Government of the District of Columbia

Child and Family Services Agency

Testimony of

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Interim Director

Performance Oversight Hearing

Committee on Human Services
Adrian Fenty, Chair
Council of the District of Columbia

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Room 412
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004
12 p.m.

Good morning, Chairman Fenty and members of the Human Services Committee. I am Uma Ahluwalia, interim director of the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency. Perhaps foremost in all our thoughts today about CFSA performance is the December 31, 2006, deadline for meeting all goals in the *LaShawn* Implementation Plan. Since I addressed you last February, the Court Monitor, *LaShawn* plaintiffs, and U.S. Government Accountability Office have all stated that CFSA will not be ready to exit court oversight by that date. While these assessments are correct, it would be a mistake to conclude from them that CFSA performance is stagnant, that we are not on the right track, or that our "glass is half empty." Last February, I promised you that CFSA would give our very best effort to meet all the goals in the Implementation Plan. We have kept that promise.

CFSA has made enormous measurable progress over the past eight months. We are about to enter negotiations with the *LaShawn* plaintiffs regarding an exit strategy—in other words, exactly what the District must do to leave court oversight of child welfare. This discussion is possible only because improvement strategies we implemented in the second half of FY06 are achieving tangible results. Independent reviewers including our Court Monitor and GAO recently acknowledged this notable upsurge in progress. CFSA is steadily becoming a high-performing child welfare agency that consistently achieves positive outcomes for children and families.

Children and Families

Comparison of Out-of-Home and In-Home Children as Proportions of Total Child Welfare Caseload

	Sept. 03	Sept. 04	Sept. 05	Aug. 06
Out of home	41%	47%	47%	53%
In home	59%	53%	53%	47%

At the end of August, CFSA was serving 4,523 children, including 2,410 (or 53

percent) in out-of-home placement. We continue to move more children to permanence more quickly through family stabilization and reunification, guardianship, and adoption. In FY 2005, 1,232 children reached permanence, and through August of this year, another 965 reached permanence. For several years, we have seen a trend toward declining in-home cases and increasing out-of-home cases as proportions of overall caseload. In FY06, the proportion of out-of-home cases exceeded that of in-home for the first time. This reflects reformed practices such as referring low- and moderate-risk cases to the Collaboratives, moving more children to permanence, and closing cases safely rather than allowing them to linger in the system for years.

Over 90 percent of children we serve continue to be African-American and almost evenly divided between males and females. However, several other factors are significantly different than just a couple of months. The number of older children, ages 12 to 21, in the system is growing. In December 2002, this population was just less than half our caseload, but by August, 2006, it had grown to almost 62 percent. This is in part the sad legacy of District child welfare's past failure to achieve permanence for some of these children. However, it also reflects a changing demographic. Over 37 percent of children now entering foster care are over age 12. Some of these children have already experienced the juvenile court system through minor offenses or curfew violations or their caretakers deem them unmanageable. These children are significantly challenging the public child welfare system, as I will discuss later.

Reflecting the experience of other urban child welfare systems, District child welfare cases have always been complex, but that is truer today than ever before. Our semi-annual Quality Service Review in spring 2006 found that half the families in the sample of 40 in-home cases were

struggling with severe, multiple issues that included lack of appropriate, affordable housing; untreated mental health problems; untreated substance abuse; and domestic violence. We are seeing more children with significant mental health and medical needs. As GAO noted in their recent report, the complex needs of our children and families pose significant challenges. CFSA and our partners must continue to strengthen practice to meet these needs, and the District must rise to the challenge of developing and improving local resources to serve struggling residents.

Performance Highlights

Last February, I highlighted 10 performance indicators representative of the hundreds we track regularly. At that time, I reported CFSA performance was strong on three, showing steady progress on four, and in need of corrective action on three. Today, CFSA performance is strong on seven of these indicators, showing steady progress on two, and in need of corrective action on only one. In the growing number of areas where CFSA has achieved strong performance, we now face the challenge of sustaining it (although we are doing so in some key areas, which bodes well for the future). In the declining number of areas in which we still need to improve, I am confident that strategies now in place will move the agency to higher performance.

