



TESTIMONY

*Testimony of Eshauna Smith
DC Alliance of Youth Advocates
Before the
Committee on Human Services
July 2, 2007*

Good morning Committee Chairman Wells, members of the Committee on Human Services and members of the council staff. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

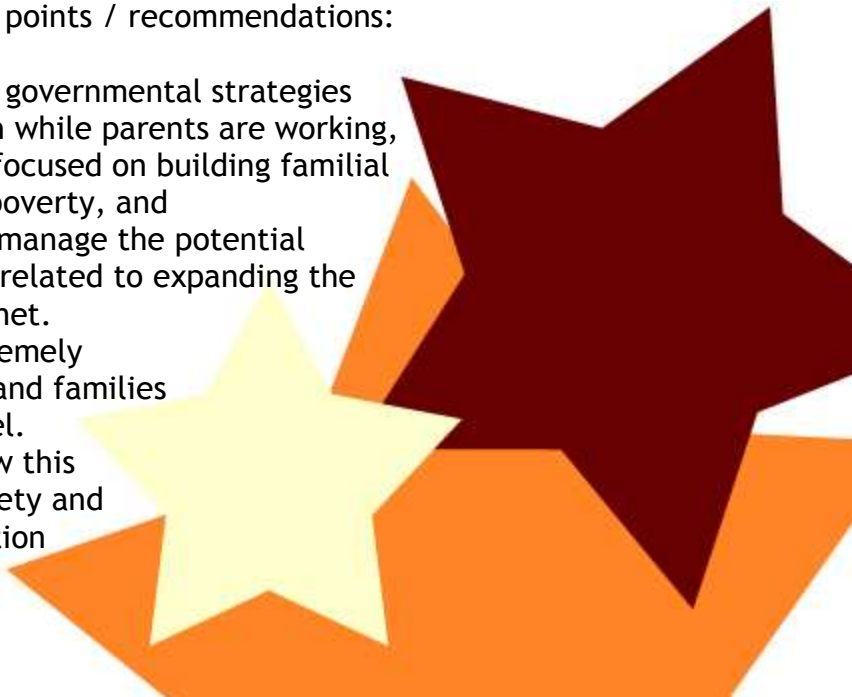
My name is Eshauna Smith. I am the Executive Director of the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates (DCAYA). I will be reading testimony on behalf of the members of DCAYA including those here today - the Latin American Youth Center, Sasha Bruce Youthworks, Metro TeenAIDS, National Center for Children and Families, Facilitating Leadership in Youth and more. DCAYA is a city-wide coalition that works to ensure policies, programs and practices that promote and propel youth into healthy and productive adulthood.

DCAYA appreciates and values the committee's efforts to promote dialogue and raise awareness of the issue of youth safety. As a coalition of over 50 member organizations who serve 10,000 youth annually, we too are focused on ways to ensure the health, safety and well-being of our city's young people. However, I am here today to raise a number of concerns on behalf of DCAYA regarding the process by which the potential policy of instituting a rebuttable presumption of neglect has come about and to respectfully challenge several of the notions present in the fundamental approach that is being used to promote "parental responsibility and youth safety."

My testimony will be focused on four key points / recommendations:

- (1) Lack of advocate input and engagement,
- (2) The lack of early, comprehensive, proactive governmental strategies focused on creating safe opportunities for youth while parents are working,
- (3) The need for strengthening family supports focused on building familial communication, parenting skills, and reducing poverty, and
- (4) The capacity of the child welfare system to manage the potential influx of caseloads and increased work demand related to expanding the definition of neglect and thereby widening the net.

