



501 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NW · 8<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Washington, DC 20001  
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949  
[www.childrenslawcenter.org](http://www.childrenslawcenter.org)

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Youth Affairs  
May 29, 2025

Public Hearing:  
Budget Oversight Hearing  
Child and Family Services Agency

Tami Weerasingha-Cote  
Policy Director  
Children's Law Center

## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman Parker and members of the Committee. My name is Tami Weerasingha-Cote and I am the Policy Director for 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 on behalf of Children's Law Center regarding the Mayor's proposed FY26 budget for the Child and Family Services Agency. Children's Law Center attorneys serve as guardians-ad-litem for children in the care and custody of CFSA.<sup>1</sup> Currently, we represent approximately half the children involved with CFSA – several hundred children in foster care and protective supervision each year.<sup>2</sup> Children's Law Center also has teams of attorneys dedicated to helping families secure special education services for their children, address unhealthy housing conditions, and obtain custody or guardianship of children in their extended

family.<sup>3</sup> As a result, we not only have expertise in the issues impacting children who are already in the care and custody of CFSA, we also have insight into systemic issues affecting the broader population of families most likely to be impacted by CFSA's policies and practices.

In this extremely challenging budget year, we are largely relieved to see the Mayor's proposed operating budget for CFSA includes only a modest cut of 3.5 percent, and no FTE cuts.<sup>4</sup> My testimony today will: (1) highlight several important investments included in the proposed budget; (2) discuss the importance of restoring full funding to Safe Shores; (3) flag the potential impact of proposed cuts to prevention services; and (4) urge the Committee to take the lead in moving forward proposed legislation designed to help older youth in foster care.

### **CFSA's Proposed FY26 Budget Includes Increased Investments in Critical Areas**

The Mayor's proposed budget for CFSA includes the following important investments:

- A slight increase of \$412,000 for out-of-home placements, which includes living arrangements for children who must enter foster care, including family foster homes, group care, and independent living programs.<sup>5</sup>
- A slight increase of \$30,000 for clinical health services, which includes the provision of medical and behavioral health screenings for children in foster care, and other health services and supports.<sup>6</sup>
- An increase of \$264,000 for In Home clinical case management and support, which includes the provision of social work support and services that ensures the safety and well-being of children while they remain in their homes with their families.<sup>7</sup>

- An increase of \$370,000 for older youth empowerment, which provides targeted programming and support services for older youth in foster care.<sup>8</sup>

We have previously testified regarding the need for CFSA to expand its placement array,<sup>9</sup> to increase the availability of clinical services,<sup>10</sup> and to improve the supports provided to older youth in care<sup>11</sup> – so we are very pleased to see increased investments in these areas. It’s also our understanding that there is an increased need in the community for In Home services and supports, so we are glad to see additional investments there as well.

### **Funding for Safe Shores Must be Restored**

Further, it’s our understanding that the proposed budget eliminates CFSA funding for Safe Shores, a critical organization that provides services and support for children affected by abuse in DC.<sup>12</sup> Safe Shores serves as the District’s statutorily designated child advocacy center.<sup>13</sup> Children’s Law Center strongly urges the Council to secure funding for Safe Shores, even in the difficult budget landscape that FY26 presents.

DC is required by law to review and investigate every instance of child sexual abuse with a multidisciplinary investigation team (“MDT”) with representatives of the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), CFSA, and the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), and to adopt a written child abuse protocol to ensure coordination and cooperation among all involved agencies to increase their efficiency and effectiveness in

handling their investigations and ensuring the child's safety and treatment needs are met.<sup>14</sup> Since 1995, Safe Shores has coordinated teams of federal and local authorities to serve DC children believed to be in harm's way.

Our attorneys, who represent more than half of the District's foster children, have witnessed Safe Shores' deft and sensitive coordination of authorities and clinicians to minimize the impact of forensic investigations on our clients. When a child comes forward with an allegation of abuse, the last thing they need is to have to tell their story repeatedly to the police officer, then the assigned detective, the Child Protective Services (CPS) investigative social worker, the assigned CFSA social worker, their attorney, their therapist, and so forth. Our attorneys have reported to Safe Shores to observe one clinician interview with our client in a child-friendly environment that is equipped with toys and technology that enables our attorneys, CPS investigators, and law enforcement to observe the interview, ask questions, and use the same recording in family or criminal court proceedings. This evidence-based approach avoids retraumatizing the child, improves investigatory effectiveness, and maltreatment substantiation rates, and increases the referral rate of cases for prosecution.

