system.

Despite their numbers, older youth are not getting much attention. They are not part of the LaShawn Order, which has largely defined the strategic approach and activities of the agency. Older youth in the system do not demand the same level of oversight as younger children. Before they turn 21, they may not be in crisis. But that situation changes when they turn 21. Only 14% of

youth aging out have all the necessary resources to support themselves. As a result, many youth face homelessness, incarceration, and a lifetime of reliance on public assistance.

Right now we are putting all of our attention and resources into keeping youth safe before they turn 21 – and doing very little to make sure that they can survive and thrive after 21.

The Good News

In working to improve the care and futures of older youth in the DC foster care system, there is a strong foundation of opportunity and many reasons to be hopeful:

- ✓ We have youth who have persevered through incredible odds to accomplish so much – graduating from high school, enrolling in college, holding down jobs, and being responsible.
- ✓ We have examples of incredible social workers who are providing excellent support for their youth in care.
- ✓ We have great models of residential care who are preparing their youth for independence. Some of them are here today: Sasha Bruce, Latin American Youth Center.
- ✓ We have CFSA leaders who are passionate about improving services for older youth.
- ✓ We have money. DC taxpayers have proven themselves willing to spend more on our older youth in care than most states.
- ✓ And we have time. DC is one of a handful of states that keeps its young people in the system until age 21. This gives us several years after high school graduation to get youth on the road to viability and self sufficiency

Further, Dr. Gerald and his staff have worked hard to improve the agency and have made progress in many areas. We appreciate CFSA staff's accessibility, their commitment to older



youth, and their willingness to meet, answer questions, and respond to the individual problems that we've brought to their attention. For example -- A number of the problems that were raised by individual youth in their testimonies during the Yes Youth Can Hearing on Older Youth organized by YWP with this Committee in January have been acknowledged and in some cases addressed by CFSA staff. We appreciate this effort.

At the same time we are gravely concerned about the inadequacy of CFSA's response to the issues and challenges faced by the majority of older youth (and especially the ones who are not on TV or in committee hearings talking about their issues) who are aging out of the system at 21 without the knowledge, skills, permanent relationships, and supports they need to be self-sufficient, successful adults. To address these problems, we need data, goals, benchmarks, good program design, evaluation, and ultimately results. We also need a commitment to a meaningful public dialogue.

In order to begin to address our failures to prepare older youth, we must shift the way that we think about our investment in foster youth and their potential and the way we communicate it to them. Establishing expectations and goals are essential. One of the most striking and discouraging issues that our teen staff have run into again and again in their research and preparation is that CFSA does not have goals and benchmarks for older youth in several important areas including education, employment, preparing to age out, and developing permanent relationships. The absence of goals sends a very troubling message to our youth. It says we that we don't think they can accomplish much. We need to change that message. They need to know we believe in their abilities.

Of course, there is the Cap Stat website and the CFSA performance indicators. While these include important information about investigations and social worker visits – the focus is on minutia. We have a system that is driven by box checking – and—at least in theory—holds itself accountable for checking those boxes. But it is missing the larger purpose. The real performance indicators for CFSA should be how many children are in permanent homes and what happens to foster youth when they age out at 21. Those are the only success indicators that have any real meaning. Box checking ducks our fundamental responsibility to prepare these children for life after they age out at 21.



We are asking CFSA, the DC Committee on Human Services, and the child welfare community to take a step back and rethink the way we are approaching our work with older youth in the child welfare system. We have several suggestions about local DC legislative and regulatory initiatives that will help us do that.

Education and Employment

Education—and specifically college—is probably the single most effective strategy for increasing the life prospects and well-being for foster youth. Yet education seems to be absent from agency goals and data collection. After three months of inquiries (including data requests for our Older Youth Hearing) – we have no significant data or information about the education that older youth are receiving.

What we do know is that the rates of college enrollment are low. In May 2009, CFSA reported that 82 youth ages 18-23 were enrolled in college (community or 4-year programs): that's about 8-10% of the total older youth population. This number is low compared to national foster youth enrollment rates of 13%, a DC youth enrollment rates of 29%, and national youth enrollment rates of 48%.¹ What's more troubling is that foster youth graduation rates are close to DC youth high school graduation rates (43% and 40% respectively). But college enrollment rates differ significantly: 29% for DC youth and 8-10% for foster youth.

