

**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
March 16, 2010
(revised August 15, 2010)**

**Testimony of
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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, 172¹ 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 2013².

Currently, CFSA has a permanency target of 48 percent, a 7.4 increase from 2008. Yet, only 24.6 percent of children achieved permanency³. 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%)⁴. Thus, CFSA did not achieve any this permanency performance indicator for older youth⁵. 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 cases⁶. 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 goaling 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 youth⁷.

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 2009^{8 9}. CFSA fell short of its 2009 performance target to expand kinship placements to 20 percent¹⁰. The CFSA 2010 fiscal year performance plan does not prioritize improving kinship placements as a key performance indicator¹¹. Nationally kinship placements account for about 24 percent of placements for children and youth in foster care¹². DC's 2009 APPLA youth kinship placement rate was about 7%: 47 out of the 696 DC foster youth goaled APPLA were placed in kinship homes¹³.

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 settings¹⁴. 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 Together¹⁵. 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 model¹⁶; 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 training¹⁷. 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 model¹⁸. 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 APPLA¹⁹; 74 percent of older youth have been in care for more than 24 months²⁰. 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 in their 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 members²¹. 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 system²². 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 process²³. 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 youth²⁴.

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

¹ FACES Data Retrieved from CFSA: Exits by Age 2008-2009, CFSA: October 2009, page 4

² FACES Data Retrieved from CFSA: PLCO101MS-Ver 1.10 Summary, CFSA: August 2009

³ 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>

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

⁵ 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>

⁶ 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>

⁷ 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

⁸ 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

⁹ FY09 Performance Accountability Report, Child and Family Services, Government of the District of Columbia: page 5 Retrieved from <http://capstat.oca.dc.gov/Pdf.aspx?pdf=http://capstat.oca.dc.gov/docs/fy10/CFSA.pdf>

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ 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>

¹² Foster Care Statistics, Child Welfare Information Gateway: February 2009, page 3. Retrieved from <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/foster.cfm>

¹³ FACES Data Retrieved from CFSA, Placement type by goal: September 2009

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ Agency FY2010 Performance Plan, Child and Family Services, Government of the District of Columbia: page 4 Retrieved from <http://capstat.oca.dc.gov/Pdf.aspx?pdf=http://capstat.oca.dc.gov/docs/fy10/CFSA.pdf>

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ 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

¹⁸ Six Steps to Find a Family: A Practice Guide to Family Search and Engagement, Mardith J. Louisell, page 50-53. Retrieved from <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/SixSteps.pdf>

¹⁹ FACES Data Retrieved from CFSA: PLCO101MS-Ver 1.10 Summary, CFSA: August 2009

²⁰ Annual Public Report: Implementing the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 2000 in the District of Columbia, CFSA: February 2009, page 30

²¹ <http://www.bellefairejcb.org/adoption-foster-care-autism/teens-2-homes/>

²² A Reason, a Season, or a Lifetime Relational Permanence Among Young Adults with Foster Care Backgrounds, Gina Miranda Samuels, Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago: 2008, page 11 Retrieved from http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/old_reports/415.pdf

²³ 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

²⁴ CFSA Training Services FY2007 Report/FY2008 Plan, September 2007, page 2-10