CFSA Performance on 10 Key Indicators

Strong | Steady | Corrective Action

	December 2005	August 2006
1. Achieving permanence	Strong	Strong
2. Administrative Reviews	Strong	Strong
3. Internal quality improvement	Strong	Strong
4. Case plans for foster care cases	Steady	Strong
5. Case plans for family/kinship care cases	Steady	Strong
6. Monthly visits to children in foster care	Steady	Strong
7. Licensing foster homes	Steady	Steady
8. Timely investigations	Corrective Action	Strong
9. Visits to children at home	Corrective Action	Steady
10. Placement	Corrective Action	Corrective Action

Strong Performance

In February, I highlighted three areas of strong performance: achieving permanence for children, conducting timely Administrative Reviews, and

developing a robust internal Quality Improvement system. Today, our performance remains strong on all these indicators.

- Over the past three years, CFSA increased the number of children achieving permanence through reunification with birth parents, guardianship, or adoption. The number of children reunified with parents will likely be higher for FY06 than ever. We are implementing additional strategies to support permanent outcomes for children that should significantly strengthen performance. In FY05, the number of District children re-entering foster care within 12 months of case closure dropped to 7 percent and continues at this rate today. This reflects growing quality in our decisions about reunifying families and providing services to stabilize them. Our percentage of family reunifications within 12 months of child entry into foster care is higher than the national standard. All these gains make a direct, positive difference in the lives of children and families we serve.

- As two additional indicators of diligent focus on permanence, CFSA has now sustained performance at above 90 percent for almost two years in conducting timely permanency hearings and Administrative Reviews for children. Our performance is currently at 98 percent in both areas.

- Activities and findings of our internal Quality Improvement Administration are now embedded within CFSA. QIA produces numerous comprehensive regular and special

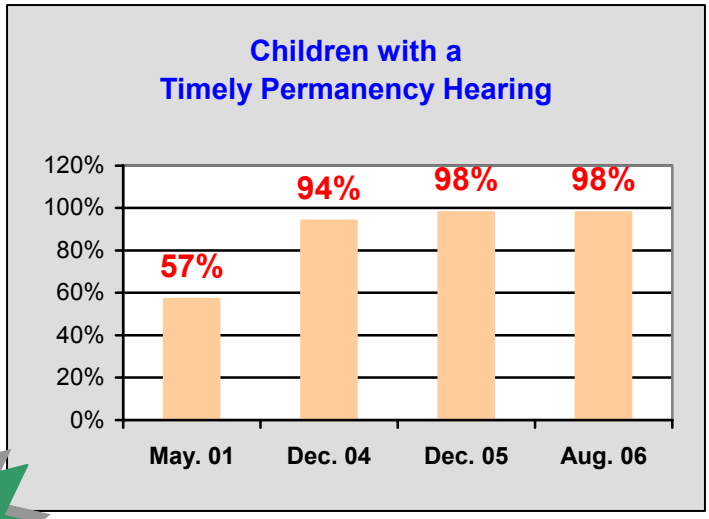
reports each year to inform senior management, our providers, and the public. GAO cited QIA data in their recent report about CFSA.

In addition to sustaining strong performance in key areas, CFSA has also made significant performance gains. The big news is that over the past eight months, we have moved three indicators previously showing steady progress and one needing corrective action solidly into the "strong performance" category. Additional key areas in which we now show strong performance are:

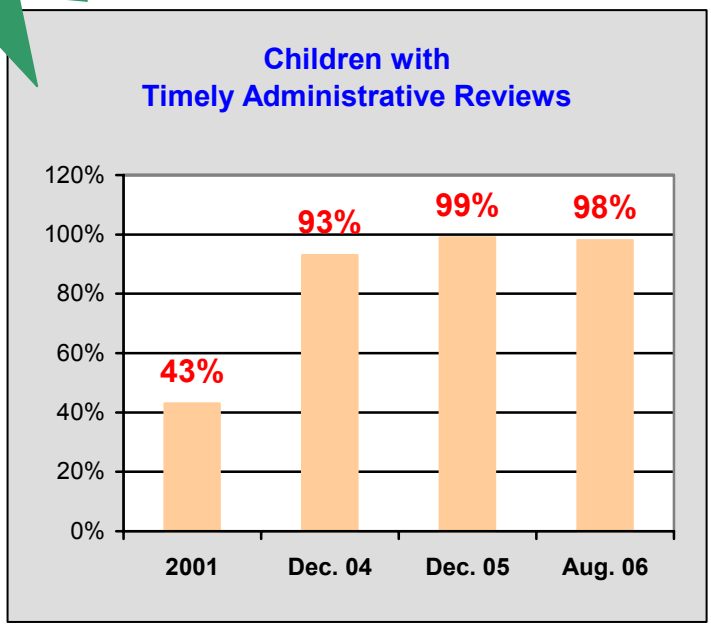
- Timely completion of investigations;
- Regular social worker visits to children in foster care;
- Development of case plans for foster care cases; and
- Development of case plans for family cases.