Further, foster youth face many placement-related school barriers: When youth change placements -- 44% do once a year – they change schools and usually lose 3 to 6 months of their education.² Group home rules and strict curfews often prohibit youth from taking part in after school activities. Further, most group homes and ILPs offer little educational support for youth residents. Although CFSA does not have data available on these issues, a 2007 study by the Bay Area Social Service Consortium found that foster youth experience reduced levels of engagement, increase expulsion and discipline problems and that 40-41% of foster youth repeat grades.³

Currently, CFSA has one program in place to address the educational and employment needs of older youth. Center for Keys for Life (CKL—which is now called the Office of Youth



Empowerment) receives \$1.1 million in federal grants through the Chafee program. CKL keeps a low profile. There are few materials, no website, little outreach, and limited accessibility. Youth have to be referred by their social workers. As a result, CKL reaches only a fraction of the older youth who need their services. In 2007 reports to Children's Bureau, CKL reported serving 35 youth to achieve their academic goals; 30 in 2008;⁴ 30 in 2009. That's 3% of the older youth population.

The performance oversight questions asked as part of this hearing included inquires about goals, benchmarks, and outcomes for CKFL. There were none provided. CFSA did provide the total number of youth receiving educational services (30) and the total number receiving life skills training (436). However, there was no information about how many hours of training youth actually received, what they learned, or how they used it. Were the 436 youth participants in conferences or outreach activities or did they actually achieve some kind of outcome through the program. CFSA has not provided any kind of schedule of training or detailed description of training objectives, or any kind of comprehensive plan for this program.

Recommendation: Ten years of mismanagement is long enough. We fully support Chairman Wells proposal to reclassify the Center for Keys for Life as a community based program funded through a competitive RFP process for \$1,091,992 in Chafee grant money. To ensure high quality youth-focused programming, the RFP will set a new precedent with a number of requirements including: 1) youth decision making; 2) community involvement; 3) youth-focused outcomes; 4) bi-annual collection and public sharing of youth outcome data; and 5) providing matching funds of 20% of the budget. An effective education-employment program for foster youth could be the foundation of a transition center that would provide additional support in these areas to youth aging out.

The Education and Training Voucher (ETV) is a federal grant program that provides up to \$5,000 to foster youth enrolled in college, university and vocational training programs to support a range of educational needs. Administered by CKFL, this program received \$207,052 in federal grants distributed to 123 youth in college and trade school for 2008. For many youth, especially those in vocational school, the ETV is the only source of financial aid that they have access to.



Based on our experience with our own youth staff and dozens we've interviewed – this program is being administered in a way that undercuts youth's attempts to further their education and violates federal guidelines. The program has no publically accessible guidelines, application procedures or website and has created a number of obstacles that discourage youth from seeking funding. Most youth we interviewed are not unaware ETV even exists and are misinformed about having to attend CKFL in order to receive funds. Youth who have tried to apply have been discouraged, rejected, and misinformed about deadlines and what is covered. One young woman who received the ETV and other financial aid complained about being harassed by a collection agency because her bills were not paid by CKFL. One young man we worked with was denied an application and advised by CKFL to sell drugs instead of going to school because he could make more money. One young woman who was denied an application for cosmetology school was not able to get approval before aging out and never had a chance to go to school. She is struggling to make ends meet with a child and no job. The list goes on...

Recommendation: Like CKFL, ETV should be run by an organization and staff whose intention is to get as many foster youth into school as possible. We recommend that the program be reclassified as a community based program funded through a competitive RFP process. To ensure high quality youth-focused programming, the RFP will set a new precedent with a number of requirements including: 1) youth and community involvement; 2) youth-focused goals and outcomes; 3) bi-annual collection and public sharing of youth outcome data; and 4) publically accessible guidelines and operating procedures.

Quality and Resource Allocation in Congregate Care

About a third of older youth reside in congregate care: 159 in group homes, 162 in Independent Living Programs, and 88 in Residential Treatment Centers. Currently, CFSA contracts with 22 group home providers, 9 independent living program providers, and 33 residential treatment centers. Although there has been some improvement in congregate care quality since the regulations were passed in 2001, in general these contractors continue to be overcompensated and underperforming.



