



COUNCIL FOR COURT EXCELLENCE

**Major Points of Council for Court Excellence Testimony to DC Council
Committee on Human Services Oversight Hearing on CFSA FY09 Performance,
3-11-10**

The child welfare system's goals are to provide for the safety, permanency, and well-being of the children who come to its attention. As CCE testified last year, the DC child welfare system is doing far less well than it needs to on the goal of permanency: finding permanent families for all foster children and doing so with a sense of urgency.

We emphasize that delays in permanency are the responsibility of the entire system -- including the Family Court, the private attorneys appointed by the Family Court to represent children and adults, and the Office of the Attorney General -- and should not be placed solely at the doorstep of CFSA.

Since fiscal 2004, the good news is that the number of DC children in foster care has declined by nearly 700, from 2,824 to 2,144. You would expect that the lower caseload in foster care would let all the professionals in the system work more quickly to achieve permanency. Unfortunately, the results, as reported in CFSA's annual reports, do not bear that out. **Permanency appears to have slowed down** for far too many foster children.

Let us highlight some disturbing trends from the data:

- Of the 2,824 DC children in foster care at the end of **fiscal 2004**, **only 36% had been in care for more than two years. Now, 58% have been in care for more than two years and 36% have been in care for more than four years.**

There are various ways neglected children can achieve permanent families:

- First, stabilizing a family so that children can remain at home or return home is the principal goal of the child welfare system. In fiscal 2009, 358 foster children were reunified and left foster care. However, 34% of the reunifications in 2009 occurred within one month of the child's removal from home. It would be a good idea to review these cases to determine if CFSA made reasonable efforts to prevent the trauma of removal in the first place.
- Second, adoptions have declined every year over the past six fiscal years: from 420 in 2004 to only 108 in 2009. With 491 other foster children with that court-approved permanency goal, **at the current rate of speed it could take nearly five more years to complete adoptions for those 491 children.** This should not be acceptable to anyone.
- Third, permanency by legal guardianship has also declined for the past six years. There were only 88 in fiscal 2009 compared to 203 in 2004. With 284 other foster children with that court-approved permanency goal, **at the current rate of speed it could take more than three more years to complete guardianships for those 284 children.** This also should not be acceptable to anyone.
- Fourth, 32% of the children in foster care at the end of fiscal 2009 have a court-approved permanency goal of Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement, or APPLA. 90% of those 700 children have been in foster care for more than two years, and 68% have been in foster care for more than four years.
- Finally, 175 DC children aged out of the foster care system in fiscal 2009, without achieving permanency.

The Family Court has for several years been making a decision within the Adoption and Safe Families Act's 14-month deadline on what a child's permanency goal is, but as the statistics above make quite clear, **all parts of the District's child welfare system are taking far too long to implement that permanency decision.**