



40 WORTH STREET, SUITE 605  
NEW YORK, NY 10013  
MAIN NUMBER: (212) 691-0950  
FAX NUMBER: (212) 691-0951

89-14 PARSONS BLVD, 2<sup>ND</sup> FLOOR  
JAMAICA, NY 11432  
MAIN NUMBER: (212) 691-0950  
FAX NUMBER: (718) 291-4360

**General Welfare Committee on Racial Disparity in Child Welfare  
Oral Testimony of Teyora Graves  
Center for Family Representation**

**October 28, 2020**

Good afternoon, my name is Teyora Graves and I am Senior Parent Advocate from the Center for Family Representation or CFR.<sup>1</sup> I am also an impacted parent.

Over the past 11 years I have seen that not only does the system disproportionately impact Black and Brown families but once caught in the system, families are not treated with the respect they deserve. Over the past several years working as a parent advocate, I have personally seen how dehumanizing and racist this system continues to be when it comes to people who look like me.

A prime example of this is how our children are treated when they are removed from our care and sent to the Children's Center. The Children's Center is where case workers take children who have been removed pending a decision about where they will be placed - either in foster care or with a kinship resource. We have clients whose teenage children are placed in the Children's Center and then allowed to come and go as they please, without the parents being informed. We have heard reports of some children engaging in prostitution. Parents who have been accused of neglect, are not taken seriously when they raise concerns about this--rather treated as though they have forfeited the right to be outraged that their children are at this risk.

The lack of respect and the racist overtones extend into the whole system--at ACS conferences and in court. I have personally observed a parent repeatedly be asked by a case worker whether she was pregnant by the same father of her older daughter. When my client repeatedly said that her baby had the same father, the worker eventually said "wow that's a first." One CFR client was repeatedly asked whether he was sure that he was his child's father. One ACS prosecutor, we call them Family Court Legal Services attorneys or FCLS attorneys, called our client "selfish" for seeking visits with her child during the pandemic. We have seen favorable settlement offers be withheld, even for parents who have their children at home and who are in full compliance with their service plans, because, to quote one FCLS attorney, they are "young and may have more children in the future" so they want a finding of neglect to be made on the record. One CFR client was told by a caseworker, at a conference, that she was trying to "sound more white" because of how she pronounced her last name. There are more

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<sup>1</sup> The Center for Family Representation is the county-wide indigent defense provider in Queens and New York counties for abuse and neglect cases. In 2016, with support from the City Council, we began our Home For Good practice. Home for Good is made up of several practice areas: Immigration, Housing and Public Benefits, Re-entry prevention, and Adult criminal defense. In 2020 we began representing youth in juvenile delinquency proceedings also in Queens and Manhattan.

examples like these and we know that parents and advocates from across the city have had similar experiences. These examples reflect the racism and disrespect that those caught in the family regulation system face on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup>

This is a system that presents itself as caring about children and families. In reality, it disproportionately targets Black and Brown families and then fails to treat them with respect.

For race and equity issues, it cannot be business as usual at ACS. In our experience, some problems are acknowledged by ACS leadership. However, the policies and initiatives they have launched fail to trickle down. There is no meaningful accountability mechanism for either ACS or FCLS, that parents or advocates can take advantage of, in the moment or soon thereafter.

Many parents are afraid to raise their concerns out of fear of retaliations. We have to be careful of what we raise and with whom, because we know that complaining could mean an unfavorable outcome for our clients.

We urge the City Council to create a standing commission, independent of ACS, to be tasked with the responsibility of reviewing and approving existing and proposed policies that have the goal of dismantling and addressing racist remarks and behaviors. The commission must have decision making authority and the City must commit to implementing their recommendations. The Commission must be made up of the families and youth that have been directly impacted by the system in addition to advocates and ACS representatives.

The damage the system has done and is continuing to do to Black families has gone unchecked for too long. Parents deserve a voice and choice when it comes to what happens with their families.

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<sup>2</sup> Abolishing the Police Also Means Abolishing Family Regulation” Dorothy Roberts. The Imprint. June 16, 2020 at: <https://imprintnews.org/child-welfare-2/abolishing-policing-also-means-abolishing-family-regulation/44480>