
Government of the District of Columbia



Child and Family Services Agency

Testimony of

Roque R. Gerald, Psy.D.

Director

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

**United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs**

**Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia**

**The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka, Chairman
The Honorable George V. Voinovich, Ranking Member**

March 16, 2010

Good morning Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich and members of the subcommittee. My name is Dr. Roque Gerald and I currently serve as the Director of the District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today about our continued child welfare reform efforts and our ongoing plan to increase and expedite adoptions for those children who are in need of permanent, loving homes.

CFSA's mission is to ensure the safety, permanence, and well being of abused and neglected children and to strengthen troubled families in the District of Columbia. We operate a 24-hour child abuse and neglect reporting Hotline (202-671-SAFE) and investigate reports of child abuse and neglect. Our services include foster care, adoption, and supportive community-based assistance.

When CFSA was established as a cabinet-level agency in 2001, I joined the executive leadership team and established a unique in-house Clinical Practice function that administered physical, mental, and behavioral health programs for children, youth, and families. At the time, we set out to build a highly functioning child welfare system that was responsive to the needs of the District's at-risk families. We also implemented programs consistent with best practices in the field while developing a sound agency infrastructure. Our success was directly related to hiring a skilled staff of licensed social workers, investing in a broad array of resources that directly supported quality services for children and families and establishing a federally certified case management system. These improvements were reflected in the 2007 Federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) of CFSA, which noted a strong system that was delivering improved outcomes for children.

In January of 2008, the discovery of the tragic deaths of the Jacks and Fogle girls shocked and saddened our entire community. In response, Mayor Adrian Fenty immediately mobilized his administration to provide tangible assistance to CFSA to address the systemic issues that contributed to the tragedy. Mirroring a nationwide trend following high-profile child welfare cases, calls to our hotline skyrocketed. When I became CFSA's interim director in July 2008, the agency was faced with a daunting backlog of Child Protective Services (CPS) investigations stemming from the aforementioned case. Nevertheless, the agency worked diligently and we achieved our goal of reducing the backlog to fewer than 100 cases in the first quarter of FY 2009. CFSA currently averages a backlog of 20-40 investigations and we are now posting solid achievements in every area of our core mission and forging ahead to improve outcomes for the children, youth, and families we serve.

New Strategies for Permanence

As I mentioned earlier, achieving permanence for children and youth in foster care is a fundamental aspect of our mission. We want every child and youth, regardless of age, to exit the system to a permanent home and it is our deeply held belief that everyone needs and deserves a family. We believe all pathways—reunification with birth parents, guardianship, or adoption—should be explored as long as the outcome is a safe, nurturing and permanent home. At the very least, if that is not possible, we hope that every older youth will exit with a life-long connection to one or more stable, caring adults outside the system. This represents a change in thinking about ways to achieve permanence and we continue to use new and innovative strategies to move forward on this front.

Goal of Adoption

Throughout much of the last decade CFSA made significant progress in expediting a backlog of stalled adoptions. However, by 2008, adoptions began to decline. While some of this was attributable to the decline in the District's foster care population, it is clear that barriers to timely permanency existed and needed to be addressed.

In 2009, CFSA and our private-provider partners reversed the decline in adoptions, exceeding the target of 125 with 128 adoptions in the calendar year—a 25 percent increase over the 102 adoptions in 2008. Finding adoptive homes for young people in foster care can be challenging because many are older or want to stay together with their brothers and sisters. Among young people adopted from the system in 2009 were 16 teens and 20 sibling groups—the highest number of children in these categories achieving adoption in several years. Our work also resulted in a record number of finalizations at the annual *Adoption Day in Court* during National Adoption Month last November. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Senator Landrieu for her ongoing support of Adoption Day. It means a great deal to both our staff and the participating families that she makes time to attend each year and we welcome the future participation of every Senator on this committee.

For children and youth with the goal of adoption, CFSA initiated the proven best practice of high-impact teams, which are established to focus on and expedite adoption. High-impact teams are composed of CFSA adoption specialists and representatives from the local non-profit agency, Adoptions Together. The high-impact team strategy at CFSA is called the Permanency Opportunity Project (POP). Key features of this unique program include: 1) collaboration around

individual cases across all levels and systems both inside and outside of the agency; 2) consideration of multiple pathways to permanence beginning at the moment a child or youth enters care; and 3) diligence in using new strategies to identify adoptive families for children and youth and promptly move those in pre-adoptive homes to finalization.

In 2009, the high-impact teams reviewed and worked on a total of 260 cases with the goal of adoption. They also provided consultation and coaching around adoption to case-carrying social workers both within CFSA and at private providers who manage about half the local caseload.

Older Youth

The second front in our push for permanence focuses on older youth in care. Reflecting the trend of other urban child welfare agencies, CFSA is presiding over a groundswell of youth growing up in care - fully 60 percent of the District's foster care population today. Also mirroring a national trend, we are seeing an increase in young people entering care in their teens.