According to the 2008 Auditor's report on congregate care, the median contract payout rate ranges from \$73,000 to \$174,000 per youth per year.⁵ This payout level is among the highest in the country. Since FCC started our work in 1999, contract award levels have doubled. Yet, facilities are not required to meet specific outcomes or contribute to youth development (personal, academic, employment) or well being, keep data, or even commit to keeping teen residents in care. During a time of budget cuts, it is essential to take a hard look at our contract rates and the quality of services we are getting and make a transition to performance based contracts. Further, resource allocation is in many cases is grossly disproportionate, with funds going to support large, expensive staffs while minimal resources are provided for youth. Staffing models seem to be based on a juvenile justice group home system that requires higher staff to resident ratios and an emphasis on security.

Although data on group home operations and impact is hard to come by, many of our teen staff and members complain of a range of quality of life issues. Meals are often skipped. Food is locked up and of poor nutritional quality. Transportation is inadequate. Allowance is often withheld when teens have jobs and provided at a minimal level (average is \$10 a week) when they don't. Disciplinary guidelines are inconsistently and unfairly enforced. Staff are often poorly trained, petty, and frequently violate youth confidentiality. Facilities lack basic infrastructure like hot water, fully working toilets, and rodent free kitchens. Further, youth do not have the financial support to buy clothes, get hair care, buy hygiene products, or buy school supplies.

Further, teens residing in residential care report very little development support. Counselors are rarely available. Youth training is sporadic and poorly delivered. Working computers with internet are rare as are tutors or academic support. Staff are unaware of youth rights or house regulations, are not adequately screened, and do not seem to be emotionally prepared to work with youth. Further, teens report frequent disruptions of privacy, no protection from theft or violent house mates, and unfair allowance withholding.

Recommendations: There are several issues that need to be addressed here.

First, the overall quality and orientation of group homes and ILPs need to be addressed and the transition made from a profit maximization (and so provide as little care as possible) model to



proven, evaluated, results-oriented programs that can prepare our youth for college, employment, and self-sufficiency. We have a few successful youth development focused models (LAYC, Catholic Charities, and Sasha Bruce are three who we've worked with). We need to replicate and expand our existing models, attract new models to DC, and shut down the programs that are not producing positive outcomes.

Next, contractors need to be held to much more rigorous standards performance based outcomes, consistent and detailed financial statements, and collecting and sharing data with the public. We were glad to read in the Oversight Responses that the Human Care Agreements are moving forward but they have been for two years now. When will they actually be implemented? As of October 1, 2010 – CFSA will be required by federal mandate collect data for the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) on each youth who receives independent living services and to collect demographic and outcome information on a specific cohort who they will follow through surveys at 17, 19, and 21. It's critical that these data collection provisions are part of the congregate care contracts.

Finally, youth support needs must be addressed. We recommend expanding the scope of group home and ILP regulations (Chapter 62 and 63) to ensure that adequate resources are being devoted to youth care and development specifically in the areas of financial support, academic strengthening, and increased youth development support. These expanded regulations must focus on four main areas:

- 1) Require that group homes spend minimal percentages of budget resources directly on youth
- 2) Increase the resources allocated directly to youth for material needs and savings through a Mandatory Allowance Program (MAP) that would provide the following:
 - ✓ Monthly allowance via direct deposit to all qualifying youth living in group homes
 - ✓ 15-16 year olds receive \$300; 17 and older receive \$350 as long as they meet program standards for grades, school attendance, and enrichment program participation
 - ✓ All youth receive a base allowance of \$150 a month regardless of MAP participation
 - ✓ All youth receive a mandatory savings allotment of \$50

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- 3) Increase the quality and quantity of youth development and life skills training and support. In particular, MAP would support teaching of financial skills essential to youth as they age out.
 - 4) Improve academic support and resources for youth

Confronting the Challenges of Aging Out

The real performance indicators for CFSA – which don't appear anywhere on the Cap Stat website -- are what happens to foster youth after they age out at 21. Are they in permanent families? In college? Making a livable wage? Are they living on the street? Couch hopping? In jail?

