



**Testimony of
Najiba Hlemi, Executive Director**

**Regarding B26-399 – Support, Opportunity, Unity, Legal Relationships (SOUL)
Amendment Act of 2025**

Thursday, November 13, 2025
9:00 AM Hearing

In Support

The Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center (“FAPAC”) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with a mission to *empower and advocate for families and youth involved in the child welfare system, to promote the long-term stability of families in the nation’s capital.*

We envision a future where every child in the nation’s capital is safe, supported, and nurtured by their birth, kinship, foster, or adoptive family, and every family is empowered to uphold the well-being and dignity of the children in their care.

FAPAC works as an organizational agent of systemic change by partnering with other District agencies to provide innovative stabilization services to families at risk. We are testifying in favor of the Support, Opportunity, Unity, Legal Relationships (Soul) Amendment Act of 2025.

The Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center greatly appreciates the opportunity to testify in support of Bill 26-399, the Support, Opportunity, Unity, Legal Relationships (SOUL) Amendment Act of 2025. FAPAC represents and supports foster, adoptive, and kinship families across the District, and we work closely with youth aging out of care.

Through direct engagement with youth in the District, FAPAC has consistently heard that older teens and young adults need more flexible permanency options that respect their growing independence while providing stability and emotional connection. We have long known that the traditional options of foster care, guardianship, and adoption, do not meet the needs of every young person in the child welfare system. We are in dire need of revitalization and innovative approaches to caring for displaced youth in the District. As a leader in our nation, many other states are looking to us as a model of effective problem-solving. This is our opportunity.

Many youth growing up in DC foster care want to maintain supportive adult relationships without the full legal implications of guardianship or adoption. The SOUL Act provides a pathway for these connections to be formally recognized and supported. This legislation centers youth choice and recognizes that stable, lifelong relationships can take many forms.

FAPAC is pleased to testify in support of the SOUL Act and recommends that the legislation include a transitional pathway well before youth age out of foster care at 21 years old. More specifically, we recommend that the SOUL arrangement explicitly allow and encourage progressive independence for participating youth. Many older teens in care are eager to develop practical life and independence skills such as managing housing, budgeting, transportation, and other aspects of daily living. Yet they are prohibited from doing so until they reach the age of 21, and at that point, they no longer have the safety net of the Child Welfare System if they make a mistake. An 18-year-old who feels prepared to rent their own apartment, travel, and experience what it means to be independent should be allowed to do so; however, they are currently not, as they are in custody in the District of Columbia.. This delay in independence is harmful to youth, keeping them reliant on the government's system of care. It is in our community's best interest to encourage independence while youth are excited about it, not fearful at 21 when they know they are completely alone. Including this opportunity for progressive independence within the SOUL legislation would provide youth with the caring adults and support systems they need to simply grow up. Imagine the learning opportunities that are missed when we delay their independence until 21. Older youth deserve to make their own choices.

The SOUL legislation emphasizes youth agency, allowing older teens and young adults to choose the type of lifelong relationship that fits *them*. Part of encouraging youth agency includes affirming their right to grow into independence while still retaining the emotional and relational support that the SOUL family provides. For some youth, this may include the opportunity to live in their own residence or a semi-independent setting, with their SOUL family remaining a consistent source of guidance and care. Clarifying that a youth's residence can vary, while the SOUL relationship remains intact, would ensure that the model reflects the diverse needs and realities of young people transitioning from care into adulthood.

In conclusion, FAPAC strongly supports the SOUL Amendment Act of 2025 as a meaningful step toward expanding permanency options for youth in foster care. We encourage the Council to consider additional provisions that allow for supported independent living within the SOUL model, ensuring that every young person has the freedom to grow independently and the supportive relationships necessary to thrive in adulthood.

Najiba Hlemi
Executive Director
Najibah@dcfapac.org