All these areas are bedrock components of effective child welfare.

Strong Performance

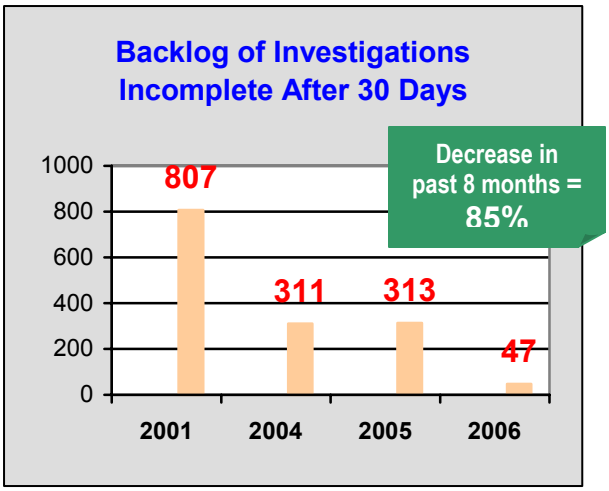


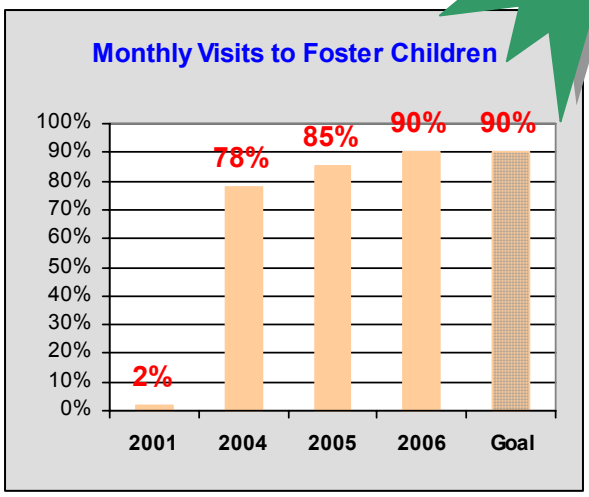
Sustained Performance

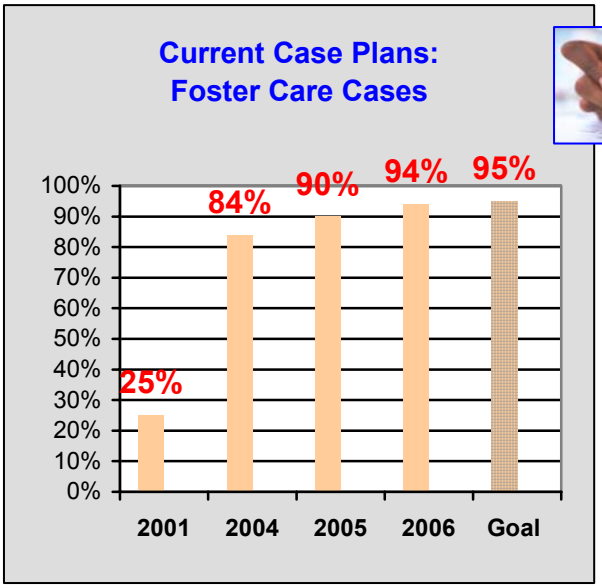


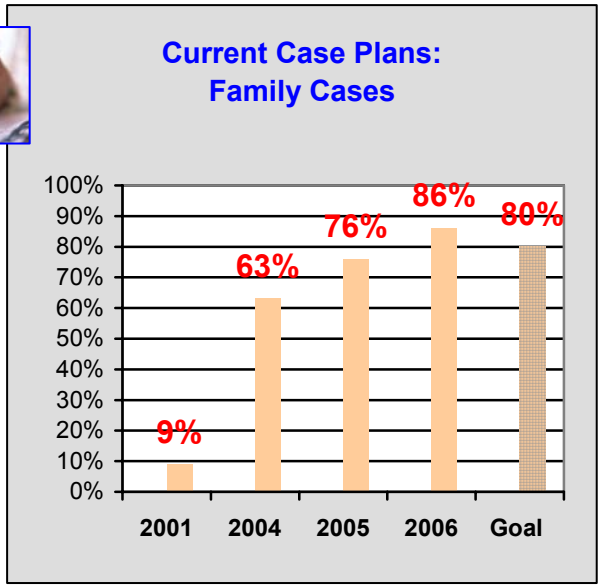
Strong Performance (continued)