According to Child and Family Service's own 2008 Quality Service Review about DC foster youth transitioning out of care, at the time of discharge from the system:⁶

- ✓ Only 14% have all the necessary resources to support themselves
- ✓ 66% suffer from mental illness or substance abuse
- ✓ 34% are pregnant or parenting
- ✓ 40% have their high school diploma
- ✓ 10% are enrolled in college

- ✓ 37% had identified an adult connection that would support them after leaving the system.
- ✓ 34% were living in independent apartments when they emancipated.
- ✓ 14% had documented physical medical needs requiring long-term attention.
- ✓ 59% had insufficient funds to cover their living expenses,
- ✓ 46% were unemployed

Although DC does not keep data on youth aging out, a 2007 study by the University of Chicago focused on foster youth in the Midwest found that 68% of men and 46% of women are arrested within one year of aging out and that the average earnings of a foster care youth during the



first year after aging out is \$7,000.⁷ The 88 youth who reside in residential treatment centers (RTCs) face even more significant burdens since they are cut off geographically from family and community support and then at age 21 sent back to DC to live on their own.

Right now, CFSA funds two programs to support older youth during their 21st year, as they age out. For the past five years, the Community Collaboratives have been contracted to provide services to transitioning youth. We learned by reading the Oversight Responses that 6 Collaboratives were being paid \$250,700 to serve 100 youth in 2009. This was news to YWP (and many of the Collaboratives) who told us that there were actually three Collaboratives (North Capitol, South Washington West of the River, Far Southwest) providing services to 55 youth during 2009. Our interviews with staff and leadership at these programs indicate that the Collaborative Aftercare program is pretty much a referral service. Youth come in and meet with staff or volunteers – who refer them to other organizations for services. There is no follow up, no tracking, no benchmarks, and little data available about outcomes or what youth learned or how they used the referrals.

Housing is a major obstacle for youth aging out of care – the majority of whom end up couch surfing or homeless. Currently, CFSA has one housing support program. Rapid Housing, administered by the Collaboratives, provides housing assistance for families with children and youth aging out of care through a \$5,000 rental subsidy available to youth employed full-time or enrolled in school and working part-time to qualify for funds. For FY08, \$750,000 was allocated, and 79 emancipating youth were served, along with 49 families. Although this program is important – it does not serve the neediest youth who are unlikely to have full time livable-wage jobs.

Recommendations: YWP supports the creation of a community-based, adult-youth run DC Foster Youth Transition Center (YTC) that would provide intensive training and support services for youth ages 15-25 in a nurturing environment that offered a range of services and training in life skills, academic strengthening, employment preparation and placement, housing, health, and relationship building. Built on a foundation of youth development programming, the Center would provide:

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- Individualized support services for finishing high school and enrolling in college, connections to jobs and housing, financial management, and health care access.
 - Group trainings that allow for peer-to-peer and interactive learning and build youth skills in self advocacy, leadership, health and wellness, and life skills.
 - Youth-accessible hours as well as a hotline youth can call for quick help.
 - Genuine commitment to youth by involving them on YTC staff and boards

Such a Center could be created and financially supported by consolidating several ineffective CFSA programs and contracts – mainly CKFL and the Collaborative Aftercare program. The Center would be awarded through a rigorous RPF process to a community based organization (or collaboration) with a record of successful youth outcomes, expertise in employment, education and youth development, and engaging youth as leaders and staff.

We also support the expansion of Rapid Housing to include the neediest transitioning youth who may not have full time employment. We are heartened to find out that CFSA is considering working with Covenant House to create more housing options for youth aging out. We urge them to pursue this.

Understanding and Enforcing Youth Rights

Right now – there is no one place where all youth rights – as they are stated in case law, CFSA policy, group home and ILP regulations and other places – are listed and explained. Youth don't know what they are entitled to so they can't self advocate. Adult advocates are also missing key information. For the few youth who do know their rights -- when there is a violation, there is no consistent, neutral place to report. Understanding and enforcing youth rights is an essential first step in improving their lives in the system.

