

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DANIEL K. AKAKA

Assessing Foster Care and Family Services in the District of Columbia: Challenges and Solutions

Hearing Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

March 16, 2010

Today's hearing is an opportunity to examine how Congress can work together with the District government, child advocates, and most importantly, the families and children within the child welfare system, to improve the foster care and adoption process in the District of Columbia. I am particularly interested in exploring how Congress can support the District as it strives to find a permanent, loving home for every child under its care.

Almost two decades have passed since the District's child welfare system was placed under Federal Court supervision. Since then, D.C. has made real, though uneven, progress instituting reforms.

I would like to commend Director Gerald. He assumed leadership of the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) during a time of crisis, and he brought stability back to CFSA. However, stability is not success, and several significant issues remain. In particular, I have three concerns I would like to address this afternoon.

The first is the need for the District to set higher expectations for finding permanent homes for children in foster care. In 2009, 127 children in D.C. foster care were adopted - only 28 percent of all D.C. foster children with the goal of adoption. While this number exceeded the District's target for the year, it is significantly less than previous years and not nearly good enough. Greater transparency about how these adoption goals are set will help us understand the challenges CFSA faces, and how it is working to address them. This hearing is a good opportunity for CFSA to clearly explain the process used to determine its adoption goals.

Second, in order to meet higher permanency goals, CFSA must develop and implement a consistent approach to finding permanent homes for foster children. I am encouraged that CFSA has launched nationally-recognized programs, such as the Permanency Opportunities Project. This high-impact team strategy fosters collaboration and creativity to achieve a more efficient and effective permanency process. I urge Director Gerald to institute a strategic plan to fully implement these best practice models, and make sure they become a permanent part of CFSA operations.

My third concern is financial management. The current economic recession has forced state and local governments to confront declining revenues as the need for assistance increases. Like other governments, D.C. faces significant spending pressures that will require difficult choices.

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At the same time, CFSA has lost tens of millions of dollars in Medicaid reimbursements, due to an inability to properly file claims. These problems are so severe that CFSA has stopped filing Medicaid claims altogether, as it attempts to revamp the entire claiming system.

It is critical that CFSA quickly address these issues so the Agency has the funds it needs for the children in its care. If CFSA is to succeed in placing more foster children with loving families, they will need adequate funding to expand promising programs such as the Permanency Opportunities Project. The *Recovery Act* increased the Federal government's share of the District's Medicaid cost reimbursement. In dollar values, this totaled \$132 million in additional funds for the District. The Federal government has continued this assistance through the first quarter of Fiscal Year 2010. By suspending Medicaid claiming, CFSA continues to forgo this valuable help.

It is clear that the District faces great challenges in improving its child welfare system. However, rather than be discouraged by the work remaining, I am inspired by the dedicated witnesses here today. I believe if we work together, over the coming years, we will make a difference for thousands of DC children who deserve a loving and permanent home.

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