Improved Performance









Investigations. Prompt investigation of reports of abuse and neglect protects children. CFSA has gone from an unacceptable backlog of 807 child abuse investigations not completed within 30 days in 2001, to a total backlog of 47 at the end of August 2006. In the past eight months, we reduced the backlog by 85 percent to the lowest level in CFSA history. Historically, new reports of child abuse and neglect increase in the fall after school opens, so we are watching the backlog closely. However, strategies we put in place last winter and spring appear to be working. Among these are filling vacancies, building supervisory capacity, offering a pay differential in recognition of the demands of this job, and conducting periodic "Grand Rounds" to help investigators with their most challenging investigations. This is evident in the timeliness in completing investigations. We went from just 38 percent in September 2003, to 50 percent in September 2005, to 70 percent of investigations closing within 30 days in August 2006.

Visits. Regular visits from social workers are the primary vehicle for monitoring child safety, well being, and progress toward permanence. From an abysmal two percent of foster children who had a monthly visit from their social worker in 2001, 78 percent had a monthly visit in December 2004, and 85 percent received a visit in December 2005. At the end of August 2006, fully 90 percent of District foster children had a visit from their social worker. In addition, 66 percent of foster children received two visits from their social worker in August of this year.

Case Plans. Case plans serve as the essential roadmap to services and positive outcomes for both children and families. Over five years, we have increased current case plans for foster children almost four-fold—from 25 percent in 2001 to 94 percent at the end of August 2006. For parents,

the only way was up from a shameful nine percent with current case plans in 2001. At the end of August 2006, 86 percent of parents had a current case plan—an admirable nine-fold increase.

Steady Progress

CFSA's last two internal Quality Service Reviews revealed eye-opening findings about the need for improvements in monitoring and serving children who remain at home with their parents after we substantiate abuse or neglect. We must be very concerned about these children because they often live with their maltreaters.

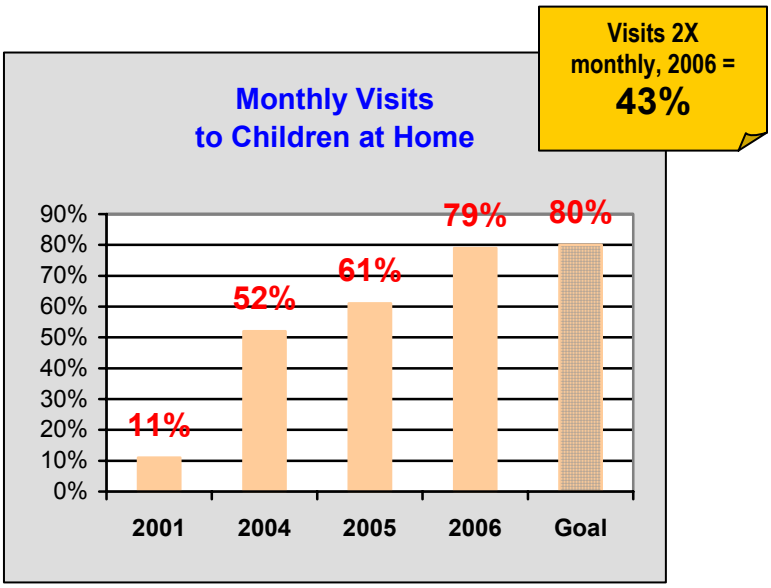
Last February, I reported that in December 2005, social workers paid a monthly visit to only 61 percent of children living at home. Because these children are so vulnerable, I indicated we were about to reorganize case-carrying social workers into dedicated out-of-home and in-home units. Since most in-home cases lack court involvement, our goal was to give some social workers in-home cases only, freeing them from the court requirements of a mixed caseload. In June 2006, we completed the reorganization and now have nine units entirely focused on serving children and families at home. It appears these units are achieving what we anticipated: Social worker monthly visits to children at home increased to 79 percent in August 2006 from 52 percent in 2004. Social workers visited 43 percent of children at home twice in August. While we still need to improve service to in-home cases, we are confident about the strategy, since visits to all children increased in each of the three months following the reorganization.