Recommendation: YWP supports DC legislation to create a DC Foster Youth Bill of Rights. We were pleased to read in the Oversight Responses that CFSA has been working on a Youth Bill of Rights and that it will be completed by May. Our youth have also been working on a similar project. Because this project – and having it completed ASAP – is so important, we would like to work on parallel tracks. Since CFSA's Youth Advisory Board is taking the lead on this, it's a great

opportunity for our youth to work together. There are many great models for this work and many states (Massachusetts, Arizona, California, Texas, Nebraska and others) which have legislation already in place.

Improving Data collection and Public Reporting

The inability of CFSA to collect and share data and information in a consistent and accessible way is a significant obstacle to effective advocacy, good program design, public engagement, and quality services. The most consistent, reliable source of information any of us have about what is going on at CFSA are the reports from Center for the Study of Social Policy. These reports are essential to inform oversight efforts and advocacy work. The data situation has to be addressed asap. It creates a bad dynamic. We are spending all of our time trying to get data and information rather than problem solving. Our organizational experience trying to get information and data during the past three months, as we worked on developing the Yes Youth Can hearing in January was especially frustrating. We submitted a data and information request with about 50 items and received responses for 5.

Recommendation: We are recommending the CFSA be required to start collecting and publically sharing data and information on critical areas impacting older youth well being including education, employment, aging out, permanent relationships, health, and the quality of congregate care. This data should be shared through three website accessible report cards that are updated quarterly. We were happy to hear Dr. Gerald mention that the Young Advisory Board was putting together a congregate care report card as part of this work. This is an excellent idea and very much needed.

Soon, CFSA will be required by federal law to start collecting data on older youth. As of October 1, 2010 – CFSA will be required by federal mandate collect data for the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) on each youth who receives independent living services, surveying youth on the following outcomes: 1) financial self-sufficiency; 2) experience with homelessness; 3) educational attainment; 4) positive connections with adults; 5) high-risk behavior; and 6) access

to health insurance. We recommend that the data they are collecting as part of this federal requirement be made available on their website and updated annually.

Permanency for Older Youth

We are concerned that CFSA is not making meaningful progress toward improving permanency outcomes – especially for older youth. CFSA’s ability to achieve timely permanency for children and youth should be an important measure of the agency’s performance. Although APPLA numbers are decreasing, they’re only decreasing because youth are aging out of the system; not because they’re gaining permanence. In 2009, 172⁸ youth emancipated from District care. Based on current population numbers of youth goaling APPLA in District care, over 550 more youth will age out of DC foster care system between 2010 and 2013⁹.

Currently, CFSA has a permanency target of 48 percent, a 7.4 increase from 2008. Yet, only 24.6 percent of children achieved permanency¹⁰. Data obtained from CFSA between August to October 2009 shows that out of almost 1,200 youth aged 13 and older, only 15 exited care through adoption, 21 through guardianship, and 93 through reunification (a total of 12%)¹¹. Thus, CFSA did not achieve any this permanency performance indicator for older youth¹². In the DC CFSA Oversight Hearing last week, several child welfare stakeholders testified about this problem. In regards to older youth, currently, minimal efforts have been made to address the barriers of achieving permanence for this population, thus costing the District millions for high cost care which is not supported by positive youth outcomes. Adopting practices to address the issues of older youth permanence in the District can save hundreds of youth from the perils which await them when they exit District care without permanent supports while ensuring the District is taking fiscally responsible measures to improve agency performance.

The failure to find permanent homes for older youth has lead to a steady stream of young people who are on the path to emancipate from care. Here are some of their stories.

Youth who emancipate from District care are more likely to end up homeless, in jail, and on public assistance because they are not connected to a permanent family support network. In 2009, 172 youth emancipated from the District’s foster care system. In the January Youth Roundtable, we heard from Dax Jasper, who emancipated in October, speak of his struggles since losing his job but



was fortunate to be spared from homelessness by residing with his friend's family. Janice Watts, who emancipated in August with her son, spoke of how she was also spared from homelessness with support from Catholic Charities and after-care support from Sasha Bruce. Erica McCard, who emancipated in July, spoke of her success in a computer technology program despite having to sleep on her friend's couch after she emancipated. Then there are those who were not present nor were not as fortunate.

Since joining YWP in 2008, I have had the privilege of working with about 33 DC foster youth who were staff members of our program. The majority of these youth had the permanency goal of APPLA (Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) and five have since emancipated from care. The day to day struggles of these youth –most of whom do not have permanent homes or adults to support them –have inspired FCC to take on permanency as part of our five point agenda. Last year, as a documentary film maker, I set out to identify the best practices in permanence and through this project hoped to find solutions to provide youth permanent homes. Unfortunately, after 17 hours of footage, I was unable to identify standardized best practices to ensure older youth in the District gain permanence; instead we found the standard practice of preparing youth to age out.

Two of our former FCC youth staff who emancipated this year continue to deal with life-threatening obstacles. One young man, who emancipated in February 2009, left his decade-long foster home placement to become homeless and incarcerated in less than one year. Another was hospitalized with a life threatening illness and was helped by the efforts of his former ILP – who helped him to reestablish a permanent connection. The most tragic case is a friend of several of our teen staff members -- Dominique Curtis, mother of two, who left her independent living program in April 2009, was found murdered several weeks after her emancipation. These stories illustrate the reality of what youth are faced with after aging out of the DC foster care system without permanent and reliable connections to adults to support them and provide them with permanent homes. Accounting for more than half of the CFSA out-of-home population, a greater number of older youth 13 and up are on the path to emancipate from foster care rather than being placed in permanent homes.



Minimal efforts have been made to ensure older youth will achieve permanence beyond those required through the October 2008 federal court stipulated order. In following with a provision of the court order to complete reviews of all children with the permanency goal of APPLA (Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement) for inclusion in the 2009 Strategy Plan, CFSA reviewed 722 out of more than 800 APPLA cases¹³. According to Dr. Gerald's January, 22nd 2010 Youth Roundtable testimony, these reviews revealed 80 percent (578) of the youth already had an established or potential lifelong connection with at least one stable, caring adult and that 29 percent (167) of the adults confirmed those relationships. While 26 percent (178) have incorporated case plans with specific actions to solidify permanent or connected relationships, only 5 percent (36) of the reviewed youth achieved permanence. Little has been specified on how the agency will address continuing to work to identify permanent connections for youth who have been identified as not having any.

CFSA's standard practice with older youth is to prepare them to age out even as viable permanency options may still be available. Examples of this were demonstrated during the January Youth Roundtable as we heard from youth goaled APPLA, despite the availability of caring adults who could provide them a permanent home. Sarah Ocran was given the goal of APPLA despite her Godmother's interest and efforts to have her placed in her home. Trey Jones hasn't had any specific action incorporated in his case plan to place him among the numerous family members he has. A 2008 CFSA study, on youth aging out of the DC foster care system addresses the lack of focus on older youth permanence by raising the question on whether the child welfare system continually assessed family circumstances and consistently queried parents/guardians about other relatives who might have provided permanency for youth¹⁴.

Kinship placements are essential to maintaining family connections and increase the likelihood of permanence. Yet CFSA's kinship placements have steadily declined -- from 19.8 percent in 2006 to 15.7 in 2009¹⁵. CFSA fell short of its 2009 performance target to expand kinship placements by 20 percent.¹⁶ ¹⁷ The CFSA 2010 fiscal year performance plan does not prioritize improving kinship placements as a key performance indicator¹⁸. Nationally kinship placements account for about 24 percent of placements for children and youth in foster care¹⁹. DC's 2009 rate was about 7%: 47 out of the 696 DC foster youth goaled APPLA were placed in kinship homes²⁰.



CFSA has identified kinship care a priority strategy for permanency planning for older youth. Yet the majority of older APPLA youth are placed in foster homes (many without an intention to continue as a resource parent after emancipation) and high-cost congregate care settings²¹. Foster homes may provide stability while youth are in care, however many foster parents do not provide youth the permanent homes youth need through adulthood. Congregate Care placements are expensive and not required to contribute to permanence in any way. Utilizing kinship placements as a more conventional and economically feasible means to achieve permanence for youth would greatly improve outcomes.

