

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



June 30, 2020

Tracy Hamilton, Chair
Citizen Review Panel
c/o Center for Child Protection
714 G Street SE, #3
Washington, DC 20003

Dear Ms. Hamilton,

The Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) received *The Citizen Review Panel's Annual Report May 1, 2019-April 30, 2020*. We appreciate the Citizen Review Panel's (CRP) thoughtful, comprehensive efforts and for hosting the Citizen Review Panel Stakeholders' Forum. Members of the CFSA Executive Leadership reviewed the report and we have provided responses to the recommendations in the attachment.

We appreciate your commitment to the children and families of the District of Columbia and look forward to our continued collaboration.

If you have any questions, please contact Roni Seabrook, Planning Specialist in the Office of Planning, Policy and Program Support at Roni.Seabrook@dc.gov.

Sincerely,

Brenda Donald, Director
DC Child and Family Services Agency

**DC Child and Family Services Agency Responses
to the 2019-2020 Citizen Review Panel Annual Report Recommendations**

TRAINING FOCUSED RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation: Mental health first aid should be provided as a mandatory topic or special course during in-service training for all foster parents.

CFSA Response

Youth Mental Health First Aid is offered to resource parents as a course during in-service training. The course description is below:

Youth Mental Health First Aid Training: This eight-hour course teaches lay-persons how to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental illness and substance use disorders, de-escalate crises, provide comfort, and refer individuals to professional services. The program utilizes interactive exercises and role-playing activities to teach a unique action plan for helping others.

Recommendation: All stakeholders of the foster care system (foster parents, social workers, attorneys, judges, etc.) should be required to take mental health first aid training and should be trained to be sensitive to mental health needs of youth in care. CFSA should mention this in the oversight hearing before the DC City Council to encourage and make a course in Mental Health First Aid available.

CFSA Response

As indicated above, the Youth Mental Health First Aid is offered as a course during in-service training for foster parents and social workers. In addition, CFSA social workers receive training on the mental health needs of youth in foster care through their education which is further explored during pre-service training for new social workers. CWTA also offers training on Engaging Older Youth (description below) and has recently partnered with the Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative to bring the training *Integrating Adolescent Brain Development into Child Welfare Practice* in FY 2021. While CWTA can suggest these training sessions to other stakeholders of the foster care system, it does not have the authority to require it.

Engaging Older Youth Training

Participation in this training session provides social workers, family support workers, and resource parents with the information needed to identify and address barriers related to engaging youth involved with the child welfare system. Participants engage in discussion that supports the development of cultural awareness as it relates to the historical context of African American youth. Social workers will gain an understanding of how engagement skills can facilitate meaningful conversations.

Recommendation: Training for foster parents should be specific to the types of foster youth placed in their home, such as individuals who are LGBTQ, youth with special needs, and issues that are gender specific.

CFSA Response

CFSA's Child Welfare Training Academy (CWTA), offers population specific training for resource parents to support their ability to care for the unique needs of youth who may be placed in their homes. The Foster Parent Training Regulation Act of 2018, which is legislation passed by the DC Council in December 2018, requires specialized training for resource parents when a child who meets one of the criteria listed below joins the family. The legislation specifies timeframes for notification, attending training and resource parent exceptions for when resource parents will not be required to complete the training.

- LGBTQ
- A victim of sex trafficking, as that term is defined in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000
- Child with a disability
- Pregnant or a parent
- History of violent behavior; or
- Sixteen years of age or older.

CWTA developed the Parenting Specialized Populations training, a six-hour session designed to provide resource parents with information on ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care who have been identified as part of a specialized population per the Foster Parent Training Regulation Amendment Act of 2018. Participants will receive information regarding the unique development needs, parenting practice, and ways to best support children who are sixteen (16) year of age or older, a victim of sex trafficking, may be LGBTQ, a child with a disability, pregnant and parenting, or has a history of violent behavior. Participants will be also be provided a list of both in-person and online training sessions that will provide more in-depth and detailed information for each of these populations.

CFSA's foster parent training program, New Generation PRIDE speaks specifically to the challenges of working with teens and provides additional resources for parents to support them. Additional specialized courses include:

- **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):** This four-hour in-service training course about ASD is offered to social workers and resource parents. It provides social workers and resource parents with a review of the diagnosis of autism and its associated symptoms along the spectrum, with a focus on specific interventions and best practices for children and youth diagnosed with ASD.
- **Understanding and Preventing Human Trafficking in Child Welfare:** The course introduces social workers and resource parents to current federal and local laws and policies regarding Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC); terminology related to CSEC; best practice guidelines for identifying and preventing CSEC; and provides participants the opportunity to explore cultural considerations as it relates to CSEC as well as their own beliefs and values. The course also covers ethical considerations.
- **The Human Trafficking Volume II: Recognizing and Responding to Indicators of Commercial Sexual Exploitation in Child Welfare:** This course builds on information

from the previous course and includes information on ways to recognize the risk factors and conditions that place children and youth at heightened risk; best practice to reduce these risks; how to identify, report and respond to children and youth who are victims of CSEC; current services available to meet the holistic and specialized needs of children and youth who have experienced CSEC; and strategies for cross-collaboration to address these needs in a trauma-informed way that promotes safety and resilience.

Specialized Training with National Center for Children and Families

CFSA's partner agencies also address the specialized training needs of resource parents who care for youth who may have special needs. During FY 2019, NCCF provided in-service training on fostering children with special needs to equip parents with knowledge, skills, and awareness to foster youth with special needs. During training sessions, foster parents are encouraged to consider placement for this population.

