

Testimony of Elaine Farley

Vice-Chair, Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center Board of Directors

Confirmation hearing of Brenda Donald

as Director of Child and Family Services Agency

Before the Council of the District of Columbia

Committee on Human Services

March 16, 2012

Good morning, Chairman Graham and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Elaine Farley and I am the Vice-chair of the board of the Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center, commonly known as FAPAC. I am also a long-time foster parent, a DC resident in Ward #4, and a member of the DC Citizen's Review Panel.

FAPAC provides training, individual and group support for foster, kinship and adoptive parents. FAPAC also works to strengthen relationships between birth and foster parents. We coordinate a multi -agency training coalition, and additionally we partner with CFSA, DMH and private agencies to develop solutions to problems that create barriers for families.

FAPAC supports a vision of strong prevention programs to keep families intact. When children do need to come into care, there must be high quality, well-trained and supported foster placements. We must make serious efforts towards reunification and other permanency options; and provide effective post-permanency services to support families and keep them stable and healthy.

Chairman Graham, I am here today to deliver FAPAC's testimony in support of Brenda Donald's confirmation as Director of Child and Family Services Agency. We thank Mayor Gray and Deputy Mayor Otero for bringing her back on board at this critical time in CFSA's history.

Why do we say that this is a critical point in CFSA history? In the eleven years of FAPAC's work with CFSA, we have worked with six CFSA Directors. Despite all these changes in the Director role, CFSA has made definite improvement in these past years. We want to acknowledge CFSA staff for the extremely hard work that has gone into the improvements in permanency outcomes and post-permanency support, for the increased focus on resolution of problems through the Ombudsman's office, and for many improved policies and initiatives.

However, despite pockets of change, we have not seen evidence that our children and families are really doing better. They still suffer from a system that is disjointed, where families have to fight to obtain needed services, and where teaming is a strongly stated concept but not a reality for families. It brings us much concern that we have seen little alignment between what families need to succeed and how they are assisted to do so. We hear of wonderful policies that remain unimplemented because no one knows about them and we learn of services that are offered based only upon whether the worker happens to be aware of them.

The CFSA Director at this time must be someone who thinks systemically; is willing to dig beneath the surface to determine what is working and what is not; who can work with the complexity of our public-private system; and who can ask the hard questions required to align a disjointed system into one that is capable of healing children and families.

It is FAPAC's strong belief that Brenda Donald is the right person to lead CFSA forward at this time. We are greatly relieved to have a Director who has a deep and strong commitment to the children of the District of Columbia. We are excited to have a Director who is unafraid to jump up to grab the highest hanging fruit on the vine. Ms. Donald has had an extremely strong start in the past two months. Although we might worry that she has not had time to sleep, she came into this job moving fast. In the first month she met with a multitude of groups and

individuals, and sought out different perspectives, concerns and suggestions. Despite this very overwhelming schedule, she responded quickly to a request when a foster parent group wanted to meet with her about an urgent issue. She impresses us with her responsiveness and lack of defensiveness; with her calm nature when faced with stress; and with her sincere desire to hear and respond to the community and to put a laser focus where it needs to be. We are grateful for her strong emphasis on supporting kin placements, and her down to earth "all about the work" attitude. Since she has been in the leadership role, we have already seen a new and exciting energy reflected at CFSA.

"It cannot be done" is not in Ms. Donald's vocabulary. Her appointment in the acting role has brought us hope. We ask this council to move forward her nomination as permanent CFSA Director.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.