The agency's 2010 performance plan does not address the systemic barriers to permanency for DC foster youth. One initiative outlined in the plan is to increase and expedite youth permanency through contracting with Permanency Opportunities Program (POP), a program of Adoptions Together²². This promising model has shown that with concerted permanency planning, permanent outcomes for children and youth can be achieved. But the program only reaches 45 children. Older youth permanence however, has been addressed in the 2010 performance plan through the refinement of existing youth services model²³; however it is unclear how those existing models relate to improved permanency outcomes for youth. The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) tool, indicated in the performance plan as a permanency initiative, is a tool to help young people prepare for adulthood not a tool to support youth to achieve permanence.

It is important that CFSA develop a strategic plan to improve permanency outcomes and ensure adequate funding to support those efforts. National and local models reflect that positive permanency outcomes can be achieved when agencies are willing to invest the time and money to address the barriers which keep older youth from permanent homes. We agree with the recommendation by the Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center (FAPAC) study – that social workers should receive permanency training²⁴. This may be one strategic method of ensuring case carrying workers have the knowledge and tools to navigate youth through the permanency process without CFSA needing to rely on contracting this work out of the agency. Family Search and Engagement (FSE) a practice developed by the National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning at the Hunter School of Social Work has demonstrated permanent outcomes for youth and cost-savings for jurisdictions which adopt this practice model²⁵.

Fostering Connections may provide 55 to 75 percent federal reimbursement for this type of training to public and private agency staff and a number of other stakeholders.

CFSA should have a standardized practice that supports older youth to gain permanence. We have not seen evidence that this issue is being prioritized or that there is a strategy in place to address this problem. Youth 13 and up account for about 55 percent of the CFSA out-of-home population. The majority (58 percent) of these youth have a permanency goal of APPLA²⁶; 74 percent of older youth have been in care for more than 24 months²⁷. These youth are the least likely to be adopted or matched with legal guardians and thus have limited options for permanence. On the issue of older youth lingering in care, Dr. Gerald stated during the 2010 CFSA Performance Oversight Hearing that, “Once you have the youth in care, it is much more difficult to get older youth out of care, and easier to really keep them in care.” We would like to know how the Agency plans to address this challenge. The lack of permanence for emancipated youth creates significant barriers to youth becoming well functioning adults and further exacerbates barriers their in education, employment, as well as mental and physical long-term well being.

Recommendations: We have three recommendations for improving permanency outcomes for older youth in the DC foster care system:

1) Establish programs that support older youth to gain permanence: Currently youth understanding of how permanence benefits them as young adults is limited. Many are under the impression that they should have all the knowledge, skills, and tools to be successfully independent at 21. This false impression of adulthood should be addressed through education. At FCC, most of our foster youth staff learned about permanence at YWP rather than from their caseworkers. FCC programs support youth understanding of the importance of permanence and how not having permanent supports can negatively impact youth in the long-run. One youth stated that he thought it would be embarrassing for a youth to rely on adults after 21, but now he realizes it is normal. Providing youth outlets to process the normalcy of significant adult support beyond 21 is important to removing barriers to explore legal permanence options for older youth.

Promising practices show older youth can achieve permanence when practice is centered on the needs of this population. Some of these practices involve education of youth, adults, greater

focus on teen specific recruitment strategies, etc. One model program, Voices to Permanency/Teens2Homes in Ohio improves permanency outcomes for older youth through peer groups, summer camps, circles of support, mentors, and trainings for child welfare support workers and family members²⁸. Through this program older youth have become more open to permanence and several have gained permanence. The Tennessee Youth Advisory Council (TYAC) utilizes foster youth alumni peer advocates to educate and mentor youth currently in care. The Advocates attend meetings to ensure foster youth understand their options and are able to advocate for what they need. The current District pilot program, Permanency Opportunities Project (POP), is already working to make permanence a realization for 65 children and youth for the 2010 fiscal year and another 45 children and youth in the 2011 fiscal year. POP is utilizing best practice case mining and other permanence related efforts to identify youth connections. POP has been able to get around permanency barriers social workers have been unable to resolve.

