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First, I would like to thank Councilman Jim Graham for inviting me to come speak at this hearing. My name is Paul Ashton, and I am the Research and Grants Coordinator at the Justice Policy Institute (JPI), a Washington, D.C. based nonprofit working to reduce society's reliance on incarceration and the justice system by promoting healthy and safe communities.

I'm here to talk about our recently released brief *Fostering Change: How investing in D.C.'s child welfare system can keep kids out of the prison pipeline*. This brief was the final in a four-part series that examines how investing in D.C.'s education, youth employment, mental health and child welfare systems can help to not only increase positive life outcomes for youth, but in turn increase public safety. Often times when I talk about public safety, the perception is that I am simply talking about the courts, corrections and police – when in actuality public safety encompasses so much more than that - it includes collateral agencies addressing issues such as education and mental health that can help reduce future justice system involvement.

What we know is that, child abuse/neglect and child welfare involvement are correlated to higher rates of justice system involvement – for instance of all people currently incarcerated in the U.S. on average 1 in 3 women and 1 in 10 men report a history of abuse as children.<sup>1</sup> To give it a little more perspective, research tells us that abused and neglected children are:

- 30 percent more likely to commit violent crime;
- 59 percent more likely to be arrested;
- And 28 percent more likely to be arrested as adults.<sup>2</sup>

So, as someone who works in research and policy, what this tells me is that we need to be making the necessary investments in our youth serving systems that can help mitigate negative outcomes for youth and provide them with the resources and tools to be successful. One of those investments is ensuring that our child welfare agency has the funding and resources to successfully engage families, work to prevent child maltreatment and provide an array of services and responses focused on improving family and child outcomes, while working to make removing children from their homes a last resort.

A child is abused or neglected every 3 hours in Washington, D.C.<sup>3</sup> – that number is staggering and calls upon our leadership and communities to work to reduce it. Now, I don't want to paint an overly bleak

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, "Prior abuse reported by inmates and probationers," 1999. <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/parip.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Long - Term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect." Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006. [http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/long\\_term\\_consequences.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/long_term_consequences.cfm).

picture for the District, because that is not necessarily the case. In recent years we have been seeing, in-line with national trends, a decrease in both the number of children served by Children and Family Services Agency (CFSA) and those entering foster care. However, D.C. is still removing children from homes at higher rates than other comparable cities, so there is still work to be done.

In *Fostering Change*, we examine some of the patterns of youth involvement in the child welfare system. We know that family and neighborhood poverty are two of the strongest predictors of child maltreatment and that is reflected in D.C. We have one of the highest rates of child poverty in the country, largely concentrated in Wards 7 and 8 and correspondingly rates of youth in foster care are highest in those wards as well. There is also a similar pattern when examining child welfare involvement by race. Ninety-nine percent of youth involved in the child welfare system in D.C. are youth of color. Wards that have the most people of color also have the highest rates of youth in foster care, for instance Wards 5, 7 and 8 make up about 75 percent of all substantiated cases of abuse and neglect.

Similarly, the disproportionate representation of youth of color and children from select wards is mirrored in the juvenile justice system. In 2011, nearly all the youth under DYRS supervision were youth of color and half were from Wards 7 and 8. Greater investments are needed in wards that are experiencing impacts related to poverty, race, crime, child welfare involvement, low levels of educational attainment, and limited access to mental healthcare.

Smart investments in CFSA can help to reduce the number of youth who enter its care, crossover into the juvenile justice system and help to reduce future justice system involvement. Within *Fostering Change*, we look at the link between child maltreatment and delinquency, highlighting four major risk factors: mental health, victimization, educational instability and the type and number of placements within the child welfare system. In addition, we emphasize the role that neighborhood and parental stability play in child involvement in both the welfare system and the juvenile justice system.

Some of our specific recommendations include:

- The implementation of a universal case plan for the district for all youth serving systems. Such a case plan would allow for increased collaboration and information sharing among agencies serving D.C.'s children such as CFSA, DYRS, DCPS and DMH.
- Increased use of and investment in evidenced based programs shown to reduce child welfare involvement. Some such programs are already underway in the District; specifically Differential Response, highlighted in our brief, is in a phased implementation process with CFSA. Cost-benefit analysis research from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy has frequently found that community interventions focused on prevention and alternative responses are often more effective and provide greater cost-savings than traditional service approaches both in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.
- Expanded efforts on maltreatment prevention, including adequate levels of prevention funding for CFSA.
- Narrowing the front door through alternative responses that moves away from a one-size-fits-all approach and emphasizes graduated responses. Correspondingly, increase funding support and the ability for agencies, such as CFSA to partner with local community partners to voluntarily engage families prior to further child welfare system involvement.
- Minimize placement disruptions and increase the use of kinship care, by providing adequate resources for families of child welfare involved youth.
- Engage fathers, other family members and incarcerated parents in the child welfare process.

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<sup>3</sup> Children's Defense Fund, *Children in the District of Columbia* (Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund, 2011).  
<http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/state-data-repository/cits/2011/children-in-the-states-2011-dc.pdf>

- Focus on economic and social investments in the wards facing significant challenges related to the confluence of race, poverty, crime, unemployment and low educational attainment – particularly in Wards 5, 7 and 8.

Lastly, *Fostering Change* also includes recommendations featured in the other briefs released by JPI covering education, youth employment and mental health in D.C. The success of the child welfare system is reliant upon the support of strong collateral youth-serving systems, including the mental health system, education system and employment programming. The collective ability of these four systems to support the safety and well-being of youth has a significant impact on youth trajectories and outcomes. Therefore the following recommendations were included in *Fostering Change* to acknowledge the interconnectedness of all youth-serving systems:

- prioritizing investments in education to provide education support and stability for youth from at-risk communities;
- increase community access to timely, appropriate, culturally responsive and trauma-informed mental health treatment;
- provide youth employment opportunities with meaningful connections to adults

From my perspective, this series of briefs produced by JPI are important, not because Director Stanley at DYRS or Director Donald at CFSA are not doing great things, they are both working hard to bring reforms and innovative practices to their respective agencies, but more so these briefs are to help educate policymakers and the public of the importance of investments in these agencies. And provide a broader picture of what it takes to do what is right for our children, while working to increase public safety.