



616 H Street, NW · Suite 300
Washington, DC 20001
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949
www.childrenslawcenter.org

**Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Human Services
March 16, 2012**

**Public roundtable on PR19-561: The Director of the Child and Family Services Agency
Brenda Donald Confirmation Resolution of 2012**

**Sharra E. Greer
Policy Director
Children's Law Center**

Good afternoon Chairman Graham and members of the Council. My name is Sharra E. Greer. I am the Policy Director of Children's Law Center¹ (CLC) and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of CLC, the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District and the only such organization devoted to a full spectrum of children's legal services. Every year, we represent over 1,200 low-income children and families, including 500 children in foster care, dozens of children at risk of entering foster care, and several hundred foster parents and relatives of children in foster care.

Children's Law Center has a long standing policy of not taking formal positions on mayoral appointments. Since the choice of director should be informed by an understanding of the problems facing the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), I am providing my testimony today with the hope that I can offer useful thoughts about the agency and its needs. CLC presented extensive and detailed testimony at the agency's oversight hearing a little over a month ago that provides a still accurate assessment.² I will not repeat that testimony today, but will focus on a few highlights.

CFSA is an agency that faces significant challenges. To have a successful child welfare system, the agency, in conjunction with other DC agencies, must institute reform at every step in the process. On the front end, the government does not adequately prevent abuse and neglect, and CFSA does not do a good enough job keeping children safely with their birth families. Forcibly removing a child from his parents is traumatic and sometimes can cause even more harm than staying in a troubled home environment. CFSA must help children remain safely with their parents if at all possible and support the policies and programs necessary to implement this goal.

Once CFSA removes children, it does not serve them well in foster care. Children stay in foster care too long because CFSA fails to reunify them with their parents or find alternative permanent families. Too few children are living in kinship foster placements, despite evidence that

these placements are significantly more stable than non-kinship foster homes. Although there have been modest improvements in recent years, children in CFSA custody still have a high level of unmet mental health needs. I cannot overstate the importance of providing prompt and effective mental health services to children and families.

Children in care also face additional struggles such as lack of educational stability which jeopardizes their long-term educational outcomes. Finally, when children are nearing the age when they will no longer be in care, they are not adequately prepared. Older youth are not given appropriate transition plans to successfully enter adulthood. These are long standing problems that the agency has struggled to address.

Over the past year, the agency has made some strides. Prior to Acting Director Donald coming on board in January, the agency went through significant transitions. Director Roque Gerald left at the end of May 2011 and Debra Porchia-Usher stepped in as Interim Director. During this time, the agency made important progress. CFSA launched a differential response pilot project, aimed at keeping more children safely at home. CFSA took a significant step to lower barriers for children to be placed with kin by issuing a policy defining the non-safety related licensing factors that may be waived for kin and empowering staff other than the Director to make waiver decisions.³ The agency also took some steps towards transparency with regard to rulemaking and policies.

In the slightly over two months Acting Director Donald has been at the agency, she has taken significant steps to continue and expand this progress. She quickly reached out to the community to engage stakeholders in reform. She quickly convened strategic workgroups to identify problems and, more importantly, solutions. She included key CFSA staff, as well as community stakeholders, to address how to keep children from coming into care, improve well-being while in care, have appropriate first placements and increase quick exits to permanency and

kin placement. CLC has been impressed that these workgroups have been solution-focused with an emphasis on identifying changes that can be implemented quickly as well as long term changes.

Acting Director Donald has also taken quick action to put into place her leadership team and realigning the duties of the leadership to be more effective. These steps included promoting Debra Porchia-Usher to Principal Deputy Director and bringing on board Michele Rosenberg as Chief of Staff. We view this as a key step to success. Significant reform requires a strong and stable management team that can effectively implement change.

In short, it has been an impressive and fast paced beginning to Ms. Donald's tenure. We hope that these efforts will lead to real change for children and families. Ms. Donald and CFSA cannot solve all of the problems alone. This must be a DC-wide effort. Councilmember Graham, members of the Committee, you have an essential role in the important work of reforming CFSA. The necessary work has begun. The Committee can ensure this process moves forward by not only holding the CFSA Director accountable, but holding oversight hearings to ensure all of the executive branch is working together to support the necessary reforms.

The children and the families of DC deserve for this to be a turning point for CFSA. I hope that at long last, with support across the District's government and in the community, that CFSA can become a fully functional agency. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

¹Children's Law Center works to give every child in the District of Columbia a safe home, meaningful education and healthy life. As the largest nonprofit legal services provider in the District, our over 80-person staff partners with hundreds of pro bono attorneys to serve 1,200 at-risk children each year. Applying the knowledge gained from this direct representation, we advocate for changes in the city's laws, policies and programs. For more information, visit www.childrenslawcenter.org.

² See <http://www.childrenslawcenter.org/sites/default/files/clc/021012%20Testimony-CFSA%20oversight.pdf>.

³ See CFSA Temporary Licensing of Foster Homes for Kin policy, available at <http://cfsa.dc.gov/DC/CFSA/About+CFSA/Policy/CFSA+Policy+Manual+Table+of+Contents/Program+Policies/Program+-+Temporary+Licensing+of+Foster+Homes+for+Kin> and CFSA Notice of Emergency and Proposed Rulemaking amending Chapter 60, Foster Homes, of title 29, Public Welfare of the DCMR, Nov. 18, 2011, available at

<http://www.dcregs.dc.gov/Notice/NoticeListForPublic.aspx?type=Issue&CategoryName=Emergency%20and%20Proposed%20Rulemaking&IssueID=254>.