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Good morning;

I'd like to begin by extending my gratitude to the Chairman and members for inviting me to testify before the committee. I appreciate your strong support for IV-B and the work that it funds in service to our children and families.

I am the founder, Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of Smart from the Start (Smart) which is a trauma-informed, family support and community engagement organization that has as its mission to promote the healthy development of young children, youth and families living in underserved communities and facing economic challenges, by providing the tools, resources and supports they need to thrive. Smart's multi-generational, evidence-based programming is embedded in communities where other social service agencies and providers do not go and where some of the highest rates of child welfare involvement exist. Smart works with families to identify and build upon positive attributes and protective factors, employing a strengths-based approach to mitigate the effects of trauma, economic hardship, and negative social determinants of health. This is essential in breaking negative cycles and promoting positive, sustainable change for families and communities. Smart from the Start is an independent nonprofit organization that has the leadership, guidance, and support of a diverse, powerful, and committed Board of Directors and a powerful family leadership team.

I grew up between the cities of Boston and Washington, DC having spent my childhood growing up in a low-income housing community that closely resembles those of Smart's communities. I know first-hand the incredible strengths, gifts and resilience of our families and communities and have a broad understanding of the challenges and their origin. I hire my team from the communities we serve, all of them with roots in the neighborhoods where our programs and services exist. Those roots ensure that our staff have the skills, deep understanding, and empathy necessary to build and grow impactful relationships. Having "walked the walk" in the same shoes as the young children and families we now fight for. We bring a unique perspective and unrivaled passion to this work.

I also share the experience of being a foster, kinship and adoptive parent and have raised five children. I have witnessed first-hand, the staggering dysfunction of the child welfare system and will tell you from my extensive personal and professional experiences that the best way to prevent children from being traumatized by the system is to invest heavily in programs to strengthen families, increase the number of family resource centers across the country, particularly in under-resourced communities to prevent them from entering it in the first place. That is the mission of the Families First DC Initiative funded by IV-B.

The same issues have plagued some of the very same neighborhoods for generations. If we continue to do what we have always done, we will continue to get what we have always gotten – the same communities with the same

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problems, and children and families robbed of an opportunity to reach their greatest potential. This is why Smart takes a different, comprehensive approach and has adopted an ecological, multi-generational, strengths-based approach to improving outcomes.

Smart empowers families with the concrete tools, resources and supports they need to set and achieve goals and by providing them access to culturally reflective and responsive services that promote physical and mental health and wellness. This enables us to disrupt cycles of inter-generational poverty and school underachievement; reduce disparities; prevent children from entering the child welfare and juvenile justice systems; and increase the self-sufficiency and overall wellbeing of children and families.

Smart's goals are:

- To provide high-quality educational experiences for the most vulnerable children that will equip them with the cognitive, language, physical, and social emotional assets that facilitate school and subsequent life success;
- To build on the strengths of under-served youth and families, developing relationships that will lead to the empowerment of youth and caregivers enabling them to set and achieve goals for their own self-sufficiency;
- To provide families with the resources, tools and support they need to achieve and maintain optimal health and wellness;
- To provide access to educational and career opportunities for parents and caregivers to ensure pathways to the middle class and beyond; and
- To increase the coordination and teamwork among stakeholders and agencies in our communities.

Programming and Services Include:

- Crisis Intervention and Family Support
- Early Childhood Play to Learn Program
- Prenatal Education and Support
- Baby Basics
- Smart 2 School Readiness Program
- Parenting Education
- Fun, Food and Fitness Program
- Community Health and Wellness Initiative
- Workforce Development/Certification Courses
- Career Counseling/Professional Development
- Health and Wellness Workshops/Programming
- Adult Education including GED/HiSet
- Computer Literacy Courses
- Financial Literacy and Economic Development
- Family Leadership Program
- Address the Stress Mental Health Wellness Program
- Focusing on Fatherhood
- LEAP - Leadership, Empowerment and Advocacy Program for Young Fathers
- Justice 4 All Initiative
- Restorative Justice for Healing Communities
- Youth Support and Development
- Tutoring/STEAM/Academic Enrichment
- YES Center Daily Dinner Program for Youth
- Therapeutic Mentoring
- Violence Intervention and Prevention
- NBCDI Family Empowerment Program

We have consistently invested in external evaluation. Data from the 2022-2023 Tufts University Independent Evaluation Report showed that we consistently generated positive outcomes. A few highlights are as follows:

1. Our Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) school readiness scores for Smart enrolled children entering kindergarten are between the 85th and 100th percentile in every domain (Tufts Independent Evaluation Report “Smart from the Start 2022”);
2. Our parents and caregivers consistently report a decrease in depressive symptoms, despite the challenges resulting from the pandemic as well as other stressors;
3. 92% of families reported that Smart programs and services were either “extremely helpful or very helpful” over the past year;
4. 90% of caregivers have used new strategies for addressing challenging behavior as opposed to yelling or spanking;
5. 87% of caregivers have adopted new coping skills effective in stress reduction;
6. 84% of caregivers report feeling “hopeful” about their future;
7. 82% of caregivers have set new educational and career goals for themselves;
8. 79% of caregivers have requested or followed up with referrals for ongoing individual, family, or group therapy;
9. Recidivism rates in our ward 8 DC programming dropped from almost 90% to under 8% among young fathers who successfully completed our Focusing on Fatherhood and Professional Development and Enrichment Program; and
10. 80% of adolescents participating in our youth development programming feel that they “have a supportive adult” at Smart and believe the program “has helped academically”.

