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Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia

Committee on Human Services

**Public Hearing:
Budget 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 other 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 hospitalization, 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 support a fair recovery to the COVID-19 pandemic and oppose an austerity budget that cuts financial support and services to the District's most vulnerable residents.

We are disappointed with the proposed decreases in CFSA's FY2021 budget to the Grandparent Caregiver and Close Relative Caregiver Programs, as well as the whopping \$3.5 million decrease in funding for Prevention Services, which would represent a 30% decrease from FY2020 funding, and would account for more than 50% of all CFSA FY2021 program reductions. We also note that the Grandparent Caregiver Program is already significantly underfunded. According to CFSA's Grandparent Caregiver Program Annual Status Report, 54 eligible families in CY2019 were denied the subsidy and placed on a waiting list due to a lack of appropriated funding.¹ We are also very concerned about a reduction in funding of the Close Relative Caregiver Program, which has been a critical new support for relative caregivers who are not eligible for the Grandparent Caregiver Program.

It is a hallmark of CFSA's policy to invest in prevention services to ensure children are not abused or neglected in the first place and, if they are, to prevent children from being placed in foster care. To reduce funding for the Caregiver Programs, which are successful

¹ DC Child and Family Services Agency, *Grandparent Caregivers' Program: Annual Status Report CY2019*, February 28, 2020, p. 6, available at https://cfsa.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cfsa/publication/attachments/CFSA_Grandparent%20Caregivers%20Program%20Annual%20Report%202019%20%28Final%29_2-11-20_1.pdf.

forms of prevention services, as well as for the broader category of Prevention Services is contrary to the central mission of CFSA. The need for these prevention services is even more dire now as a result of the COVID-19 public health emergency when families are exceptionally stressed physically, mentally, and financially.

A recent article by The American Psychological Association links the stress associated with the pandemic to increased risks of childhood abuse and neglect. It references a 2019 research study of Hurricane Harvey, which found stress associated with the disaster led to higher rates of both domestic violence and child abuse during and after the hurricane.² The World Health Organization observed similar outcomes, identifying a fivefold increase in the rate of inflicted traumatic brain injury in children under two in counties severely affected by Hurricane Floyd, while counties less affected or not affected had no increase in the injury rate.³ Closer to home, an April 30, 2020 Washington Post article reported that, during the public health emergency, Children's National Hospital has seen more severe child abuse cases than in prior years, with a concomitant increase in the percentage of children who have died from abuse during the pandemic than for the same time period last year.⁴

Now, more than ever, parents need to be provided with increased (not fewer) resources to help them manage their stress and assist them with basic needs and social supports. Grandparents and other close relatives who undertake to help their families by

² Ashley Abramson, *How COVID-19 May Increase Domestic Violence and Child Abuse*, American Psychological Association, April 8, 2020, available at <https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/domestic-violence-child-abuse>.

³ *Violence and Disasters*, World Health Organization, 2005, available at

https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/violence/violence_disasters.pdf.

⁴ Samantha Schmidt and Hannah Natanson, *With kids stuck at home, ER doctors see more severe cases of child abuse*, The Washington Post, April 30, 2020, available at

https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/04/30/child-abuse-reports-coronavirus/?utm_campaign=wp_post_most&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpisrc=nl_most.

taking in children when the parents are unable to care for them should also be supported, especially now, when it is harder than ever to have children come into your home with just the clothes on their back.

By continuing our investment in prevention services today, we will reap the benefits with lower entries into expensive foster or congregate care settings, as well as lower incidences of physical, developmental, and mental health issues for children growing up during this unprecedented time.

The Council has an opportunity to ensure District children are protected and given every opportunity to grow and thrive and become our leaders of tomorrow. Let's not let them down now when they need us most.

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