In a 2007 report, the Casey Strategic Consulting Group provided us with a wake-up call by showing that CFSA and the Family Court had institutionalized "aging out" without permanence as the default goal for older youth. The use of this local practice far exceeded that of several other comparable jurisdictions. In the fall of 2008, I signed an Administrative Issuance that put an end to automatic assignment of Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) as a goal for older youth. In a little over a year, our census of youth with the goal of APPLA dropped from a high of 850 to 678.

In the first half of 2009, CFSA reviewed the cases of 722 youth who had the goal of “aging out” to explore their opportunities for legal permanence or life-long connections. Delving in from this new perspective revealed that 80 percent of these youth already had an established or potential life-long connection with at least one stable, caring adult. Social workers are now using this information to rekindle or create legal permanence or lasting connections for older youth. Adoption and legal guardianship are pathways for some. For others, birth-family circumstances have changed so that reunification with parents is possible. A new approach is the “Commitment Contract” where a caring adult and youth agree to maintain a supportive, life-long relationship. This is reserved only for those cases where legal permanence is not possible.

While we are making important strides, CFSA faces several challenges in maximizing our push for permanence for more children and youth in care. Increased public awareness about opportunities to adopt from the public system or provide foster care would provide the broad-based, sustained outreach necessary to increase recruitment. Doing more to build life-long relationships for older youth in care, for whom legal permanence is not possible, and providing better preparation of children, youth, and adults for the transition to adoptive family life would also be beneficial. Finally, implementing a differential response approach to reports of child neglect would aid the District in its efforts to increase child safety, improve parental engagement, and reduce the recurrence of maltreatment.

Enhancing Well Being

Whenever possible, child welfare should leave those we serve in a safer, more stable, and improved condition. In 2009, CFSA continued to bolster efforts around our core mission of

caring for the well being of the children and youth we serve. I will briefly describe two improvements among many, which are very much in line with the intent of portions of the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act.

First, every child and youth needs to have a health screening, including comprehensive medical and dental exams, within 30 days of placement. For years, CFSA contracted out for these services, which did not wholly fulfill our needs. In December 2009, we brought routine pre-placement health screening of children and youth in-house to our headquarters. Among the advantages of this approach is the collection of medical histories from families, development of sound medical files for children and youth in care, improved health information for foster caregivers, and greater convenience for social workers.

Second, in 2009 CFSA introduced an enhanced Educational Assessment that social workers complete semi-annually for each school-age child and youth whether at home or in foster care. The Educational Assessment helps social workers better support regular school attendance and academic achievement and helps them identify and work with the educational decision maker for each child and youth in care. For older youth in care, we are working to increase the high school graduation rate and streamline access to opportunities for college or vocational training.

I would also like to provide a brief update on two of CFSA's ongoing efforts to support the well being of the children in our care. When I was Director of Clinical Practice, the support of Congress helped initiate innovative programs for children and families and contributed to launching the practice of Family Team Meetings, which build capacity in mental health services

for children and youth in care. Today, the District's unique approach to Family Team Meetings is embedded in the field, routinely receives high marks from families, and has gained national and international recognition.

Core service agencies that today serve the mental and behavioral health needs of children and youth in the District's care are a direct outgrowth of evidence-based mental health services that Congress supported years ago. I had direct experience with these projects and want you to know that your investments yielded significant, long-term dividends for the residents of the District of Columbia and we are most appreciative.

Local Control

CFSA is stronger today than ever before. Even so, District child welfare remains under Federal Court oversight and I would like to provide a brief update on the status of the lawsuit. In February 2009, the District of Columbia filed a motion asking the Federal District Court to expedite a process to terminate court oversight by the end of the calendar year. The request, which is currently pending, is fully consistent with the Supreme Court's admonition in *Horne v. Flores* [129 S. Ct. 2579, 2595 (2009)] to "return control to state and local officials as soon as a violation of federal law has been remedied." The District has corrected the violations of law the Court originally found in 1991, and has implemented important structural changes including, among others, elevating CFSA to cabinet-level agency and creating a local Family Court which oversees CFSA performance in each case where abuse or neglect has been adjudicated. Today, CFSA bears no resemblance to what was described in testimony before the Court in 1991. The

District has ambitious goals for our child welfare efforts and it is time for District child welfare obligations to completely return to local control.

Building Excellence

In 2010 CFSA will continue its agenda on behalf of the District's children and youth by: 1) continuing effective strategies for excellence in safety, permanence, and well-being; 2) institutionalizing best practices in case management that support better and faster outcomes for children, youth, and families; and 3) completing the redesign of programs for older youth in care. The District is moving forward and building on our recent successes to ensure that every child we serve has a clear pathway to permanency. I appreciate the Committee's attention this morning and would be happy to answer your questions.