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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Health and Human Services  
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Public Hearing:  
Bill 21-603, *Foster Parents Statements of Rights and Responsibilities Amendment Act of 2016*

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Good morning Chairperson Alexander and Members of the Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Damon King. I am a Senior Policy Attorney at Children's Law Center<sup>1</sup> and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of Children's Law Center, which fights so every DC child can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 8 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. In addition to our work with hundreds of children in the District's foster care system, our Families First program represents caregivers for children in or at-risk of entering foster care. Our caregiver clients include licensed foster parents, as well as relative caregivers who agree to become foster parents to care for children in the system.

I am pleased today to testify in support of the Foster Parents Statements of Rights and Responsibilities Amendment Act of 2016, which tasks CFSA with pulling together existing legal protections from across District law and agency policy to create a comprehensive foster parent bill of rights. As CFSA works to recruit more District residents to serve as foster parents, to retain the licensed foster parents it already has, and to continue to be a welcoming system for kinship caregivers, assembling a clear statement of what protections and supports foster parents should expect during their working relationships with the agency will greatly benefit foster parents, the agency, and ultimately, the children that the agency serves.

As you know, Chairperson Alexander, over the last year, CFSA has focused much of its attention on the need to increase both the size and diversity of its network of foster homes. Currently, there are simply not enough foster parents for the foster care system to operate as it should, limiting the ability of the agency to match children with the foster parents who are best equipped to care for them and meet their needs. As we testified during the agency's performance oversight hearing, this is a problem across the entire foster care population, but is particularly true for children in large sibling groups, teenagers, foster youth who are pregnant or parenting, and children with special needs (especially behavioral health needs).<sup>2</sup> In the last several months, CFSA has set some important goals in order to overcome this challenge, including the recruitment of enough foster parents to add 80 new foster homes to the network by the end of this fiscal year, a further recruitment target of 80 new foster homes in FY17, and the implementation of evidence-based foster care models in FY17 and FY18.<sup>3</sup>

These goals are important. However, as the agency, stakeholders, and this Committee all understand, if we are to build the type of foster care system that consistently meets the needs of all children who come into care, we cannot only focus on the number of new foster homes we add or the model of foster care we employ. We must also look at how we can ensure that foster parents feel fully supported in their interactions with the agency. This is an important part of equipping foster parents to

care for their foster children, and also, of ensuring that the agency retains the foster parents it recruits.

Addressing the issue of foster parent retention requires us to acknowledge that, while we are fortunate to have so many caring, devoted foster parents in the District, foster parents do at times encounter challenges while caring for children in the system. Some of these challenges are simply inherent to caring for and raising a child – they have nothing to do with a child’s foster care status and are the same challenges that parents encounter with children outside of the system every day. But others are unique to fostering – they stem from the temporary nature of foster care, from the fact that foster children are in the custody of the District Government (with decision-making authority split among various actors), and from the fact that the long-term role that a foster parent plays in the life of a foster child is heavily dependent on where the child’s court case is procedurally and the various dynamics within the child’s life.

These special challenges that foster parents encounter can include ensuring that they receive accurate and up-to-date information about their foster children’s needs and major case-related decisions, solving logistical issues such as arranging transportation to and from various services and activities for their children, receiving clear and consistent communication from the agency about what is expected of them, understanding their roles within often-large teams of professionals, and knowing where to turn during moments when they might need additional support. When these

challenges are left unaddressed, they can make it difficult for foster parents to provide high-quality day-to-day care for children in their homes, even as they work tirelessly to do so.

A foster parent bill of rights has the potential to help foster parents across the system by clearly communicating to every incoming foster parent what he or she can expect from the agency, particularly with respect to communication, relationships with social workers and other agency personnel, and specialized services and staff that are available to foster parents in emergencies or in the event that they need further assistance or support. For more experienced foster parents, a bill of rights would also be an important reference point, helping them to resolve issues as they arise and ensure that as cases progress, the agency maintains consistently high standards with regard to “teaming” with foster parents to meet the needs of children in care.

We support this bill and look forward to its passage and implementation. We hope that the agency will work closely with key stakeholders and foster parent advocates to assemble a bill of rights document that will be a useful tool for our system’s caregivers. And, as always, Chairperson Alexander, we thank you for your continued attention to the District’s child welfare system.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to answering any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Children’s Law Center fights so every child in DC can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. Judges, pediatricians and families turn to us to be the voice for children who are abused or neglected, who aren’t learning in school, or who have health problems that can’t be solved by medicine alone. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 8 children in DC’s poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. And, we multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children.

<sup>2</sup> Testimony of Damon King, Senior Policy Attorney, DC’s Children’s Law Center, before the DC Council Committee on Human Services, pp. 2-4, March 3, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> The agency reported its FY16 recruitment target in its performance oversight responses. *See*, CFSA FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q81-Q82. The agency reported its FY17 recruitment target in response to Committee questions prior to its FY17 budget hearing. *See*, CFSA FY17 Budget Request Responses to the Committee on Health and Human Services, Q8. As discussed in our budget oversight testimony, the agency has convened a Foster Care Model Workgroup to assess evidence-based foster care models, and the agency has indicated that it will implement evidence-based practices over the next two fiscal years. Testimony of Damon King, Senior Policy Attorney, DC’s Children’s Law Center, before the DC Council Committee on Human Services, pp. 8, April 13, 2016.