For over 15 years, our family and community-driven organization has successfully served children, youth, and families in the underserved communities of Boston and Washington, DC and has forged strong partnerships with public and private agency partners, community leaders and stakeholders. We have consistently and successfully grown our budget, our work and our impact over the years and have become leaders in the fields of child development, family mental and physical health and wellness, family engagement, community empowerment, youth development and family leadership. Smart has been the recipient of several awards, prizes, and commendations and has been invited to present at conferences, seminars and summits, both nationally and internationally. We are now launching programming in Philadelphia and Greater Atlanta.

The latest research and data focusing on education, maternal and child health, social services, child welfare and health care both inform and drive our work. What we know, unequivocally, is that we cannot serve a child in isolation from their family and we cannot serve families in isolation from their communities. If our children are going to thrive, we must ensure that we are helping families create environments that are conducive to healthy development, as well as safe, supportive communities. It is vital to stand up community-based family resource centers that serve as “one stop shopping” centers – where families can simultaneously engage in early education, adult and parenting education, and counseling and advocacy. And where caregivers can learn about budgeting and banking, pursue career opportunities, and get help with a resume, a bag of diapers, groceries, and even winter coats for their children.

When families have one place in their communities that serves as a beacon of support and provides non-stigmatizing, strengths-based and empowering programs and services, they enthusiastically and actively participate and are eager to make change. We must continue to invest in upstream, preventative, evidence-based programming that ensures that children and families never end up in circumstances that result in involvement with child welfare in the first place. When families do have case open and children removed, easy access to support, advocacy and resources is essential in ensuring that service plans created for families are fair, that they are able to easily access the services mandated and that they have safe, local visitation centers when necessary, to continue to engage with their children until they are reunified.

To do all of that, collaborative, public/private initiatives, like the Families First DC Program (FFDC), funded through DC's Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) under IV-B, must be available to children and families in every community. The unprecedented partnership that is the cornerstone of this initiative, gives vetted community-based organizations with proven track records of successfully serving families, the infrastructure and long-term funding stability to offer the most comprehensive one-stop shopping model of family support that I know of. At the same time, FFDC give us the autonomy to create programs and services that meet the unique needs of each community. Smart's Family Success Centers in Washington, DC offer families everything they need, including prenatal and parenting education, early education for little ones, tutoring, academic enrichment, social emotional learning, peer mediation and youth development for school-aged children and adolescents, adult education, job certification programs, economic advancement classes, crisis intervention, counseling, nutrition and exercise classes, and food pantry services. This neighborhood-based model for prevention and support is what will keep our families strong and unified and children at home and out of the system.

Traditional social service programming is paternalistic, employs a medical model - assessing and addressing families from a deficit-based approach, diagnosing what's "wrong" with people and "prescribing" how to fix them. This approach has failed repeatedly, and is why we have had generations of youth and families caught up in the same perpetual cycles. Additionally, many in our communities are re-traumatized and abused by disrupted, fragmented, and siloed systems and services that are supposed to be there to support and assist them. FFDC's approach offers a stark contrast, lovingly educating our children, empowering our youth and families, and uplifting our communities by fostering long term, consistent relationships built on mutual trust and respect.

There are several aspects of the FFDC model that have contributed to the early success of the initiative. Not only is the relationship between DC Government's Child Welfare Agency and our organization uniquely successful, it is rare. Despite the fact that the system is failing so many children and families, and outcomes for children in care and transitioning out are tragically abysmal, most child welfare organizations do not align themselves with community-based organizations in such a deliberate and collaborative working relationship. I am not aware of any that provide this level of funding, infrastructure, and support. The commitment that CFSA has, through its FFDC program, to ensuring that our Family Success Center Network has the resources, training, and oversight to generate the best outcomes is extraordinary. This initiative is a national model of best practice.

In addition to the unprecedented partnership and support, the way funding is allocated itself is uniquely supportive of the work. Our \$325,000 in annual funding for each Success Center is advanced at the beginning of the fiscal year, which permits us to have timely access to our funding for staffing, programs, and services instead of relying on the usual reimbursement model which would require that organizations utilize other funds to support this work and then invoice and wait to be reimbursed. Many smaller community-based organizations do not have the financial capacity to wait for reimbursements.