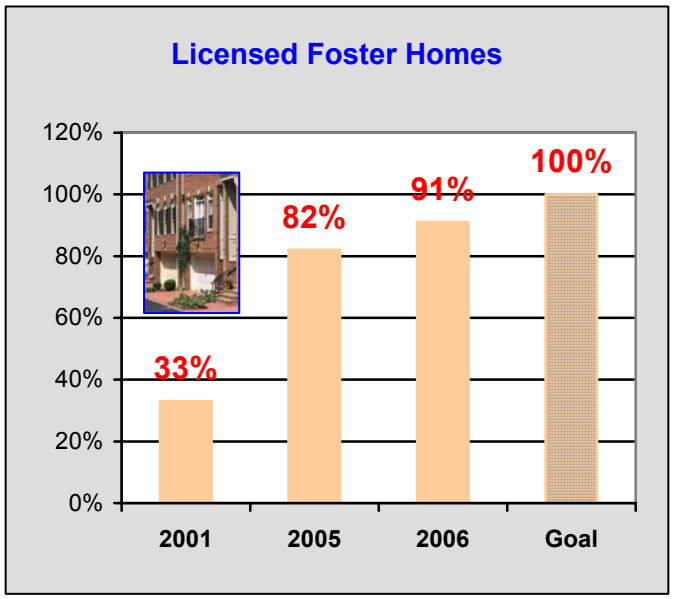
Foster Home Licensing. Licensing standards for foster homes are an important safety and quality measure for children. While 91 percent of District foster homes are now licensed, we

continue to struggle with licensing of homes in Maryland. In the past, most unlicensed foster homes had never been licensed. Now, however, the majority of unlicensed homes are those where the previous license has expired. At the end of August 2006, of the 1,074 homes caring for foster children, only 12 (or 1 percent) had never been licensed. The 161 unlicensed homes (15 percent) had not renewed their licenses before expiration.

We are determined to achieve close to 100 percent licensed homes. One strategy we are pursuing with Maryland and Virginia is creating licensing units within CFSA Licensing & Monitoring staffed with workers licensed in both jurisdictions so they can conduct home studies, license, and supervise the homes. We have presented this idea to both jurisdictions and are hopeful about reaching an agreement.

Steady Progress





Corrective Action

Everyone at CFSA is serious about building 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 managers know that turnarounds are their highest priority.

At this point, placement of children in appropriate settings that meet their needs is our most critical performance challenge, although we continue to see progress. An initial goal of local child welfare reform was to place as many children who had to enter foster care as possible in family settings. This involved a major shift away from the District's historic reliance on group homes to family-based care. We have succeeded in moving children under age 12 out of congregate care settings and in reducing the number of children of all ages in residential treatment. Today, three-quarters of District foster children are in family settings. Instituting emergency licensing for kin in the District helped. We have licensed 139 kinship caregivers under this program since last year.

Now, in addition to family settings, our goal for children who must enter foster care has expanded to "first placement-best placement." This means finding immediate, appropriate placements for every child, including those with special medical, emotional, and behavioral needs; teens; teen mothers and their babies; and sibling groups. This is now our most critical performance challenge.

The issue isn't lack of homes. To supplement our CFSA foster homes, we have contracts in place for approximately 1,400 beds. The issue is capability, capacity, and competence. Too often, our

traditional and therapeutic foster parents do not accept children into their homes because they do not feel equipped to meet the needs of children over age 9, many of whom manifest pre-teen behaviors that include oppositional-defiant characteristics and scant regard for rules. These children also tend to have strong ties to their families of origin, are angry about being in foster care or are acting out in hopes of returning home. This trend creates great urgency for strong partnerships across agencies and systems such as DMH, DCPS, DYRS, and Court Social Services.

For several years now, local providers have been struggling to meet new demands including staffing up to meet standards, licensing new homes, recruiting more homes in the District, and expanding operations to take children in the evening or late at night. As the needs of our children become more complex and children entering or in the system are older, we must recruit foster parents able and willing to serve the changing population of children in care. Our children move among placements too often, which is not in their best interest. Research indicates that children who remain in stable placements are more likely to achieve permanence because they bond with the provider than children who are shuffled from one foster home to another. We have several very specific strategies to reduce multiple placements of children and are confident that Performance-Based Contracting will further support enhanced placement matching, placement stability, and permanence for children.

