

Testimony of Margie Chalofsky

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On behalf of FAPAC and

DC Metropolitan Foster and Adoptive Parent Association

Child and Family Services Agency Oversight Hearing

Before the District Council Committee on Human Services

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Good morning, Chairman Wells and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Margie Chalofsky and I am the Director of the Foster & Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center, commonly known as FAPAC. I am also testifying today on behalf of the DC Metropolitan Foster and Adoptive Parent Association.

As you know, Chairman Wells, FAPAC is a grass-roots organization that is focused on serving foster, kinship and adoptive families and on training and organizing our families to be active stakeholders in the systemic reform of the District child welfare system. We are proud of the model of advocacy we have developed, which we identify as a duality between advocacy and partnership with the agencies that serve our children. Two exciting examples of recent partnership include the development of a Resource Parent Training Coalition which includes CFSA and ten private sector organizational members, and for which we acknowledge the CFSA Office of Training Services, and a new project with Foundations for Home and Community to enhance the team work between their foster parents and social workers.

In our testimony today, I will testify about some recent positive changes we have seen at CFSA as well as issues that bring us great consternation. As we tell our children to do, I will speak first about the positive.

First of all, we are very pleased that the Mayor has moved to appoint permanent leadership to CFSA, and look forward to working with Dr. Gerald and his management team on behalf of our children and families. We are also pleased to acknowledge the work on permanency that the agency has been undertaking with the CASEY consultants; to acknowledge the quality assurance approach of the new Program Monitoring Administration; and to acknowledge the Office of Clinical Practice for the significant improvements in EPSDT compliance. We also applaud both CFSA and DMH for working together to contract with Catholic Charities for a new mobile crisis service, which we believe has the potential to become very helpful to families.

We have a great deal of empathy for the trauma that CFSA has gone through this past year. We understand that progress on issues outside of the backlog and the stipulated order had to slow down significantly during this time. However, now that things seem a bit calmer, we no longer can afford to be patient about some serious long-term issues still facing us that ***significantly impact the District's ability to recruit and retain quality foster parents***. I will take a minute to explain how leaving these issues unaddressed puts at risk the safety of our children.

Over these eight years, FAPAC has been adamant that the words "foster parent recruitment" should never be discussed without the words "foster parent retention." Yet most of the District's efforts have continued to focus upon recruitment. At the current time, without serious retention efforts, we are recruiting into a "leaky bucket." All the media and other recruitment efforts will be useless if we don't fix the culture of double standards and disrespect that breaks the hearts of quality foster parents and causes them to quit. Additionally, when we lose good foster parents, we don't only lose them as individuals, but we lose them as potential recruiters of other good foster and adoptive parents. ***This emphasis exclusively on recruitment puts our children at risk***, as we will always find ourselves recruiting and licensing families from a place of desperation, never having the placement resources that would allow for appropriate and quality decisions in licensing as well as in matching.

Until the day that the professionals in our field would be comfortable recruiting their own friends and families into our system as foster parents, assured that they will be treated as equal partners on the professional team, adequately trained and supported to meet the complex needs of the children in their homes, and judged on their own individual merits instead of upon negative stereotyping, we will not be able to build the pool of skilled families that our children require and deserve.

Therefore:

**We no longer feel patient that:**

- 1) There is no system in place that can move fast to turn around poor practice decisions that harm children and families.
- 2) Despite the stated desire to find homes for older youth, CFSA has not moved forward on a single recommendation from the foster parent focus groups about this issue that we co-hosted at their request in 2005.
- 3) There is absolutely no accountability for workers who treat parents with disrespect or disregard, even when this attitude causes a placement to disrupt. Yet when a parent treats a worker with disrespect (this is certainly also wrong) they often see harsh consequences, sometimes including the refusal to re-license or the removal of children. ***This double standard is killing our foster parent community.***
- 4) Foster parents are responsible to nurture and protect the children in their homes, until they attempt to give input about agency decisions that they feel are making their children unsafe. At this point they are accused of being uncooperative and “difficult parents.” When this happens there is usually no recourse.
- 5) In the same light, foster parents are criticized for “not treating children like their own” and stymied, verbally chastised and penalized when they try to do so; a better reality would be to develop accurate messaging and training about the realities of parenting within a system that brings truth to the situation instead of operating on false polarities.

- 6) Children can be removed from foster homes based upon arbitrary reasons and without due process, causing loving and caring parents to either put up their emotional walls or quit, neither of which is in the best interest of any child.
  
- 7) There are next to no services put into place to proactively work to prevent disruption (except for innovations in a few private agencies), despite the District being cited absolutely everywhere about our high rate of multiple placements.
  
- 8) There has been no focused attention towards building a comprehensive placement array that adequately meets the needs of our children.

Councilman Wells, we have grown weary of bringing these same issues up administration after administration, Director after Director. We think that the instability in the CFSA Director's seat has caused these "higher fruit" issues to remain unaddressed. We desperately hope that we will now have stable CFSA leadership to address the paradigm shift needed for significant cultural change. FAPAC is committed to working with CFSA and private agency partners to turn around some of these issues. We do believe that this current administration hears and understands our concerns. However, understanding our concerns is only a first step. We plan to be strong (and loud) advocates for the implementation of specific action steps to (finally) address these serious issues.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am available to answer any questions you might have about my testimony.