GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency

Testimony of

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before the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on the District of Columbia

Fiscal Year 2006 Funding for Federal Foster Care Initiatives in the District of Columbia

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Good afternoon, Senator DeWine, Senator Landrieu, and members of the District of Columbia Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee. I am Brenda Donald Walker, director of the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). Thank you for this opportunity to report on the progress of child welfare reform in the nation's capital. In addition, I am eager to tell you about initiatives you funded via the special Congressional appropriation, for which we are grateful.

It was exactly two years ago that CFSA last appeared before this subcommittee. At that time, I was chief of staff to CFSA's former director Olivia Golden. Dr. Golden left CFSA in April 2004, and upon her recommendation, Mayor Anthony Williams appointed me to build on the foundation she established in the three years post-receivership. All of us wanted a leadership transition that would preserve the fast pace of our reform agenda. In practice, we had the least disruptive leadership transition in agency history and more than maintained the rapid evolution underway at CFSA.

Performance Highlights

Public child protection in the District has changed significantly since CFSA testified here in March 2003. To anticipate some overall questions you may have . . . . Have we passed major milestones in solidifying our foundation and improving performance in key areas? *Yes*. Are we seeing evidence of better outcomes for more children and families? *Yes*. Are we demonstrating that the District Government can deliver critical services after six years of Receivership? *Yes*. Abused and neglected children and troubled families in the District have never had a stronger safety net than they do today. But are we "there yet?" *No*. Our court-ordered Final Implementation Plan approved in May 2003, allows nearly four years to achieve rigorous performance standards. We are now almost at the halfway point and will need every moment of

the remaining time—as well as continued hard work, political will, and community support—to "get there."

As numerous other cities have learned from experience, urban child welfare reform is a long, challenging progress. The only way to succeed is to use each accomplishment as a platform for tackling the many critical requirements still ahead.

Children and Families

I want to provide a brief overview of how things stand at CFSA today, beginning with the most important element: the children we serve. Two years ago, we had 8,325 children on our caseload. Today, that number has dropped to 5,791 children—a 30 percent decline. We have gotten much better at achieving permanence for children, as I'll explain in a moment, and because caseworkers are no longer overwhelmed, they close cases instead of allowing them to languish.

Children CFSA Serves				
	March 31, 2003		*February 28, 2005*	
Total children	**8,325**		**5,791**	
• In home	5,030 (60%)	Court: 1,330 (26%)	3,113 (54%)	Court: 785 (25%)
		No court: 3,700 (74%)		No court: 2,328 (75%)
• Out of home	3,295 (40%)	Court: 3,262 (99%)	2,678 (46%)	Court: 2,607 (97%)
		No court: 33 (1%)		No court: 71 (3%)
Goals of children in out-of-home placement				
• Reunification	614 (19%)		513 (19%)	
• Adoption	1,289 (39%)		770 (29%)	
• Guardianship	124 (04%)		445 (17%)	
• Ind. Living, APPLA	1,268 (38%)		800 (30%)	
• Other			150 (05%)	
Total	3,295		2,678	
Source: CFSA FACES				

The children we serve continue to be overwhelmingly African-American and evenly divided between males and females. The largest percentage is older children, ages 12 to 17, followed closely by a sizeable group of six- to 11-year-olds. At the end of last month, 3,113 children—or 54 percent—were at home with their parents, and 2,678—or 46 percent—were in out-of-home placement.

At the same time, a growing proportion of our caseload is composed of clients with serious, difficult, and expensive issues—such as children with multiple disabilities. We are also serving many large families struggling with a host of challenges. In December 2003, our first needs assessment study (which we will now conduct every two years) showed that the typical CFSA client family is a single mother, average age 31, with four children under age 18 in the home. Among adult clients in the sample:

- 96 percent were unmarried,
- 73 percent were unemployed outside the home,

- 52 percent had not graduated from high school, and
- fully 25 percent were homeless or living in a shelter before becoming involved with CFSA.

Child protective cases in the District have always been complex, and that is truer today than ever before.

Sample Performance Indicators

With an overall caseload decline of nearly one-third and a larger cadre of case-carrying social workers, CFSA has made significant strides in meeting the long-standing challenge of reducing individual caseloads to manageable levels. Based on standards in the *LaShawn* order, caseloads may not exceed 1:12 in Investigations, 1:17 for families, 1:20 for children in foster care, and 1:12 for children with the goal of adoption. Today, average caseloads at CFSA are currently 1:15 in Investigations, 1:17 for children in families and in foster care, and 1:10 for children with the goal of adoption.

To paint an overall picture of where CFSA stands today, I want to highlight nine performance indicators representative of the hundreds we track regularly. Our court-ordered Final Implementation Plan mandates these performance measures, but that's not the point. The point is that meeting these standards is critical to providing the diligent, quality service abused and neglected children need and deserve. Of the nine performance indicators I'll discuss briefly, CFSA has been very successful on three; is making steady, incremental progress on four; and is struggling to improve and maintain performance on two. Thus, you have a Bell curve that illustrates our current status quite accurately:

- Outstanding achievement in some key areas,
- Measurable progress in many areas, and
- Stubborn problems resulting in insufficient progress in a few areas.