- Resolving these issues requires close coordination and cooperation between CFSA and local provider networks. Our strategies include:

- Creating 20 new multi-dimensional treatment foster care beds. This model is new to the District, but other jurisdictions have used it to provide placements and support to children and youth with behavioral issues. In addition, we are adding 18 teen bridge transitional housing beds for children who are not ready for independent living and another 50 beds for children with special needs.
- Advertising this fall to recruit foster homes for teens.
- Working with providers to understand their challenges in ensuring full availability of contracted slots.
- Implementing the "Mockingbird" model of foster home support where a hub foster home provides respite and other supports for other neighborhood foster parents.
- Refocusing placements for youth, with emphasis on reinforcing the importance of family and other adult connections to children of all ages.
- Ensuring we hold Family Team Meetings when a child is at risk of placement and involve people important in the child's life.
- Re-instituting CFSA's emergency foster care program that pays foster parents to be on call to accept children of any age at any time for a short term while we identify a more permanent placement. This gives us an opportunity to search for appropriate kin or other placements, which will reduce future moves.

Improving Practice

Performance gains I've discussed today stem from implementation of sound strategies and focus on casework protocols and quality as a top priority. Our Practice Model articulates clear values and goals for all parts of the agency. The Office of Organizational Development & Practice

Improvement routinely oversees data collection and analysis, develops practice guidance to improve achievement of qualitative standards, and spearheads provider performance strategies. We are using Family Team Meetings (FTMs) when a child is removed, at risk of removal, or at risk of placement disruption. Early evaluations indicate high participant satisfaction with this program. Families feel FTMs improve their collaboration with CFSA and result in better plans for their children. We now use Structured Decision Making tools to conduct assessments at critical points in cases, and early results suggest this is aiding workers in making the many difficult decisions they face. In other jurisdictions that have implemented SDM, it has reduced re-entries into foster care and expedited permanence for children.

We continue to focus on the large number of older youth growing up and entering foster care. Over the next five years, CFSA must do everything possible to give these young people the same quality start in life we give our birth children. The Youth White Paper that CFSA issued last summer is guiding our work. A critical piece of this effort is implementation of Family Finding and holding Youth Connections conferences, designed to identify families or life-long connections for each of our youth. We are also working to improve their chances at success by focusing on education.

Another critical piece of improved performance is accountability. In April, CFSA began posting scorecards on the Internet that reflect CFSA and child-placing agency performance on nine performance indicators. Internally, we conduct Management Team Meetings every two weeks in which middle managers and supervisor report progress on performance goals for which they are responsible.

Strategic Initiatives

While child welfare reform in the District is working, CFSA will always need to adapt to keep pace with our children's changing needs and evolving best practices. We have targeted several areas ripe for new strategies and aggressive action. I will touch briefly on five of them.

Workload

With CFSA's true vacancy rate just under 5 percent, we have come a long way in filling critical staff positions. Only seven workers now carry caseloads over levels mandated in the Modified Final Order (MFO). But that is only part of the equation. With caseload issues under control, we must now focus on **workload**. Our expectations for both quantity and quality are high. Most children, whether at home or in foster care, need social worker visits and assessments twice each month. Those in the first eight weeks of placement need a weekly visit. Despite meeting MFO caseload standards, we are not yet meeting benchmarks for parent-child and sibling visits.

Given the benchmark expectations that exceed federal standards and an assessment of our performance over these last five years, we must address the issue of work-load expectations and not just caseload sizes. Social workers must also do quality work in assessing needs, engaging children and families, coordinating and leading service teams, and tailoring service strategies to specific family and child requirements. With caseloads at current levels, these goals may be reachable, but we do not yet know for sure that lower caseloads will automatically lead to manageable workloads given the multiple, complex demands of the cases. We must also look at the complement of our workforce - for example the answer may not be more social workers but

rather family support workers to improve in home practice and support for foster parents or clerical support staff to help with FACES data entry. I am closely monitoring this situation.

