



NAACP *National Association For The Advancement Of Colored People*

Washington, DC Branch

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**Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on Human Services
*Child and Family Services Agency***

Thursday, March 24, 2022

FY2023 BUDGET HEARING TESTIMONY

Greetings, Chairman Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the proposed *FY2023 Budget for Child and Family Services Agency*. My name is Abiola Agoro. I am the Political Action Chair for the NAACP Washington, DC Branch overseeing legislative advocacy and public policy for the NAACP.

For over 112 years, the NAACP has championed the fight for racial justice and equity as the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization, since our organization was founded in 1909. The mission of the NAACP is to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic empowerment of African-Americans and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination. The NAACP DC Branch represents over 20,000 members, stakeholders and partners that are voting residents across all 8 wards of the District of Columbia. Since 1913, the Washington, DC NAACP Branch has led historic, fights advocating for the political, economic and cultural empowerment of Blacks people in District of Columbia. In 1914, our early members led a rally of over 10,000 people protesting segregation, equality and police brutality against Black men, women and children in Washington, DC. Today, the NAACP is a fierce, advocate for transformative solutions to ensure Black lives, children, youth and families are safe, whole, healthy, thriving and valued in all spaces.

The work of Child and Family Services Agency is critical to strengthening families and ensuring the well-being of children in the District of Columbia. CFSA provides important community-based services to help families overcome difficulties and help foster care children find safe homes.

Today's testimony regarding the FY2023 budget for the *Child and Family Services Agency*, will elevate three budget requests impacting the health and well-being of children within the District's child welfare system. The NAACP strongly urges you to fully fund the Ombudsperson for Children, we urge you expand funding of the Grandparent Caregiver Program and we urge you to expand funding of the Close Relative Caregivers Program.

First, we request you fully fund the independent, external Ombudsperson for Children which was funded last year, but had been defunded in this FY2023 proposed budget. The Ombudsperson for Children is essential in tackling systemic issues affecting the outcomes for children in DC's foster care system. CFSA's FY 2023 proposed budget has completely defunded the Ombudsperson for Children, which is critical in addressing the systemic issues affecting outcomes for foster children, and crossover youth. This independent, impartial Office of the Ombudsperson for Children increases the transparency and accountability needed to improve outcomes for children in foster care.

Many children and families in DC's child welfare system struggle to navigate the agency's complex policies and procedures, making it hard for them to resolve simple day-to-day problems regarding CFSA services. The CFSA Ombudsperson could work toward addressing the day-to-day issues including, sufficient clean clothing, hygiene products, access to education and other services.

Further, long-term systemic issues prevent children in foster care from achieving the critical milestones they need to build stable, independent lives and develop healthy relationships as adults. These systemic issues include the ongoing placement crisis, which has resulted in foster children bouncing through multiple foster homes every year, running away, or spending nights at homeless shelters or the agency building. For over thirty years, CFSA has been subject to rigorous oversight through a court-mandated monitor as a result of the LaShawn v. Bowser class action lawsuit. Due to the recent approval of a final settlement in this case, this oversight will likely end by June 2022 – making it even harder to address systemic issues.

The Ombudsperson for Children will be focused on understanding systemic issues (including those related to interagency communication and coordination), while the CFSA Ombudsperson co-located within the agency is situated to quickly problem-solve the day-to-day issues affecting CFSA-involved children and families. The CFSA Ombudsperson will report to and provide information and documents to the Ombudsperson for Children to help inform analysis and recommendations.

In addition to providing important oversight functions and services to children and families involved in the child welfare system, the Ombudsperson for Children is the only DC agency that has an explicit mandate to collect data and analyze issues impacting crossover youth. Crossover youth and children in CFSA's care have a wide range of complex needs that often require cooperation and communication across multiple DC and regional agencies. Crossover youth are children across both the foster care system and juvenile justice system, who often experience significant challenges to their well-being and stability. Crossover youth often transition from foster care, to homeless or juvenile justice systems, to prison, which exacerbate outcomes in adulthood. Crossover youth have greater difficulties in school, higher rates of recidivism and higher rates of unemployment. The Office of the Ombudsperson for Children makes it possible to better understand the scope of factors impacting at risk-youth and will identify and investigate challenging systemic issues that hinder crossover youth from achieving successful outcomes.

