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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Facilities and Family Services  
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Public Hearing:  
Budget Oversight Hearing  
Child and Family Services Agency

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## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairperson Lewis George, and members of the Committee. My name is Tami Weerasingha-Cote. I am the Senior Supervising Policy Attorney at Children's Law Center. I am also a Ward 4 resident and the parent of three children here in the District. Children's Law Center believes every child should grow up with a strong foundation of family, health and education and live in a world free from poverty, trauma, racism, and other forms of oppression. Our more than 100 staff – together with DC children and families, community partners and pro bono attorneys – use the law to solve children's urgent problems today and improve the systems that will affect their lives tomorrow. Since our founding in 1996, we have reached more than 50,000 children and families directly and multiplied our impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit hundreds of thousands more.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the Mayor's proposed FY25 budget for the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). Overall, Children's Law Center is pleased with CFSA's proposed budget for FY25. Despite the tight budget constraints facing the District this year, the Mayor's proposed budget for CFSA includes critical investments in placement and prevention, as well as sustained funding for important programs that help keep District children with their families, such as the Grandparent and Close Relative Caregiver subsidy programs.<sup>1</sup>

As guardians-ad-litem representing approximately half the children currently in the care and custody of CFSA,<sup>2</sup> we see firsthand how the quality and capacity of CFSA programs and services impact our clients and their families. CFSA must have adequate resources to meet the basic needs of the children in its care, as well as preserve and reunify families whenever possible.<sup>3</sup> We appreciate the Mayor for recognizing the paramount needs of the families CFSA serves and funding the agency accordingly. We ask this Committee and the Council to protect CFSA's funding throughout the remainder of the budget process and ensure these critical investments are included in the final FY25 budget.

#### **The Proposed Budget Prioritizes Funding for Foster Care Placements – As It Should**

As we testified during CFSA's most recent performance oversight hearing, CFSA's recent investments in specialized, therapeutic, and supportive placements have yielded some improvements in placement stability for children in care.<sup>4</sup> Some of the investments highlighted in our performance oversight testimony include intensive foster care placement and case management services; foster homes and case management services for Spanish-speaking children; and professional foster homes (homes where resource parents are employed in a professional capacity to provide care).<sup>5</sup> During the past year, CFSA also established an enhanced short-term emergency placement program<sup>6</sup> and a new therapeutic group home.<sup>7</sup>

The Mayor's proposed budget for CFSA increases funding for placement by approximately \$4 million,<sup>8</sup> enabling CFSA to not only maintain these important investments in its placement array, but to expand them. During CFSA's recent Budget Stakeholder's Forum, the agency highlighted their work to date to increase placement options – and noted that the additional funding in the FY25 budget would enable them to increase capacity for intensive foster care and increase the number professional foster parents.<sup>9</sup>

Expansion of CFSA's placement array has been a very long time coming – and the work is not yet done.<sup>10</sup> Although the overall population of foster children is shrinking, the children in care are more likely to need the higher levels of support provided by specialized resource-intensive placements.<sup>11</sup> CFSA, therefore, must continue to build out its placement array until it has enough of the right kinds of placements to support the specific population of children in the agency's care.

We commend both the Mayor and the agency for prioritizing placement in the proposed budget and thereby moving the agency closer to being able to provide a stable placement for every child in its care. We ask the Committee and the Council to join this effort by ensuring this funding remains intact through the budget process and is included in the final approved budget.

## **The Proposed Budget Maintains Important Investments in Prevention**

As also covered in our performance oversight testimony, CFSA has accelerated and expanded its efforts to transform the District's child welfare agency into a "child well-being system" by making significant long-term investments in prevention strategies intended to meet families in need with resources, rather than separating children from their families.<sup>12</sup> Children's Law Center views this transformation work as integral to preventing the occurrence of child abuse and neglect in the District and fully supports the agency's efforts on this front.

Key components of this work include the Family Success Centers,<sup>13</sup> the Warmline,<sup>14</sup> and the Collaboratives (community-based organizations that support and staff the Family Success Centers and provide case management services for Warmline referrals).<sup>15</sup> Although we are unable to determine which budget lines in the agency's proposed budget include these components, during its Budget Stakeholder's Forum CFSA explicitly stated that the proposed budget maintains funding for the Family Success Centers and the Collaboratives at FY24 levels.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the agency's budget presentation did not include any cuts or service reductions related to the Warmline in its list of eliminations included in the proposed budget.<sup>17</sup>

Children’s Law Center applauds CFSA’s tremendous work in establishing the Family Success Centers and reconstituting the 211 Warmline as means of increasing access to vital government and community-based resources, services, and programming – and thereby preventing the conditions that most frequently lead to child welfare system involvement. We are pleased that the Mayor’s proposed budget includes the necessary funding to continue this work and ask the Council to ensure this funding remains intact through the budget process and is included in the final approved budget.

## Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions the Committee may have.

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<sup>1</sup> Mayor’s Proposed FY 2022 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 4 Agency Budget Chapters – Part III, Human Support Services, Operations and Infrastructure, Financing and Other, and Enterprise and Other, p. E-4. During CFSA Budget Forum, the agency shared, “decreased in [caregiver subsidy programs] are due to the end of a contracted position, salary, and fringe. No impact to program participants. Added additional FTEs to these programs to support the growth.” See Child and Family Services Agency Budget Forum, April 22, 2024, slides on file with Children’s Law Center.

<sup>2</sup> Children’s Law Center attorneys serve as guardians-ad-litem for children in the care and custody of CFSA. Currently, we represent approximately half the children involved with CFSA – several hundred children in foster care and protective supervision each year. Children’s Law Center attorneys represent children who are the subject of abuse and neglect cases in DC’s Family Court. CLC attorneys fight to find safe homes and ensure that children receive the services they need to overcome the trauma that first brought them into the child welfare system. DC Children’s Law Center, About Us, available at: <https://www.childrenslawcenter.org/content/about-us>. The term “protective supervision” means a legal status created by Division order in neglect cases whereby a minor is permitted to remain in his home under supervision, subject to return to the Division during the period of protective supervision. D.C. Code § 16-2301(19).

<sup>3</sup> Code of the District of Columbia § 4–1301.09a. Reasonable efforts.

<sup>4</sup> Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 21, 2024), available at: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL-002.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL-002.pdf). According to CFSA’s performance oversight data for FY2023, 99 children (just under 20 percent) experienced three or more placements during the year. This is a

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meaningful improvement compared to previous years – in FY2022, 145 children (27 percent) had three or more placements; and in FY2021, 148 children (approximately 24 percent) had three or more placements. This positive trend is also supported by our own internal data and analysis. *See* FY2023 Child and Family Services Agency Performance Oversight Responses, response to Q147, *available at*:

<https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/253>; FY2022 Child and Family Services Agency Performance Oversight Responses, response to Q102, *available at*: [https://dccouncil.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CFSA-FY22-Performance-OversightHearing-Pre-Hearing-Responses-to-Questions\\_2-17-2023-FINAL-1.pdf](https://dccouncil.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CFSA-FY22-Performance-OversightHearing-Pre-Hearing-Responses-to-Questions_2-17-2023-FINAL-1.pdf); FY2021 Child and Family Services Agency Performance Oversight Responses, response to Q110, *available at*: <https://dccouncil.gov/wpcontent/uploads/2022/02/FY21-22-CFSA-Performance-Oversight-Prehearing-Questions-ResponsesFinal.pdf>. Every year, Children’s Law Center reviews several hundred of our active guardian-ad-litem cases to gain better insight into our clients’ experiences in foster care. Our most recent review (covering cases open between June 2022 and May 2023), revealed that 70 of our clients in care (approximately 20 percent) experienced some form of placement instability. This is, again, an improvement over prior years – our 2021-2022 data analysis identified 110 clients (approximately 25 percent) experiencing placement instability, and our 2020-2021 data analysis identified 128 clients (approximately 33 percent) experiencing placement instability. *See* Internal Children’s Law Center Data Collection, "GAL Deep Dive," June 2022 through May 2023; Internal Children’s Law Center Data Collection, "GAL Deep Dive," June 2020 through May 2021; Internal Children’s Law Center Data Collection, "GAL Deep Dive," June 2021 through May 2022.

<sup>5</sup> FY2023 Child and Family Services Agency Performance Oversight Responses, responses to Q140(f), Q150(h), (l), *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/253>.

<sup>6</sup> The Bridge Program includes on-site clinical staff and other supports designed to stabilize youth ages 13 to 17 with significant behavioral health needs. *See* FY2023 Child and Family Services Agency Performance Oversight Responses, response to Q87, *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/253>; *see also* Children’s Law Center monthly meetings with CFSA and OAG, on file with the Children’s Law Center.

<sup>7</sup> Allen House provides supported placements for foster children ages 13 to 17. *See* FY2023 Child and Family Services Agency Performance Oversight Responses, response to Q87, *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/253>

<sup>8</sup> Mayor’s Proposed FY 2022 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 4 Agency Budget Chapters – Part III, Human Support Services, Operations and Infrastructure, Financing and Other, and Enterprise and Other, p. E-4.

<sup>9</sup> Child and Family Services Agency Budget Forum, April 22, 2024, slides on file with Children’s Law Center.

<sup>10</sup> Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Human Services, (February 25, 2021), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TWeerasinghaCote\\_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-25-2021-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TWeerasinghaCote_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-25-2021-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL.pdf); Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Human Services, (February 27, 2022), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_ChildrensLaw-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-17-2022-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TWeerasingha-Cote_ChildrensLaw-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-17-2022-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL.pdf); Tami Weerasingha-Cote, Children’s Law Center, Testimony before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Human Services, (September 22, 2022), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/09/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_CLC-Testimony-for-Sept.-22-2022-Hearing-on-B24-0857B24-0941\\_FINAL.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/09/TWeerasingha-Cote_CLC-Testimony-for-Sept.-22-2022-Hearing-on-B24-0857B24-0941_FINAL.pdf). Sharra E. Greer, testimony before DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 24, 2023), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Sharra-E.-Greer\\_Childrens-](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Sharra-E.-Greer_Childrens-)

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[LawCenter Performance-Oversight FY2022-23-CFSA final.pdf](#); Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 21, 2024), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL-002.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL-002.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 21, 2024), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL-002.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL-002.pdf). (“CFSA has increased its prevention efforts and worked to keep children in care with their families through in-home cases and kin caregiving arrangements, a greater proportion of the foster care population is comprised of older youth and children with significant behavioral health needs.”).

<sup>12</sup> Director Robert L. Matthews, Child and Family Services Agency Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 21, 2024), p. 4, *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/253>.

<sup>13</sup> Since opening in October 2020, the District’s 11 Family Success Centers (“FSCs”) have served thousands of families and individuals. *See* FY2023 Child and Family Services Agency Performance Oversight Responses, response to Q107(a), *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/253>. FSCs seek to connect residents with existing supports and services offered by both District agencies and community-based organizations, as well as offer regular specialized programming designed to meet the needs of the particular neighborhood they serve. *See* Child and Family Services Agency, Keeping DC Families Together, *available at*: <https://cfsa.dc.gov/page/keeping-dc-families-together>; FY2023 Child and Family Services Agency Performance Oversight Responses, response to Q107(b), *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/253>. The most frequently requested services include food, clothing, mental and behavioral health programming, parenting supports, and assistance navigating employment and housing services – reflecting the needs we see at the heart of most of our child welfare cases. *See* FY2023 Child and Family Services Agency Performance Oversight Response, responses to Q107(b)(i) and attachment to Q107, *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/253>.

<sup>14</sup> In October 2023, CFSA “soft launched” the repurposed 211 Warmline as the District’s unified social service resource and referral line. Through partnerships with the Office of Unified Communications and the Collaboratives (community-based organizations that provide families with case management services, concrete supports, and parenting tools), CFSA is implementing a Community Response Model through the Warmline. This means that Warmline callers seeking help with a social need – such as food, housing, medical benefits, etc., – will either be provided with the detailed information and guidance they need to resolve the problem (e.g. contact information for shelter intake, or date/time/location information for grocery distributions), or they will be connected with a Community Responder from one of the Collaboratives who can provide more in-depth case management support and assist with navigating the relevant District-funded and community-based services. All referrals will be made through Unite Us, the same third-party platform used by the FSCs that tracks referrals through handoff, engagement, and closure. CFSA is planning a twelve-month “soft launch” period, during which the Warmline will be operational, but not proactively marketed. The purpose of this “soft launch” period is to collect information and insight into the nature of the District’s social service-related needs and build the capacity of both the Warmline staff and the broader network of government and community-based services. During the first 60 days, the most common needs reported to the Warmline were for housing, utilities, food, and income support – again reflecting the needs that most often cause the instability that brings families to the attention of the child welfare system. *See* FY2023 Child and Family Services Agency



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Performance Oversight Responses, responses to Q113, Q114, *available at:*  
<https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/253>.

<sup>15</sup> FY2023 Child and Family Services Agency Performance Oversight Responses, responses to Q104, Q106, and Q116, *available at:* <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/253>.

<sup>16</sup> Child and Family Services Agency Budget Forum, April 22, 2024, slides on file with Children’s Law Center.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*