Strong Performance: At the front end of the Bell curve, strong performance at CFSA stands out in: reducing the number of young children in congregate care, conducting timely Administrative Reviews, and increasing adoptions. These important indictors cut to the heart of what children need to thrive—namely, nurturing family settings and stability.

In 2001, when the Court Monitor prepared baseline data for CFSA, we had 99 children under age six who had been in congregate care for more than 30 days. Today, we have just five children under age six who have been in congregate care for 30 days. The District has made a huge leap forward in placing younger children in the family settings that do so much more for their healthy emotional development.

Semi-annual Administrative Reviews ensure movement of children toward permanence with all due speed. CFSA has more than doubled the percentage of cases with current Administrative Reviews—from 43 percent in 2001 to 93 percent at the end of December. Each month, we move closer to the goal of 100 percent and expect to meet it within the next few months. Our in-house Quality Improvement Administration schedules and facilitates these reviews, evaluates the status of case plans in advance, and follows up with social workers to ensure prompt attention to action items.

Deliberate focus on permanence has led to a large increase in adoptions. Family Court finalized adoption of 273 children in 2001. In 2004, adoptions jumped 41 percent to a total of 384. Add the 273 children who achieved guardianship and 262 reunified with their families, and the result is 919 children who left foster care for permanent homes last year. Speedier permanence for more children accounts for a significant portion of the decline in our overall caseload, as it should.

Steady Progress: At the top of the Bell curve are numerous areas in which CFSA is making steady, incremental progress. Four stand out:

- Developing case plans for foster care cases,
- Developing case plans for family and kinship cases,
- Making monthly visits to children in foster care, and
- Licensing foster homes.

A case plan is the critical roadmap to safety; services; and permanence through reunification, guardianship, or adoption. In 2001, only 25 percent of CFSA foster care cases had case plans. By the end of December 2004, that number had jumped to 85 percent—still short of our 95 percent goal but closing in rapidly. For family and kinship cases, only a shameful nine percent had case plans in 2001. Today, 69 percent have case plans—also short of the goal but a seven-fold increase headed in the right direction.

Regular visits by social workers to monitor foster children are one of the strongest safety features in public child protection. From an abysmal two percent of foster children receiving a monthly visit in 2001, 78 percent had a monthly visit in December 2004. That's a dramatic 39-fold increase. We are continuing to push to meet the goal of 90 percent.

Licensing standards for foster homes are an important safety and quality measure for children. CFSA has worked diligently to achieve licensing despite barriers, such as long-time placement of children with kin before the District required licensing. In some cases, long-standing court orders for monthly foster-care payments to unlicensed relatives exacerbate procrastination in fulfilling licensing requirements. Nonetheless, CFSA has more than doubled the percentage of children placed in licensed foster homes—from about a third in 2001 to just over two-thirds today. We move closer to the goal of 95 percent each week.

Corrective Action: Finally, at the end of the Bell curve, CFSA has some areas undergoing strenuous corrective action. In June 2004, our semi-annual *Quality Assurance Report* listed 11 methods CFSA is using to drive performance improvement, such as intensive, short-term work groups; training; staffing up; developing tools to facilitate investigative and case decision making; and input from outside experts. Over the past eight months, we have initiated several additional approaches.

Both Mayor Anthony Williams and I are serious about making CFSA a first-class child welfare agency that consistently performs well in every key area. Regular management reports keep me fully aware of where performance is lagging, and I have put managers on notice that turnarounds in these areas are their highest priority.

From an unacceptable backlog of 807 child abuse investigations not completed within 30 days in 2001, CFSA had reduced the current backlog by 61 percent to 311 at the end of 2004. This is still too high. Late last summer, I hired an experienced manager to head Intake & Investigations. She is now working to streamline and improve an essential function that had never been properly organized since CFSA assumed responsibility for abuse as well as neglect investigations. I have devoted extensive resources and other support to this critical gateway to child protection and will do whatever else is necessary to bring investigative performance up to standards.

Regular social worker visits to monitor children's safety and well being are the essence of child welfare. I am deeply concerned that reducing caseloads to more manageable levels has not yet translated into regular visits to children living at home. Make no mistake: More children at home are now receiving more regular visits from CFSA social workers than ever before. When the Court Monitor established a baseline for this measure in October 2002, only 11 percent of children at home received a monthly visit. In December 2004, 68 percent received a monthly visit. While that's a six-fold increase, it's not enough. CFSA Program Operations has identified barriers to visits and is working to overcome them. I have made continued, diligent focus on this essential element of casework one of the agency's top priorities.

