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

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## **Introduction**

Good afternoon, Chairperson Parker and members of the Committee. My name is Tami Weerasingha-Cote. I am the Policy Director at Children's Law Center, a resident of Ward 4, 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 this opportunity to testify regarding the proposed FY2027 budget for the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) over the past year. 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>

In this most challenging budget year in recent memory, we are largely relieved to see the Mayor's proposed operating budget for CFSA includes only a modest cut of 5.6 percent, and practically no FTE cuts.<sup>3</sup> The Mayor's proposed budget leaves mostly intact the budgets for critical program areas, including out-of-home placement and

services, and the grandparent and close relative caregiver subsidies – and we are grateful for this.<sup>4</sup> The Mayor’s proposed budget does include several concerning cuts to community prevention services – including home visiting and the Family Success Centers.<sup>5</sup> Further, the Mayor’s proposed budget does not include any funding for the implementation of SOUL. My testimony will first explain why the Committee must prioritize finding funding for SOUL and then address our concerns regarding the proposed cuts to community prevention services and Safe Shores.

### **The Committee Must Create Stable Pathways Out of Foster Care for Older Youth by Funding the Implementation of SOUL**

SOUL passed its first full Council vote unanimously last week and should pass its second vote shortly to become law in the District by the summer.<sup>6</sup> We are so grateful for LEX leadership<sup>7</sup> and the Committee’s partnership in getting SOUL this far. The Committees on Youth Affairs has done so much to turn our LEX Leaders vision into a reality – from introducing this bill, to quickly holding a hearing, to getting it through not one but two markups, and now through passage before the full Council. Children’s Law Center now urges the Committee to take the final step and make sure SOUL is fully funded in this year’s budget.

We know that it is an extremely tough budget year – and the conventional wisdom is to focus on saving what can be saved, mitigating cuts where possible, and *not* trying to find money for “new” things. Although generally true – SOUL must be the exception. As you will hear from our LEX Leaders, SOUL fills a critical gap in our foster

care system by providing older youth in care an alternative to aging out.<sup>8</sup> By enabling youth in care to build families that work for their individual circumstances, that can be dynamic and flexible in structure, and that don't have to fit within preconceived notions of what a family "should" look like, SOUL offers youth who would otherwise languish in care before aging out a way to take ownership and agency in building their own futures.

For this reason, we strongly urge the Committee and the Council to ensure that SOUL is fully funded by allocating \$385,000 for SOUL in the FY2027 budget, and \$1.98 million over the four-year financial plan.

### **Substantial Cuts to Prevention Services Will Harm Children and Families in the District**

The Mayor's proposed budget includes a cut of over \$4 million to community prevention and primary prevention services.<sup>9</sup> It is our understanding that these cuts include the elimination of \$200,000 in local dollars for CFSA's home visiting program, as well as the total elimination of the Family Success Centers.<sup>10</sup> Home visiting programs and the Family Success Centers 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. We therefore urge the Committee to seek to restore as much of this funding as possible, to ensure children and families can continue to access much-needed supports.

## Conclusion

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

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<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> Mayor’s Proposed FY 2027 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.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at p. E-6 to E-7, Table RL0-4.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at p. E-7, Table RL0-4, Lines H03801 – Community Prevention and Early Intervention Services and H03802 – Primary Prevention Services.

<sup>6</sup> Support, Opportunity, Unity, Legal Relationships (SOUL) Amendment Act of 2025 (B26-399), available at: <https://lms.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B26-0399>.

<sup>7</sup> The term “LEX” or “LEX Leader” refers to the group of older youth with lived experience in foster care who worked with CFSA, community advocates, and other government agencies to develop SOUL.

<sup>8</sup> See Tami Weerasingha-Cote, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Youth Affairs (November 13, 2025), available at: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Nov.-13-2025-Hearing-on-SOUL-Legislation\\_FINAL.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/TWeerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Nov.-13-2025-Hearing-on-SOUL-Legislation_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Mayor’s Proposed FY 2027 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-7, Table RL0-4, Lines H03801 – Community Prevention and Early Intervention Services and H03802 – Primary Prevention Services.

<sup>10</sup> CFSA Budget Stakeholder Presentation, May 6, 2026 (slides on file at Children’s Law Center).