Lastly, the NAACP strongly urges you to increase funding to sustain and expand CFSA's Grandparent and Close Relative Caregiver Programs, which provides financial and other supports to caregivers who care for and raise children in the foster care. The proposed FY2023 budget decreases funding for CFSA's Grandparent and Close Relative Caregiver Programs, when there was a waitlist last year. The Grandparent Caregivers Program, offers a monthly subsidy for low-income residents who are raising their grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-nieces, or great-nephews. The Close Relative Caregiver Program, provides a monthly subsidy to low-income residents who are raising their siblings, nieces, nephews, and cousins. Providing financial aid to low-income caregivers supports positive outcomes for the children in these households. There is a need to increase the funding for this program to meet the needs of the families requiring this support.

In 2019, there were approximately 7,000 District children under the age of 18 living in grandparent led households. Many of these grandparents are older residents living on fixed income who have willingly taken on the responsibility of caring for their young relatives. Many grandparents on a fixed-income benefit significantly from financial assistance of the CFSA's Grandparent Caregivers Program providing a monthly subsidy to promote stability and family connections for children in the care. This investment helps to keep these children out of the formal child welfare system. When compared to children in non-relative foster care, children in the care of their adult relatives have more stability. They are more likely to maintain connections with siblings, preserve their cultural heritage, and maintain community bonds.

The Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) reports that in the first quarter of 2022, 78% of children (481) in Washington, DC foster care system are Black. The NAACP advocates for real economic empowerment solutions to supporting closing the Black wealth gap for children and families. Economic inequalities continue to depress economic progress and wealth accumulation for Black residents in DC. The median income for families with children in Ward 3 is \$250,000+, the highest of any Ward. The median income for families with children in Ward 8 is \$31,597, the lowest of any Ward. Accounting for race, Black families have a median income of \$38,520, White families have a median income of \$94,720, and Latinx families have a median income of \$40,755. According to CFSA, in 2020, "Wards 7 and 8 represent the largest percentage of families participating in the Grandparent Caregivers Program. Ward 7 is home to 176 families (35%) while Ward 8 has 213 families (43%). The total number of caregivers across all Wards is 501.

The vast majority of families participating in the Grandparent Caregivers Program are African-American. In 2020, there were 491 African-American families participating in the program, as compared to just 8 Latino families, 2 Asian or Pacific Islander families, and no (0) Caucasian, American Indian, and Middle Eastern families participating. In 2019, there were 510 African-American families participating in the program, 10 Latino families, 2 Caucasian families, 2 Asian or Pacific Islander families, and no (0) American Indian or Middle Eastern families participating. In 2020, there were 64 new applicants to the program on behalf of 197 children. In total, there were 201 new children applying for the program in 2020. Of the 64 applications, 23 were approved and 33 new children were enrolled in the program in 2020. In 2020, 68 families were waitlisted due to funding.

Expanding CFSA's Grandparent and Close Relative Caregiver Programs is critical to support the economic empowerment and financial sustainability of Black families, disproportionately represented in the DC Child welfare system. Economic empowerment is key to addressing the systemic inequalities that have disproportionately impacted African-Americans for centuries. Wealth and access to resources directly impact safe, healthy and whole families with access to quality healthcare, education, employment, housing, criminal justice and legal representation. We strongly urge you sustain and expand CFSA's Grandparent and Close Relative Caregiver Programs, which provides critical financial supports to caregivers who care for and raise relatives in the foster care.

On behalf of the Washington, DC Branch of the NAACP, we strongly urge you to fully fund the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children and expand funding for the CFSA Grandparent and Close Relative Caregiver Programs. Thank you!

Respectfully Submitted,

Akosua Ali
President
NAACP DC Branch

Sincerely,

Abiola Agoro
Political Action Chair
NAACP DC Branch