Permanency Restructuring

CFSA must continue to move more children to permanence more quickly. One strategy involves decentralizing our existing Adoptions social workers, recasting them as Permanency Specialists, and embedding them in out-of-home care units to begin permanency planning from the moment a child enters foster care. This is a best practice known as "concurrent planning," which simply means working toward family reunification while also preparing back-up options in case family reunification becomes impossible. A second strategy is using Federal incentive and foundation grant funds to launch limited advertising campaigns on the Metro bus and Metro rail systems. They will seek to raise public awareness about the District's urgent need for foster and adoptive parents and to attract prospects. The first campaign will run in November and December; the second will launch in the first quarter of CY 2007.

Partnerships

In the process of child welfare reform, CFSA has levied a steady stream of new demands on our partners and providers over the past few years. To build a strong local safety net and meet court-ordered benchmarks, our partners and providers must share responsibility for performance. CFSA cannot afford to lose providers or to lower our standards, resulting at times in strained relationships as long-standing paradigms in local child welfare change in order to improve. We rely on and value our partnerships with providers and continue to offer new opportunities for them to play significant roles in the strengthened local safety net for children and families. Of

particular note is the interagency collaboration group that has been meeting under the auspices of the Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth Families and Elders. The efforts to improve our residential treatment continuum and to jointly support reform efforts in Juvenile Justice are two examples of a process that is working.

This past year we have invested significant effort with our collaborative partners to reexamine our partnership, revise our assumptions and develop pathways to strengthen our joint efforts. We have been looking at co-location models, joint training of our family support workers, strengthening the impact of prevention and to analyze the impact of our efforts and continuously improve our prevention and preservation efforts, develop a strong advocacy focus and build on current best practices. CFSA is now referring all substantiated cases of abuse and neglect that we assess as low to moderate risk to the Collaboratives. The Collaboratives also have an active Youth Aftercare Project that supports District young people aging out of foster care. CFSA is truly proud of our joint efforts. Some hard decisions remain, however. Even as we clarify our joint vision for partnership and there is progress on co-location models and modifying the contract expectations, there remains work to be done in defining the practice model that governs our partnership. This work will occur in the coming months.

Contracting and Fiscal Operations

CFSA is making progress in strengthening and tightening our Procurement and Fiscal functions, although the pace is slower than all of us would like. We continue to work closely with the District's Office of the Chief Financial Officer to streamline the provider payment system without sacrificing verification of charges. We instituted an internal invoice tracking system and

created a quality assurance mechanism to track invoice processing. Within the next two months, we will enhance provider access to FACES via the Internet so they can invoice CFSA on-line within specific time frames. This should encourage providers to ensure FACES reflects their activity, since their invoices and payments are now based on data they are responsible for entering.

CFSA has resolved FY2005 invoices with all but one provider and recently received supplemental information from that provider to complete the reconciliation process. We have held reconciliation meetings with all placement vendors covering the first six months of FY2006 and are making payments for that period. We will schedule meetings for the third quarter of FY2006 as soon as we receive necessary documentation from the vendors.

CFSA Contracting & Procurement is now stable, with all management positions filled. We are on track to institute performance-based contracting next year, a huge undertaking that will dramatically change the way CFSA purchases and vendors provide child welfare services in the District. We are in the final stages of a draft RFP for performance-based contracting that gives providers the opportunity to comment on our plans. While these changes have unsettled long-standing relationships with many local providers of services critical to our children, they are a crucial to meeting performance goals and ensuring accountability for outcomes.

Local Resource Development

Finally, to end court supervision of child welfare, the District must become actively engaged in addressing unmet housing; mental health; and medical, vision and dental needs of children and families involved with the child welfare system. Our Court Monitor noted in her most recent report, and GAO agreed, that gaps in services and long delays in accessing existing services jeopardize District compliance with *LaShawn* mandates.

Looking Ahead

With the support from the Mayor, this Council, and numerous local child-serving partners, the District's child welfare system has moved from Federal Court Receivership to an agency that has garnered respect from Federal authorities, our Court Monitor, the *LaShawn* plaintiffs, and other jurisdictions around the country. People in the national child welfare community are aware that the District has come a long way in short time and is now poised to become a child welfare success story. Everyone at CFSA is eager to address remaining shortcomings quickly and to shed court oversight as soon as possible. Recent gains have strengthened performance in several areas and moved it measurably forward in others. This month, I look forward to meeting with the plaintiffs and Court Monitor to develop our final exit plan. It will likely include a revised deadline that CFSA can and will meet. Reaching our collective goal of a strong safety net for abused and neglected children and troubled families in the District has never been more possible than it is today. We very much appreciate your involvement and support.