



District of Columbia, CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

July 1, 2015 - June 30, 2016

Annual Report



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I. Introduction

Federal law requires that states establish Citizen Review Panels to “evaluate the extent to which State and local child protection system agencies are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities.”¹ In accordance with this requirement, the District of Columbia has established the District of Columbia Citizen Review Panel (the CRP) “to serve as an external, independent oversight body for the District's child welfare system, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of District government agencies involved in child protection as well as neighborhood-based services provided by vendors.”² Each year, the Citizen Review Panel is required to submit an annual report summarizing the Panel’s activities, making policy recommendations, and providing information on the District’s progress in implementing Panel recommendations.³ Pursuant to this requirement, the Panel submits the following report covering the period from July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016.

Over the last year, the CRP has continued its work with the DC Child and Family Services Agency to improve the agency’s services for young adults aging out of the foster care system. This has included extensive work to reform the DC child welfare system’s aftercare program for former foster youth. CRP members believe that planned changes for FY17 and beyond will result in major improvements in how the District prepares its foster youth to exit the system, as well as how it works with young adults in the crucial first few years of adulthood. The CRP would like to thank CFSA Director Raymond Davidson and senior leadership and staff for their willingness to work collaboratively with child welfare stakeholders. We look forward to continued collaboration as the agency moves from formulating policy recommendations to implementing them over the next several months.

In February of 2016, the CRP also welcomed three new members to the Panel, appointed by the DC City Council. These new members bring vital expertise to the Panel, and will allow the Panel to expand its oversight activities in the coming year. The Panel is currently considering topics for further oversight based on current trends and challenges in the District’s child welfare system. The Panel would like to thank the DC Council, in particular Chairman Phil Mendelson, Councilmember Yvette Alexander, members of the Council’s Committee on Health and Human

¹ 42 U.S.C. § 5106a

² D.C. Code § 4-1303.51

³ *Id.*

Services, and Mayor Muriel Bowser's Office of Talent and Appointments for their continuing attention to the membership challenges that the Panel faces. We are optimistic for the CRP's continued growth and look forward to expanding the Panel's vital oversight work in 2016-2017.

II. The Citizen Review Panel's Activities

The Citizen Review Panel's 2015-2016 activities occurred in the context of several changes in the District's child welfare system, including a leadership change and a subtle but important shift in recent child welfare population trends. These changes greatly influenced the CRP's taskforce work regarding youth aging out of the foster care system and have provided guidance as to areas which could warrant the Panel's attention in the coming year.

A. Current State of the District's Child Welfare System

As noted briefly in last year's annual report, 2015 brought a change in CFSA's leadership. With the election of Muriel Bowser as Mayor of the District of Columbia, Brenda Donald, Director of CFSA since 2012, was appointed as Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services. Upon Deputy Mayor Donald's transition, then-Deputy Director for Administration Raymond Davidson was named Interim Director of the agency. Mayor Bowser ultimately appointed Mr. Davidson to be CFSA's Director, with the Council confirming his appointment on July 14, 2015.

Since assuming leadership of the agency, Director Davidson has worked closely with child welfare stakeholders to gather feedback about how to address the child welfare system's greatest challenges and complete the agency's multi-year reform agenda. Although the agency has experienced a number of important successes in recent years, including drastically reducing the size of its foster care population and launching several new community-based services to prevent children from coming into foster care, at the time of the leadership transition, the agency was also facing some challenges.

While the agency has worked tirelessly to reduce the number of children entering care and increase the rate of children exiting to permanency, such work has not been without difficulties. The agency has managed to reduce its current foster care population to around 1,000 children,⁴ but

⁴ The most recent data from the *LaShawn v. Bowser* Court Monitor indicates that, as of December 31, 2015, the agency had 1,017 children in out of home care. *LaShawn* Court Monitor Report, June 7, 2016, p.109.

with the pace of year-to-year population declines slowing in recent years,⁵ the agency has recently struggled to maintain the right number and array of foster homes to match population trends and fluctuations. In April, 2015, the agency experienced a shortage of foster homes, the details of which were discussed at length at recent hearings for the longstanding *LaShawn v. Bowser* class action lawsuit.⁶

Meanwhile, the agency is still in the process of assessing the effectiveness of its prevention services. The agency has completed the initial build-out of several interventions for families at risk of entry into foster care, including evidence-based crisis intervention services and evidence-based reunification support services.⁷ The availability of these types of services is vital to ensuring that families at risk of child welfare system involvement do not have to have children removed and can, instead, address their challenges while remaining together. Over the last few years, the agency has worked diligently to identify potential service providers and bring these services on-line, but now, must shift to ensuring that families are connected to these services and that these services produce positive outcomes.

And finally, outcomes for teenagers and young adults in foster care, as well as youth who age out of foster care continue to be a concern. Of youth who aged out of foster care in FY15, 69.5% were unemployed, with another 9.5% employed only part time,⁸ and among youth who attend college, drop-out rates remain high.⁹ Much like other jurisdictions, the District struggles to ensure that youth who stay in foster care through their teenage years and into adulthood leave the system fully ready for life on their own.

⁵ From December, 2012 to December, 2013, the foster care population decreased by 215 children, from 1,430 to 1,215. From 2013 to 2014, the decrease was 147 children, from 1,215 to 1,068. From 2014 to 2015, there was a decrease of 51 children, from 1,068 to 1,017. For an illustration of the downward trend in the foster care population over the last decade, see, *LaShawn* Court Monitor Report, June 7, 2016, p.108.

⁶ For more information about CFSA's placement shortage, please see *LaShawn* Court Monitor Report, June 7, 2016, pp 113, 152, as well as *LaShawn* Court Monitor Report, November 16, 2015, pp. 98-99.

⁷ CFSA FY 2015 and FY 2016 (1st Quarter) Responses to the DC Council Committee on Health & Human Services Oversight, Q19.

⁸ CFSA FY 2015 and FY 2016 (1st Quarter) Responses to the DC Council Committee on Health & Human Services Oversight, Q76.

⁹ FY16 year-to-date numbers show that 66 youth enrolled at either two-year or four-year colleges during the fall, 2015. Over that same period, 32 dropped out. CFSA FY 2015 and FY 2016 (1st Quarter) Responses to the DC Council Committee on Health & Human Services Oversight, Q69.

Since becoming the agency's Director, Director Davidson and his leadership team have begun tackling these challenges. For example, the agency has adopted a number of new strategies to recruit foster parents and has convened a working group that will recommend the adoption of evidence-based foster care models that will better serve special populations of foster youth.¹⁰ Working with the DC Council's Committee on Health and Human Services and external stakeholders, the agency is also in the process of expanding and restructuring its support services for older youth in foster care. And during the second half of 2015, Director Davidson convened a Youth Aftercare Work Group to make recommendations for changes to both older youth and after care services, with the agency beginning implementation of key recommendations in the summer and fall of 2016.

As this report will discuss, the CRP's Taskforce on Youth Aging Out has been an active participant in the agency's Aftercare Work Group, and will continue to work with the agency to ensure that the Work Group's recommendations are implemented. Further, as the Panel considers potential oversight activities for 2016-2017, it is carefully reviewing and discussing the agency's 2015-2016 activities and what the agency will face in the coming year.

B. Citizen Review Panel Membership, Structure, and Leadership Transitions

DC statute requires that the DC CRP be composed of 15 members.¹¹ Eight members, including the Chair of the Panel, are to be appointed by the Mayor, while seven are to be appointed by the DC Council.¹² Last year's annual report noted the CRP's difficulty in maintaining its operations in light of a shortage of appointed members.