2) Build youth relational skills: Older youth need the knowledge and skills to explore their permanence options. Due to the many fragmented relationships foster youth endure, youth often lack the skills necessary to build healthy support networks. A 2008 study on relational permanence from the University of Chicago, Chapin Hall, states that relational skills are some of the most crucial assets threatened by a childhood experience of trauma and abuse, separation from biological family, and ambiguous ties to a family system²⁹. There are few structured educational opportunities to support youth needs to build relational skills in the District. For example, the Ansell-Casey curriculum currently used the Office of Youth Empowerment to provide life skills training to youth in care has a limited focus on relationship building and provides no curriculum focusing on permanency.

3) Educate and train workers: In order to support permanency for older youth, workers must be trained and educated on how to best work with children and resource parents to meet the long term permanency needs of youth. The 2009 study conducted by Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center (FAPAC) identified resolving children's concerns around permanency as one of the greatest barriers social workers face in the permanency process³⁰. According to the CFSA Office of Training Services report, there are few trainings provided to District child welfare workers on permanence and none on permanence for older youth³¹.



YWP supports the FAPAC study recommendation to provide social worker training to address children's adoption related concerns and fears. As the front line staff who have the most contact with youth, it is imperative workers have the skills needed to steer youth towards permanence; rather than support youth to make decisions about their long term well-being based on youth desire to be independent from caretakers and therefore placed in Independent Living Programs. Permanency related trainings for District child welfare workers can be supported through Title IV-E federal funding.

We hope the Senate sub-committee found this information insightful and will look further into our recommendations. Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony and we hope to continue to serve as a resource for you.

End Notes

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³ Bay Area Social Service Consortium, 2007.

⁴ 2007 Annual Progress and Services Report. Prepared by the Office of Planning, Policy, and Program Support. DC Government Child and Family Services Agency for the US Children's Bureau.

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⁵ "Audit of Child and Family Services Agency's Congregate Care Contract Expenditures," Office of the District of Columbia Auditor, April 1, 2008.

⁶ ⁶ *Youth Who Transitioned from DC's Foster Care System: A Study of Their Preparation for Adulthood*, CFSA Quality Improvement Administration, June 2008.

⁷ Courtney, Mark E., Amy Dworky, Gretchen Ruth Cusick, Judy Havlicek, Alfred Perez, and Tom Keller, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21*, University of Chicago Center for Children, December 2007.

⁸ FACES Data Retrieved from CFSA: Exits by Age 2008-2009, CFSA: October 2009, page 4

⁹ FACES Data Retrieved from CFSA: PLCO101MS-Ver 1.10 Summary, CFSA: August 2009

¹⁰ FY09 Performance Accountability Report, Child and Family Services, Government of the District of Columbia: page 6 Retrieved from <http://capstat.oca.dc.gov/Pdf.aspx?pdf=http://capstat.oca.dc.gov/docs/fy10/CFSA.pdf>

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¹³ Testimony of Roque R. Gerald, Psy.D. Public Oversight Roundtable "Yes Youth Can: Confronting the Challenges of Aging Out": January 2010, page 2 Retrieved from <http://newsroom.dc.gov/show.aspx/agency/cfsa/section/7/release/19043>

¹⁴ Youth Who Transitioned from D.C.'s Foster Care System: A Study of Their Preparation to Adulthood, CFSA: June 2008, page 23 Retrieved from

http://www.cfsa.dc.gov/cfsa/frames.asp?doc=/cfsa/lib/cfsa/scorecards/youth_who_transitioned_from_dcs_foster_care_system_a_study_of_their_preparation_for_adulthood.pdf

¹⁵ FY08 Performance Plan, Child and Family Services, Government of the District of Columbia: page 4 Retrieved from http://oca.dc.gov/oca/lib/oca/performance_indicators/cfsa_plan_fy08.pdf

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- ¹⁷ ibid
- ¹⁸ Agency FY2010 Performance Plan, Child and Family Services, Government of the District of Columbia: page 4-5 Retrieved from <http://capstat.oca.dc.gov/Pdf.aspx?pdf=http://capstat.oca.dc.gov/docs/fy10/CFSA.pdf>
- ¹⁹ Foster Care Statistics, Child Welfare Information Gateway: February 2009, page 3. Retrieved from <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/foster.cfm>
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- ²³ Ibid, page 4
- ²⁴ Barriers to achieving permanency for children in long-term adoption or guardianship placements in the District of Columbia, Study Report, Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center, Washington, DC: July 2009, page 4
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