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**Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia**

**Committee on Human Services**

**Public Hearing:  
Performance Oversight Hearing  
Department of Human Services  
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Good morning Chairperson Nadeau and Members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Stephanie McClellan and I am the Deputy Director of DC KinCare Alliance. I am pleased to testify today regarding the administration of TANF benefits by the Department of Human Services. DC KinCare Alliance is a member of the Fair Budget Coalition and we support budget priorities and policies that alleviate poverty in the District of Columbia.

Here in D.C., 9,000 children are living in the care of relatives with no parent present at a rate that is double the national average. These relatives 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 also report a significant disability.

The first issue I would like to bring to your attention is that there are onerous documentation requirements for relative caregivers to obtain TANF. The Combined Application for DC Benefits is overly burdensome and difficult to complete, asks relatives to swear to the truthfulness of answers to questions that they could not possibly know, may not be submitted on-line and is not even pdf-fillable. In order for a relative caregiver to obtain TANF benefits, she must prove relatedness to the child. This may be established by a relative caregiver providing her own birth certificate, the parent's birth certificate, and the child(ren)'s birth certificates. However, requiring relatives to provide all of these birth certificates is not practical as they typically will not have the parent's or child(ren)'s birth certificates. A grandparent can only obtain the birth certificates of her grandchild(ren) if the information in DC Vital Records shows that the grandparent is related to the parent and the grandchild(ren). The only way for other relatives to obtain a child's birth certificate in DC is to have a certified court order granting the relative custody. And the cost to obtain a birth certificate is \$23 each,

which is prohibitive, especially when a relative takes in a group of siblings. Paternal relatives may not ever be able to prove relatedness through birth certificates as fathers often are not listed on them. While the ESA Policy Manual lists other documents to establish relatedness, most are either not accessible to relative caregivers, or would only prove relatedness between a parent and her own child. The bottom line is that the ESA's TANF documentation requirements for relative caregivers are onerous and burdensome, and result in unnecessary barriers to access these benefits.

Compounding problems with the documentation requirements is the fact that ESA Service Center staff often are not knowledgeable about the unique requirements for relative caregivers to obtain TANF benefits and instruct relatives to provide documentation that is not required. This results in multiple unnecessary visits to the Service Center, where relative caregivers must wait hours for service and there is no option to make an appointment or have a phone call answered or returned. This delays these relatives and the children in their care from receiving benefits to which they are entitled.

We propose the following to reduce barriers to access TANF by relative caregivers:

1. Similar to other jurisdictions like New York and Maryland, DHS should permit additional types of evidence to prove relatedness to a child, such as a court order, a written acknowledgement of paternity, an affidavit from the caregiver, DNA tests, and statements not only from religious leaders but also from community members.
2. DHS should provide special training to staff on the requirements for relative caregivers to obtain benefits. DC KinCare Alliance would be happy to assist with developing and/or providing such training.
3. Each Service Center should have a kinship office to serve relative caregivers. DHS could implement a model kinship office in one Service Center as a pilot project to

determine its effectiveness. DC KinCare Alliance would be happy to assist with implementation of such a pilot project.

4. A constituent should be able to make an appointment to speak with an ESA representative, especially if they have to come back multiple times.
5. DHS should establish an Office of Ombudsperson to ensure that constituents can have their issues addressed in a timely manner. Currently, there is only a language access Ombudsperson but no one to address other issues that arise on a regular basis.

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I have with me here today two relative caregivers who will tell you about the real-life difficulties they have encountered when trying to obtain TANF benefits to help them raise the young children in their care.

Thank you for your consideration of these important matters.

I am happy to answer any questions.