Since the last annual report, DC Council Chairman Phil Mendelson's office has worked closely with the CRP to fill Council vacancies. As a result, on February 2, 2016, the Council passed resolutions appointing of three new members: Emily Smith Goering, Marie Cohen, and Michelle McLeod (See Appendix A for their resumes). Additionally, as the Council is responsible for appointing the Panel's Vice Chair, Ms. Smith Goering was appointed to this position, filling a long-standing vacancy. Each of these new members has brought significant child welfare expertise to the Panel, and the Panel's veteran members look forward to working

¹⁰CFSA FY 2015 and FY 2016 (1st Quarter) Responses to the DC Council Committee on Health & Human Services Oversight, Q82.

¹¹D.C. Code § 4-1303.52.

¹²*Id.*

with them in the coming year. The CRP will continue to work with the Chairman's office to fill the remaining four Council vacancies on the Panel.

Unfortunately, the appointments of Ms. Smith Goering, Ms. Cohen, and Ms. McLeod have been offset by the departures of four Mayoral appointees: Dr. Betty Nyangoni, Elaine Farley, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Dr. Matthew Levy. The CRP's current members would like to thank Dr. Nyangoni, Ms. Farley, Ms. Brooks, and Dr. Levy for their service and dedication to the Panel's work. The CRP is currently working with the Mayor's Office of Talent and Appointments to fill all remaining Mayoral vacancies and to re-appoint members who were appointed by the previous Mayor.

The Panel continues to be facilitated by the Center for Child Protection and Family Support,¹³ a DC non-profit organization under the leadership of Joyce N. Thomas. The partnership between the DC CRP and CCPFS has been vital to the DC CRP's activities over the last year. CCPFS has provided much-needed planning assistance and logistical support for the Panel's quarterly meeting, research and expertise in support of Panel taskforces, and resources to ensure that Panel members are fully up-to-date on the latest developments in child welfare, in the District and nationally. The CRP Work Plan for 2016 may be found in the appendix B.

C. Quarterly Meetings

The DC CRP holds meetings on a quarterly basis.¹⁴ Quarterly meetings are open to the public and are held at various locations around the District. These meetings provide opportunities for the Panel to discuss its on-going work, as well as for Panel members and the public to learn about the newest developments in the District's child welfare system.

Since the last annual report, quarterly meetings were held on September 30, 2015, December 1, 2015, March 1, 2016, and June 21, 2016. The Panel used each of these quarterly meetings to discuss issues relevant to the District's child welfare system, as well as the on-going work of the Taskforce on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care. During the March 1 and June 21 meetings, the Panel discussed potential topics for a new taskforce that will take on an additional oversight issue, beginning in the fall of 2016. CRP Vice-Chair Emily Smith Goering will chair this new taskforce and the Panel's newest members will serve as taskforce members. The minutes of each quarterly

¹³More information about CCPFS is available at: <http://www.centerchildprotection.org/>.

¹⁴D.C. Code § 4-1303.53.

meeting can be found in Appendix C, as well as a survey highlighting potential 2016-2017 oversight topics is included in the appendices (Appendix D and E).

D. Citizen Review Panel National Conference

The CRP was able to send one member, Vice-Chair Emily Smith Goering, to the National Citizen Review Panel Conference, held June 6th-9th in Phoenix, AZ. The theme of the conference was *Achieving Meaningful Impact: Citizen Involvement in Child Welfare*. Ms. Smith Goering presented at the conference on the work of the CRP's Taskforce on the Youth Aging Out of Foster Care (the work of the taskforce is discussed further below). The presentation was attended by approximately 20 participants representing CRPs from across the country. See Appendix F for the Power Point presentation presented during the conference.

E. Taskforce Activity

Within the DC CRP, subject matter taskforces play a vital role in helping the Panel to carry out its oversight responsibilities. The Panel currently has one active taskforce: The Taskforce on Youth Aging out of Foster Care. The Taskforce on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care was organized in response to a persistent problem in the District's child welfare system: That far too many youth age out of foster care unprepared for adult life. As discussed above, many young people struggle when they leave the foster care system at age 21, particularly in the areas of employment, secondary and post-secondary education, housing, and managing challenging relationships. CFSA has a responsibility to ensure that the young people in its care are adequately prepared to deal with the challenges of adulthood, and the Taskforce on Youth Aging Out advises CFSA on how it can improve supports for this population.

Once a youth reaches the age of 19 ½, he/she is supposed to be referred to one of five Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives and matched with an aftercare service worker, who is expected to begin attending transition planning meetings and assist with linking the youth to post-emancipation supports.¹⁵ When a youth turns 21, his/her aftercare worker and assigned Collaborative are responsible for providing the youth with voluntary, post-foster care services until age 23.¹⁶

¹⁵See, CFSA Program Policy: Older Youth Services, Procedure F: Aftercare Services.

¹⁶*Id.*

The Taskforce continued to build on work from the previous year and collaborated with CFSA to implement the CRP recommendations from the CRP 2014 annual report. In 2015, CFSA held two forums with stakeholders who provide service to youth aging out of foster care. From these meetings, three short-term work groups were formed to address the issues of program outcome measures, scope of work for aftercare provider contracts, and best practices. CRP members attended both forums and participated in all of the workgroups. As a result of these meetings and CRP recommendations, CFSA updated the scope of work for future aftercare contracts. It also identified a set of benchmarks and outcome measures to be used to track youth's progress – both pre- and post-emancipation – in preparing for adulthood. At the end of the process, CFSA developed a final report highlighting changes to the program model (see appendixG). Additionally, in spring 2016, the agency made the decision to issue a solicitation to identify a new aftercare services provider (or combination of providers) for FY17. To date, aftercare services have been provided as part of a larger contract between CFSA and the Collaboratives, with the contract covering a variety of different services and supports for families. The agency hopes that this new solicitation will allow it to select a provider (or combination of providers) that is best equipped to work specifically with the transition-aged youth population. Finally, based on CRP recommendations, a position has been created at CFSA that will provide further oversight of services for youth aging out of care and assist with the internal re-alignment of agency programming to better serve transition-age youth. This position is in the process of being filled and CRP Taskforces Chair Rick Bardach has participated in interviews for the position.

III. Recommendations of the Citizen Review Panel

The Citizen Review Panel Taskforce on Youth Aging Out is pleased with the recommendations of CFSA's Aftercare Workgroup and would like to thank CFSA for a thoughtful and inclusive stakeholder process. At this time, the Taskforce believes that the best way forward for the agency is to fully implement the Workgroup's recommendations, a process that is already underway. The Taskforce looks forward to working with the agency to ensure that, by the end of FY17, the Workgroup's recommendations are full implemented.

IV. Conclusion

The DC Citizen Review Panel is pleased to submit this annual report documenting the Panel's activities for 2015-2016. The last year has included important progress in addressing long-standing membership challenges, and the Panel looks forward to continuing to work with the Council and the Mayor to fill remaining vacancies in the coming year. The Panel's current membership has continued its work regarding improving services for young people aging out of the foster care system, and is pleased that the agency is taking steps to improve oversight of aftercare services, implement a common set of benchmarks and outcome measures across all services for teens and young adults, and identify a new aftercare provider for the coming year. With new members and new challenges for the agency going forward, the Panel looks forward to using 2016-2017 to expand its oversight activities into new topics, and continue to fulfill its mandate to provide oversight and accountability regarding the District's child welfare system.

Respectfully Submitted by the Members of the District of Columbia Citizen Review Panel:

Damon King, Chair

Emily Smith Goering, Vice Chair

Rick Bardach, Treasurer, Chair of the Taskforce on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Sherrill Taylor

Claresa Venson

Michelle, McLeod

Marie Cohen