Update on FY04 Special Appropriation

Of the $14 million special appropriation you generously awarded to the District in FY04, CFSA received $9 million for early intervention, flexible funds for kinship licensing, student loan repayments for social workers, and technology improvements. When Congress approved the FY04 appropriation in February 2004, we immediately began developing and succeeded in launching several new initiatives.

Early Intervention

The core of our early intervention strategy is the new Family Team Meeting (FTM) initiative, which ensures families have a strong voice in decisions about removing a children or changing their placement. In FY04, we executed a contract for FTM training from noted national experts, hired the FTM team, and established the flexible fund component of the program.

The program began as a pilot from September through December for selected high-risk cases. We began conducting FTMs before all removals in January 2005, and beginning next month, we will hold an FTM before all placement changes. While it is too early to draw conclusions about the long-term effectiveness of FTMs in the District, we have developed a tracking system to follow the progress of FTM participants. For example, we know that of the 11 children whose families participated in Family Team Meetings last September, two remained at home, four were returned to their father, and five were placed with relatives. So far in 2005, we have held 47 FTMs for 85 children. Other jurisdictions that have used Family Team Meetings for some time have typically experienced fewer children entering care and significant reductions in placement disruptions. We anticipate similar outcomes for the children and families we serve.

Emergency Support Fund

Flexible funds facilitate licensing of family members willing to care for children who would otherwise go into traditional foster homes or congregate care. We are using flexible funds for

home repairs or renovations, furniture, medical exams, and lead paint removal—all to help relatives meet foster home licensing standards.

We also use the funds to underwrite room-and-board payments to kinship homes with short-term temporary licenses, which are ineligible for federal reimbursement. Between March 2004 and the end of the fiscal year, we spent approximately $234,000 from the flexible fund to support about 99 families in meeting licensing standards.

Social Worker Student Loan Repayment

Nearly every child welfare agency in the nation struggles with the challenge of reducing high social worker turnover. Repaying all or a portion of student loans is an experiment to determine whether this incentive will keep social workers on the job longer.

Under our demonstration project, case-carrying social workers who have worked for CFSA or one of our contracted providers for at least two years and who agree to stay an additional two years were eligible for generous loan repayments between $10,000 and $18,000. Within the seven months available to plan and launch the program, 147 social workers applied for a total obligation of $2.2 million out of the $3 million allocation. We also budgeted $250,000 for administration, documentation, and evaluation. While it will be at least two years before we know whether this is an effective retention strategy, we believe it will encourage qualified and motivated social workers to extend their tenure in the District.

Technology Improvement

Three million dollars allocated to upgrade technology for social workers has two primary purposes: conversion of our FACES automated management information system from a server- to a web-based platform and purchase of laptop computers so social workers can access FACES in the field. In FY04, we awarded contracts to establish the web-based system and to purchase almost 250 laptop computers. We are now phasing in FACES.net over 18 months.

Even at this early stage, we are already seeing results. Under a portion of the project known as the provider web, all our contracted child placing agencies now have real-time access to FACES. This allows them to update placement changes promptly, which, in turn, helps CFSA resolve long-standing payment challenges. At the end of this month, CFSA Information Systems will begin replacing social worker personal computers with laptops. By the end of 2005, social workers will be able to enter and retrieve client information in the field. Among many benefits, we hope this will improve CFSA's ability to claim federal revenue. We are set to forge ahead in that arena since this past January, CFSA's FACES system joined an elite group of only eight other "states" that have achieved State-Administered Child Welfare Information System—or SACWIS—approval from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Mental Health Services

Director Martha Knisley of the District's Department of Mental Health is here today to report on use of their special appropriation to develop new mental health services for foster children. Without stealing her thunder, I will just say we have long needed the expanded range of mental health treatment options DMH is now able to provide. Family instability, abuse and neglect, removal from home, multiple placements, and other factors too often leave some child victims

with serious emotional and behavioral issues. They deserve expert, caring treatment, and we're delighted to have these new, high-quality services available.

Looking Ahead

Thanks in large part to your support and commitment to improving child protection in the District, we are moving toward becoming a model for the nation. At the same time, we have great deal of work still ahead. I am especially concerned about the large number of older youth growing up in care in the District, a sad legacy from past failure to focus on permanence. Over the next five years or more, CFSA must do everything possible to redress that failure and give these young people the same quality start in life we give our own birth children. In addition, we must do more to prevent younger children in our care from growing up in the system.

Of CFSA's $235 million budget, we can use only five percent (or approximately $12 million) for early intervention and preventive services. We really need more flexibility to shift resources to address critical front- and back-end issues such as:

- The lack of affordable housing that too often undermines family efforts to stay together or reunite;
- Post-adoption services, especially for families who adopt older youth; and
- After-care programs for young adults who have aged out of foster care, including affordable housing and other supports.

We hope you will be interested in discussing potential next steps in building the viable safety net for the District's abused and neglected children and troubled families. As always, thank you for your caring interest in these children and families and for your support.