Our work at Smart has always been guided by our family leadership team. Similarly, FFDC requires each Success Center to recruit a Community Advisory Council to inform and lead the work we do in each community. Our parent and youth advisors provide us with an expertise that contributes to our efficacy and provides a high level of credibility and accountability. This results in high retention rates and great outcomes for the vulnerable families we serve.

Another facet of the model that has led to great outcomes is the powerful network of funded organizations they've created, all of whom work together seamlessly to serve families, share resources, and jointly problem solve and plan events. This prevents duplication of programming and wasted resources. The organizations selected to lead the 11 Success Centers in DC have established relationships within their communities and come to the network with expertise and experience that, collectively, is a powerhouse system of support for children and families.

The relationship we have nurtured with Families First DC has also led to other funding opportunities as a result of the strong partnership we have with the administration of Mayor Bowser. We now have secured additional funding to enhance our work at the Success Center and to fund our DC Youth Empowerment and Success Center.

In the three other cities where Smart serves children and families, we do not have funding like that from Families First which ensures that children, youth, and families have consistent, seamless access to programming and support. At those other sites, our funding is almost completely private, which means we are at the mercy of foundations and individual donors, leaving the stability of our programming and, therefore, of the families we serve, constantly in question.

I have been doing this work for over 30 years and have led Smart for 15. We have had our share of challenges in terms of resource development and funding. Despite being able to make ends meet and to stay afloat, often our ability to do so depends heavily on private foundations, donors, and who sits in City Hall. The FFDC model stands in stark contrast and thus has truly ushered in new opportunities to change the fabric of communities with this innovative and impactful model. While we have a strong, supportive relationship with Mayor Bowser, who has been extremely supportive of our work, the Families First Initiative adds the stability and predictability we lack in other cities and doesn't rely solely on Mayor Bowser.

For example, in our city of origin, Boston, Smart from the Start relies almost entirely on private foundations and donors to fund the same work we do with the support of Families First DC. In spite of the fact that Smart from the Start launched programming in Boston first, in 2008, (DC programming launched in 2013) and that we serve more than five times as many families as we serve in DC, we do not enjoy the same kind of support.

We once had a strong, collaborative partnership with city government but when a new administration took over city hall it was decided that the evidenced-based, trauma informed and comprehensive work we do at Smart from the Start was not a priority. Without the collaborative relationship we enjoy with the administration in DC as a result of the Families First DC programming, we were ousted from our citywide Child and Family Development Center in 2022, the very limited funding we received from the city was repurposed, and our children, families and the communities immediately surrounding that center were in a free fall. Had we been afforded an opportunity to stand up a federally funded Family Success Center in Boston, and had a more supporting relationship with our child welfare agency, we would not have been at risk of being uprooted and displaced and our children and families would not have been at risk of losing the counseling, educational and economic programming and support they were receiving at that center.

Gratefully, champions in the Massachusetts State Legislature and the private funding community stepped up and thankfully, we have a new home and resources to continue our work, but at this time, 80% of our funding is from foundations and donors and all public funding is provided through reimbursements, again, meaning we have to have the money to spend before having it allocated as a reimbursement. We serve eight neighborhoods in Boston and approximately 6,500 young children, youth, and adult caregivers. Support from the federal level would ensure adequate funding to prevent the uncertainty we have experienced in Boston, where the population we serve has been stagnant instead of growing the way that it has in Washington, DC.

While programs come and go, few have embedded in, truly partnered with, and committed to staying the course with families and communities regardless of the challenges, like Smart from the Start has. Thanks to the Families First DC Initiative and IV-B funding, we are able to confidently make promises to children youth and families that we will keep, thanks to the long-term support.

For over 15 years, our family and community-driven organization has successfully served children, youth, and families in the underserved communities of Boston and Washington, DC. It has forged strong partnerships with public and private agency partners, community leaders and stakeholders. It has consistently and successfully grown its budget, its work and its impact over the years and has become a leader in the fields of child

development, family mental and physical health and wellness, family engagement, caregiver and community empowerment, youth development and family leadership. It has been the recipient of several awards, prizes, and commendations.

The IV-B reauthorization is crucial to the sustainability of our impactful work in DC. I humbly ask you not only to ensure that FFDC continues to be funded but to imagine a country where every child, in every city has an opportunity to benefit from a neighborhood Family Success Center. Imagine an America where every child can enjoy fun, enriching educational experiences; where their families have the basic supports they need as well as counseling and a path to self-sufficiency and the middle class. Imagine a country where we are able to keep all families together and thriving, and where entire communities change and the need for the child welfare system as it is today will be dramatically reduced.

Thank you for your time and support. On behalf of myself, Smart from the Start, the Families First DC Network and the children and families, we serve I want to thank you from the bottoms of our hearts. We look forward to your continued and much appreciated support for the essential and life changing work that you make possible in our communities.