(Point 1) In the last two weeks, two extremely important measures regarding children, youth and families have been up for debate at the city council level. First, the lowering of the youth curfew, and now this discussion on parental accountability, youth safety and the potential proposal of a rebuttable presumption of neglect aimed at parents whose children 13 and younger are outside after 10pm.



a These issues are core and go to the heart of DCAYA's work. As youth service providers we work hard to provide and sustain a wide range of critical youth development services that not only provide resources to young people, but also function as critical family strengthening support mechanisms that are crucial to the often overwhelmed, burdened, and stressed families that we serve. As a result, providers would be fundamental in the implementation of any policy focused on widening the net of parental neglect. As a community that has daily interaction with the very constituency that's being discussed - youth and families - and as implementers of the potential policy - ***we urge you to provide an opportunity for early engagement and input from the youth advocacy community - including young people themselves.*** We feel that we have a lot to offer and can work with you to provide a comprehensive picture of the challenges that our youth and families face towards building real and sustainable solutions that will strengthen our youth and families and get at the core issues that are the real reasons behind youth being out late at night - poverty, the lack of parental supports, and lack of community resources.

(Point 2) Without early, proactive community engagement and planning, we end up where we are today - hastily reaching in the summer months towards quick fixes and band-aid approaches under the guise of "youth safety." Last summer DCAYA opposed the youth curfew and did so on the grounds of fundamentally disagreeing with the punitive nature of the curfew and the lack of a comprehensive, youth development plan structured to deal with the core issues that lead youth to be idle in the summer hours. Today, we fundamentally disagree with the potential implementation of a rebuttable presumption of neglect for parents on those same grounds. This policy is equally punitive in regards to parents, instituting a blame first, ask questions later approach- automatically bringing parents into the system and forcing them to prove that they are not guilty. In the same vein as the youth curfew, this proposal also lacks a comprehensive strategy that looks at the systemic issues. If the issue is really about keeping youth safe, ***why weren't discussions, roundtables, and hearings held months ago to ensure that :***

- (1) ***we would not have cuts to summer funding for out-of-school-time programs so that parents would have a place for their children in the summer*** (programs experienced major cuts this summer),
- (2) ***summer programs would be ensured a public facility with which to provide summer programs*** - several DCAYA members have no space to serve youth, and
- (3) ***our youth employment system which has experienced numerous challenges, would be equipped to provide substantive summer jobs efficiently as a key parental and family support*** (the special Saturday hearing held on youth employment was advocated for by DCAYA and the Youth Action Research Group, it was not a proactive event on the part of the City Council) and
- (4) ***youth development groups could offer extended summer hours***

(Point 3) Instead of proactive, comprehensive and systemic, we go towards punitive and blaming. ***We urge the City Council to look at implementing a "support first" approach when it comes to our parents and families.*** In a city where 1 out of 3 children live in poverty and where it was found in 2005 that 49% of youth in DC lived in households where no parent had full time, year-round employment¹ we know that our families are overburdened and struggling to make ends meet. The last thing we want to do is bring these families into the court system and entangle them in deeper crisis and trauma.

The District is home to a number of community-based resources including the system of Family Support Collaboratives and additional providers that can be utilized to develop creative alternatives that promote poverty reduction, parenting skills development, and family communication. Instead of a policy that charges a parent with an unmitigated claim in order to provoke "accountability," we respectfully challenge the city to explore alternative solutions. ***For example, implementing a hotline system that can connect concerned constituents to a Family Support Collaborative or similar provider who can deploy a family care worker to explore and assess the situation seems to us a better, more strategic, and most importantly - more supportive approach.*** We feel strongly that with the appropriate support, energy and investment, the District can build a proactive system of seamless supports for families and thus does not need to resort to punitive, quick fixes that will ultimately not solve the problems at hand.

(Point 4) Lastly, we have a number of questions regarding the process of implementing a rebuttable presumption of neglect and the ability of the child welfare system to handle the additional caseloads that this will spur.

- (a) How would it actually work once a case was opened up under this rebuttable presumption, how would the actual scenario play out in terms of the interaction between the family and CFSA?
- (b) Does CFSA have the capacity and infrastructure to handle the increased caseloads?
- (c) What role would the police play? How could we ensure checks on the interaction between the police and families?
- (d) Would this clog the queue and deter caseworkers from more pressing cases - in light of the fact that in widening the net of neglect we would most likely be affecting the many to find the few and thus incur a pretty heavy influx of caseloads that could be of a potentially marginal nature?

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before your committee today. In addition, I am prepared to answer any questions you may have.

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