

Testimony of Rosie Parke, Director of Communications and Community Based Services

East River Family Strengthening Collaborative, Inc

before the

Committee on Human Services

Regarding the

CFSA Performance Oversight Hearing

February 25, 2021

Good Morning Chairperson Nadeau and members of the Committee on Human Services. My name is Rosie Parke and I serve as the Director of Communications and Community Based services of East River Family Strengthening Collaborative, located in Ward 7. Thank you for allowing me to express my support of the DC Child and Family Services Agency, especially as it relates to the Families First DC Initiative.

ERFSC is among 9 grantees of the Families First DC Initiative grant which took effect on January 1, 2020. This very important initiative; spearheaded by Mayor Muriel Bowser and led by DC Child and Family Services Agency focuses on families in Wards 7 and 8. It is a neighborhood based, whole family approach to provide upstream, primary prevention services and neighborhood driven resources. The initiative aims to empower communities and families, integrate government services and programs to build on family strengths, and is in direct alignment with ERFSC's mission to empower families, youths, seniors, and the Ward 7 community.

Since receiving the grant, ERFSC and the other grantees have worked closely with CFSA to ensure that all the residents in targeted areas are at the forefront of our

planning and implementation of what are now called the Family Success Centers. ERFSC received two grants to operate Family Success Centers in the Benning Park/Benning Terrace and Minnesota Avenue/Benning Road neighborhoods. The planning phase from January 1, 2020 to September 30, 2020 was a collaborative process with Director Brenda Donald and her key staff, including Octavia Shaw, Kiara Streeter and Dominique Griffin, and the other grantees. Collectively, we engaged in the process of conducting needs assessments to ensure that we would provide services that the residents indicated that they need, hosted various focus groups and community meetings, and in the initial stages, did some in-person community engagement. Once the pandemic hit in March 2020, we ensured that we provided meals, PPE equipment and services such as “Coping with COVID” sessions to ensure we were being compassionate to our residents, while paying attention to the DC mandates of staying at home, and ensuring we were socially responsible by observing social distancing. We convened Community Advisory Councils (CAC) which comprises of community stakeholders, who are an integral part of this very important initiative – the CAC meets monthly and with their help we can regularly strategize on the best services and programs for the residents we serve. We have also worked closely with government agencies such as DC Housing Authority, MPD 6D, DC Public Library, and DC Public Schools to ensure that we are not duplicating services, but rather working in tandem to ensure the needs of the residents are catered to. CFSA hosts monthly check-in meetings with various government agencies which provides us with easier access to services, and they have done an incredible job of ensuring that all grantees have regular training on Now Pow, the Protective Factors, and the National Standards. We

have also worked with external partners who are our mini-grantees and have contracted them to provide services for our residents such as fitness and wellness, cooking classes, art and dance classes, community workshops on trauma and violence, and mental health services.

Without the active support and guidance of CFSA by meeting with the network of grantees frequently via site visits, monthly networking, and data meetings, we would not be in the position we are to truly make DC stand out as part of a larger national model. With the NowPow data system, we can track and refer residents across the network of grantees and service providers and cater specifically to the varying needs of our residents. We appreciate Director Donald and her team at Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) for ensuring that there is consistency yet autonomy across all the Family Success Centers.

Since implementation began on October 1, 2021, ERFSC like the other grantees have been providing programs and services residents indicated that they needed, and we are constantly canvassing the community to ensure that we are pivoting based on the challenges brought on by the pandemic. Our monthly meetings with CAC members serve as the perfect space for us to strategize on successes, challenges, and opportunities to serve our residents better. We have hired staff (Family Center Managers and Community Support Specialists) who grew up in and reside in those targeted communities where our Family Success Centers are located. We believe that the staff not only serve as role models, but they also have a vested interest in the success of their neighbors, and in most instances go above and beyond. We continue to work with government agencies and strategic partners to ensure that we are not

duplicating services but working together for our residents. Most importantly, with various external situations our residents (and us) have faced and are facing, such as the political climate, assault at the Capitol, General Election, and the pandemic, we are adapting a more fluid, flexible, and compassionate approach to service delivery.

Our residents have indicated that they are inundated with home schooling and at times lack the interest or energy to join us on yet another Zoom session, so we do our best to find out what their personal needs are and deliver on those needs. We are extremely mindful of social distancing and as such are doing most programming virtually. We have taken care packets to residents, given them gift cards, had Movie Night and Games Night with them, given them free produce, and have spent time just talking to them to help alleviate various anxieties they are experiencing. Despite the pandemic, we are still seeing families show up for services at our FSC, such as fitness and wellness sessions, dance classes, tutoring sessions, workshops on coping with community trauma, and mental health sessions.

We continue to work with community stakeholders such as Chris Donatelli of Donatelli Management and Scottie Irving of Blue Skye Construction, Dr. Lewis Tait of The Village DC, and DC Housing Authority to ensure that our residents have access to critical services, such as “Motivational Mondays”, the mobile health units which provide COVID testing, and other community connections. We continue to work with service providers who can deliver programming to our community with creativity and flexibility. We continue as mandated reporters to look for any signs of child abuse or neglect and we serve our residents with passion so that they can truly buy into the fact that by participating in the

Family Success Centers, #SuccessWithinReach is much more than a hashtag; it is their reality.

In closing, it is important to reemphasize what our Executive Director Mae Best, who has been leading this agency for twenty years said, in her testimony last year, “The Families First DC Initiative is reminiscent of the development of the Healthy Families Thriving Communities Collaboratives. The collaboratives underwent a long community planning process, including residents from public housing and organizations, to come up with their model.” We know that this model works, and we are confident that with time and consistency, we will see most of our residents calling these Family Success Centers their second home. With time and commitment, we will see a decrease in those families who fall into the care of CFSA.

Thank you so very much for the opportunity to share my testimony.