Failing to allocate funding for Safe Shores would not eliminate the District's obligation to utilize the multi-disciplinary aspect of child abuse allegations, but it would eliminate the District's ability to utilize the one provider with the experience and expertise to do this difficult job well and immediately. Restoring this funding is

essential to meeting the needs of children in the care and custody of CFSA, and we strongly urge the Committee and the Council to ensure this is done.

### **Proposed Cuts to Prevention Services May Undermine CFSA's Goal of Keeping District Families Together**

Unfortunately, the proposed cuts to CFSA's budget includes several cuts that will hamper CFSA's ability to keep District families together, causing us great concern. Specifically, the proposed budget includes cuts to kinship support, the Grandparent and Close Relative Caregiver subsidy and support programs, as well as CFSA's primary prevention and housing and community support services.<sup>15</sup> All of these programs and service areas provide direct support for struggling and vulnerable families, which is at the heart of CFSA's stated goal of keeping families together safely whenever possible. We fear that decreased investment in these vital prevention efforts will result in increased numbers of children entering foster care.

### **Moving SOUL Legislation Forward Will Create More Pathways for Stability and Success for Older Youth in Foster Care**

Finally, as you know, Children's Law Center has been working in close partnership with a group of current and former DC foster youth (known as our LEX Leaders), CFSA, the Office of the Attorney General, and others to develop proposed legislation for SOUL, a new permanency option for older youth.<sup>16</sup> Although we are disappointed that SOUL was not included in the BSA as we had hoped, we remain invested in moving this legislation forward. We hope that this Committee under your

leadership, Chairman Parker, will take the steps necessary to move this legislation forward as quickly as possible.

## Conclusion

There are a few additional line items in CFSA's proposed budget that raise questions for us, and we will be seeking the assistance of the agency and this Committee over the coming weeks, to fully understand the implications of the proposed budget and address any concerns. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I welcome any questions the Committee may have.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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>2</sup> DC Children's Law Center, About Us, *available at*: <https://www.childrenslawcenter.org/content/about-us>.

<sup>3</sup> DC Children's Law Center, Our Impact, *available at*: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/our-impact/>.

<sup>4</sup> Mayor's Proposed FY 2026 Proposed 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-1.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at p. E-4, Table RL0-4, Line H03705, Out-Of-Home Child Placement.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at p. E-5, Table RL0-4, Line H04101, Clinical Health Services.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at p. E-4, Table RL0-4, Line H03903, In Home Clinical Case Management and Support.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at p. E-5, Table RL0-4, Line H03707, Older Youth Empowerment.

<sup>9</sup> Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 21, 2024), p. 12-15, *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); Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Youth Affairs, (February 13, 2025), p. 9-12, *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/T.Weerasingha-Cote\\_Childrens-Law-Center\\_FY24-Performance-Oversight-Hearing-for-CFSA\\_FINAL-1.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/T.Weerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-Center_FY24-Performance-Oversight-Hearing-for-CFSA_FINAL-1.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 21, 2024), p. 15-16, *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-)

---

[Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL-002.pdf](#); Tami Weerasingha-Cote and Amber Rieke, testimony before the DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (December 6, 2023), *available at*: [Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Dec-6-2023-Hearing-on-B25-0500-and-Foster-Youth-Behavioral-Health\\_FINAL.pdf](#).

<sup>11</sup> Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 21, 2024), p. 17-18, *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>12</sup> Although we cannot identify an explicit explanation in the FY2026 Proposed Budget and Financial Plan, it is our understanding that the proposed budget does not include the one-time budget enhancement included in the FY2025 budget to continue funding for Safe Shores to serve as the District’s statutorily designated child advocacy center.

<sup>13</sup> Code of the District of Columbia § 4–1301.02. Definitions. (2B).

<sup>14</sup> Code of the District of Columbia § 4–1301.51. Mandatory investigation of child abuse and neglect cases by multidisciplinary team.

<sup>15</sup> Mayor’s Proposed FY 2026 Proposed 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, Table RL0-4, Lines H03704, H03602, H03604, H03802, and H03803.

<sup>16</sup> Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Youth Affairs, (February 13, 2025), p. 7-9, *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/T.Weerasingha-Cote\\_Childrens-Law-Center\\_FY24-Performance-Oversight-Hearing-for-CFSA\\_FINAL-1.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/T.Weerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-Center_FY24-Performance-Oversight-Hearing-for-CFSA_FINAL-1.pdf).