In FY 2020, CFSA will work to maintain and increase the pool of resource parents for the LGBTQ population and will continue to make this training and placement need a priority, especially for transgender youth. Training on understanding and working with LGBTQ youth along with a new policy for gender expression youth will be offered to the entire pool of resource parents to increase awareness and encourage more resource parents to accept placement for this population of youth.

Resource Parent Advisory Council

In addition, the Child Welfare Training Academy aims to continually provide quality training that not only increase individual professional growth and development, but also promotes the safety, permanence, and well-being of the children and families of the District of Columbia. Thus, the Resource Parent Advisory Council was developed to ensure CWTA are better able to respond to resource parent training needs. The council's first meeting was April 1, 2020 and will convene quarterly to discuss upcoming training options and needs for new curriculum that is specifically geared towards resource pants. The advisory council is made up of new and experienced resource parents who expressed interest in participation. The advisory council meetings provide both an evaluator and partnering relationship between CWTA and the Agency's resource parents.

PROGRAM OPERATIONS/MENTAL HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation: Foster parents should not be judged negatively for seeking mental health support. CFSA should have a clear policy statement on mental health involving foster parents.

CFSA Response

CFSA does not judge resource parents for seeking mental health support and encourages all individuals who need mental health to seek appropriate treatment; this is discussed during both the home study process and the relicensing process. Resource parent support workers and social workers are available to support resource parents and recommend community resources and encourage all resource parents to utilize mental health supports available through their insurance provider.

Recommendation: Mental health treatment should be available to all children in foster care, even if they are not exhibiting symptoms of mental illness. There should be early intervention to prevent significant mental health problems for children as they develop.

CFSA Response

Mental health services are available for every youth in CFSA care. Currently, the Office of Well Being provides mental health evaluations to youth to aid in determining whether therapy is needed based on clinical presentation. For youth recommended for therapy, CFSA has on-site mental health therapists to provide therapeutic support. For children not identified as needing therapy immediately, on-demand therapy services are available at any time when the need is recognized. In addition, CFSA has a contractual relationship with MBI Health Services, a certified behavioral health agency, for long term therapy services for CFSA youth and their families. Lastly, some youth enter care with an existing connection to a Core Service Agency for therapy. The Office of Well Being works with CFSA social work teams and the mental health agencies to maintain those therapeutic relationships to ensure continuity of services, when possible.

Recommendation: CFSA should partner with other DC leadership to provide education and awareness about mental health to the African American community to decrease stigma about mental illness and encourage individuals to seek treatment when needed.

CFSA Response

CFSA is a member of the Department of Behavioral Health Planning Council (BHPC) along with several other District agencies and community organizations. In addition to CFSA’s participation on BHPC, CFSA actively participates in forums, work groups and meetings that aid in education and/or service provision for children and families served by CFSA and the District of Columbia. BHPC is an appointed advisory group that helps the Director of the Department of Behavioral Health to:

- Identify unmet behavioral health needs
- Advise the Director in the planning and implementation of person-centered behavioral health services that are easily accessible, integrated and coordinated with co-occurring physical health care treatment; and communicate to the public about DBH services, goals and objectives, and
- Monitor, review, and evaluate the allocation and adequacy of mental health and substance abuse services in the District of Columbia
- Serve as advocates for adults and children with behavioral health disorders and needs

RESOURCE PARENT SUPPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation: All new foster parents should have an experienced foster parent mentor assigned to work with them for a specific amount of time.

CFSA Response

The *Bridge, Organize, Nurture, and Develop* (BOND) program is CFSA’s new “hub” model (launched in April 2020) for engaging and supporting resource parents through peer networks led by experienced and committed BOND parents. Services offered via the BOND program

include but are not limited to peer support, resource parent networking and respite services. Providing consistent, meaningful support for our resource parents is a top priority for CFSA. We are transitioning from two previous models to a single program in order to promote more deliberate, comprehensive and coordinated support for resource parents.

DC CFSA resource families are assigned to a BOND Squad of 10-12 peer resource parents. Each Squad has an assigned BOND Lead Family, with an experienced and committed resource parent who will provide leadership of the Squad. The BOND Lead Family's role is to provide peer support/mentoring to assigned resource families, coordinate special activities and provide or assist with coordinating respite care. All resource parents, to include kinship parents, are assigned a BOND Lead and have this support available to them around the clock.

Recommendation: Existing foster parents should be supported and encouraged to recruit potential foster parents.

CFSA Response

In March 2020, CFSA hired an individual for a new recruiter position, who is responsible for creating a robust recruitment and retention plan by Oct 1, 2020. Part of the plan will include the creation of the Ambassador Program, or informal recruiters, to include foster parents. CFSA recognizes that foster parents are the best recruiters and look forward to including them in a more formalized way.

Recommendation: Foster Parents should be allowed to create a profile to present to youth before placement so that young people have an idea of expectations before the face-to-face meeting occurs.

CFSA Response

The aforementioned plan also includes the creation of Foster Parent Profiles and this work is underway.

OFFICE OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation: CFSA/OYE should assist in setting up a network of former foster youth that could provide support to youth aging out of foster care.

CFSA Response

The Office of Youth Empowerment will create an After-Alliance Alumni group comprised of 5 youth that will meet quarterly to discuss effective transitional supports to youth aging out of foster care. This group will address key transitional components needed to enhance the aging out of care process based on their experience. Through this process, youth will serve as a source of support coupled with the aftercare specialist. The group will meet biannually to review current processes and provide feedback as well as report on the progress. These youth will also mentor and provide direction to youth who can benefit from a peer-to-peer mentorship program.