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Judith Sandalow

**Testimony before the
District of Columbia Council
Committee on Human Services**

**Director of the Child and Family Services Agency
Roque R. Gerald Confirmation Resolution of 2009
PR 18-0137**

**Judith Sandalow
Executive Director
The Children's Law Center**

May 13, 2009



Good morning, Chairman Wells and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Judith Sandalow, and I am the Executive Director of the Children's Law Center in Washington, DC. I am testifying today on behalf of the Children's Law Center¹ which, as you know, represents 500 children in the abuse and neglect system each year. With the help of more than fifty area law firms, the Children's Law Center also represents several hundred foster and kinship parents as well as struggling families under investigation by Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA).

The Children's Law Center has a long standing policy of not taking formal positions on mayoral appointments. Since the choice of director should be informed by an understanding of the problems facing CFSA, I am providing my testimony today with the hope that I can offer useful thoughts about the agency and its needs.

A year and a half ago I testified at Dr. Sharlynn Bobo's confirmation hearing. She was the fourth director in six years. The challenges facing the agency then were significant, to say the least. My testimony described a poorly performing agency that frequently failed its children.

At the time, it was unimaginable that the agency could decline even further. Yet, the discovery of the Jacks/Fogle children's bodies and the District's response led to just that. An overwhelming investigations backlog and the mass exodus of staff brought the agency to the brink of disaster and further endangered the well-being of the District's children.

Dr. Gerald, as Interim and then Acting Director, deserves enormous credit for clearing the backlog and rebuilding the staff. Successfully stabilizing the agency took

¹The Children's Law Center envisions a future for the District of Columbia in which every child has a safe home, a meaningful education and a healthy mind and body. We work toward this vision by providing free legal services to more than 1,000 children and families each year and by using the knowledge we gain from representing our clients to advocate for changes in the law. The Children's Law Center is the largest civil legal services organization in the District of Columbia and the only organization providing comprehensive representation to children.

focused leadership, including the ability to mobilize CFSA staff as well as staff from other agencies.

CFSA is no longer on the brink of disaster. It is now back to being the same poorly performing agency that it was in the Fall of 2007.² The most recent assessment by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, the Court Monitor in *LaShawn A. v. Fenty*, reflects this and reports that while progress has been made there is much work to be done to have a successfully performing agency.³

As I struggled to write this testimony and to put into words the problems facing CFSA and the direction it needs to go, I had an astounding realization. Almost every word of my testimony 18 months ago at Dr. Bobo's confirmation hearing is applicable and true today. I can make no stronger statement about the situation facing DC's children today than simply to submit again my testimony from that hearing.⁴

I want to add only these thoughts. Dr. Gerald has, over the past several months, articulated a desire to focus on keeping children in their homes or with kin, to improve social work practice and to involve the community in real partnership. He has taken a few concrete steps toward these goals – convening advocates and private providers in an initial meeting focused on building shared outcomes and drafting a detailed social work practice model that is currently being reviewed within CFSA and by the community. These are positive steps forward.

Dr. Gerald cannot move even these initiatives forward, however, unless he has a senior management team with the skill to implement these ideas throughout the agency.

² See *LaShawn A. v. Fenty*, An Assessment of the District of Columbia's Child Welfare System (As of January 31, 2009), Center for the Study of Social Policy, April 30, 2009 (Monitor's Report) pg 2-3.

³ Id.

⁴ Testimony before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Human Services, Director of the Child and Family Services Agency, Sharlynn E. Bobo Confirmation, Resolution of 2007, PR 17-0343, of Judith Sandalow, Executive Director, the Children's Law Center (November 8, 2007) is attached.

There are still key positions that are filled by acting staff and some that are unfilled.⁵ Unless CFSA has a strong and stable management team, the dramatic changes that are necessary will be impossible.

Councilmember Wells, members of the Committee, you have an essential role in the important work of reforming CFSA. Dr. Gerald has begun the necessary work. He has stabilized the agency, begun to rebuild the staff and management, started to reach out to stakeholders and other agencies to work on collaborative solutions. The Committee can ensure this process moves forward by not only holding the CFSA director accountable, but holding oversight hearings to ensure all of the executive branch is working together to support the necessary reforms.

The children and the families of DC deserve for this to be a turning point for CFSA. I hope that at long last, with support across the District's government and in the community, that CFSA can become a fully functional agency. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

⁵ Monitor's Report at 9.