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Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia

Committee on Human Services

**Public Hearing:
Performance Oversight Hearing
Child and Family Services Agency
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Good morning Chairperson Nadeau and Members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Marla Spindel, and I am the co-founder and Executive Director of DC KinCare Alliance. Our mission is to support the legal, financial, and related service needs of relative caregivers who step up to raise children in their extended families in times of crisis when the children's parents are not able to care for them due to mental health and substance use disorders, incarceration, death, abuse and neglect, and/or deportation. DC KinCare Alliance is a member of the Fair Budget Coalition, and we are pleased to report that the Coalition's FY 2021 Budget Platform requests \$600,000 for an independent Office of Ombudsperson for Child Safety and Well-Being.

When we testified at this hearing last year, we asked the Council to expand the Grandparent Caregivers Program to include other close relative caregivers. We thank the Council for passing the Close Relative Caregivers Subsidies Amendment Act of 2019 so that aunts, uncles, cousins and adult siblings who are taking care of DC's at-risk children can get the financial help they desperately need. The Grandparent and Close Relative Caregivers Programs together ensure the safety and stability of children at already traumatic times when they have to leave their parent's homes to live with a relative.

There is one additional thing we would respectfully ask the Council to do to ensure these Programs are fully achieving their purposes, and that is to remove the requirement that a caregiver is not eligible to apply for a subsidy until 6 months after a child has moved into their home. The six-month waiting period causes real hardship to relative caregivers and the children they raise. DC's relative caregivers are primarily women of color who live in Wards 7 and 8. They often live at the economic margins of our society, even before they are called upon to raise a relative child. Many report a significant disability. The children who come into their care arrive with nothing but the clothes on their back and the relative caregiver has

to scramble to buy food, clothing, shoes, toiletries, bedding and even a bed. The up-front costs of having a child come into their homes unexpectedly are great and our kinship caregivers do not have savings or other resources available to cover these costs. Often, they wind up falling further into poverty, with no money to pay for rent, food, heat, water, or electricity.¹

We know that there are devastating impacts for children growing up in poverty.² Advancements in neuroscience have made it possible to demonstrate that poverty disrupts the developing brain architecture, which leads to significantly lower educational achievement, earnings, and overall health for those growing up in poverty, as well as a disproportionately higher rate of developmental delays and learning disabilities.³ And, research has found that there is a “dose-response” pattern, such that outcomes are worse the longer children are exposed to poverty.⁴ These studies posit that interventions aimed at increasing the income of families with children can alter the link between childhood poverty and deficits in cognition and academic achievement.

According to CFSA’s Grandparent Caregiver Program Annual Status Report for FY 2018, 66% of the recipients of the subsidy receive TANF, which means they live well below the poverty line. The annual average GCP subsidy together with TANF effectively brings a family at least up to the poverty line. But waiting to do this only serves to hurt children and increase their risk of both short-term and long-term deficits in all areas of development,

¹ We testified at the Department of Human Services Oversight Hearing about obstacles for relative caregivers to obtain TANF and other benefits in DC.

² Toxic Stress Key Concepts,” Harvard University Center on the Developing Child.
<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>.

³ Perry Firth, “Homelessness and Academic Achievement: The Impact of Childhood Stress on School Achievement,” Firesteel: The Network of Washington YWCAs Washington. (September 8, 2014).
<http://firesteelwa.org/2014/09/homelessness-and-academic-achievement-the-impact-of-childhood-stress-on-school-performance/>

⁴ Hair NL, Hanson JL, Wolfe BL, Pollak SD. Association of Child Poverty, Brain Development, and Academic Achievement. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2015;169(9):822–829. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2015.1475.
<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2381542>.

including health, education, and well-being. Every minute, hour and day matters, and we should make sure every effort is made to bring these children out of poverty as soon as possible.

We also note that in addition to the 6-month waiting period, CFSA reports that there is an average processing time of 30 days for someone to be approved for the subsidy. Even once approved, the caregiver will not receive their first payment until the month after approval. Ultimately, this results in caregivers having to wait a minimum of **8 months** before receiving any payment. Moreover, the first payment is often only a partial payment, as the subsidy is paid in arrears. For example, if a relative caregiver were approved for a subsidy today, they would have to wait until March 7-11 for a payment to be issued, and it would only be an amount equal to the remaining 17 days in February – about half a month’s subsidy. They will have to wait until April 7-11 to receive a full month’s subsidy payment for the month of March.

Significantly, for those applying for the GCP subsidy, the wait time is indefinite as there has been a waiting list since August 2019. This is the first time CFSA has reported a waiting list for this subsidy, which we attribute to more children being diverted from foster care to live informally with relatives, along with more grandparents becoming aware of the Program as a result of our efforts to publicize it community-wide.

The Council has an opportunity to today to dispense with the 6-month waiting period that undermines the purposes of these Programs to ensure better outcomes for children when they cannot live with their parents. We also ask that the Council consider emergency funding now of the Grandparent Caregiver Program to eliminate the current waiting list, and increase funding for FY 2021 to ensure such a waiting list does not occur next year.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions.