

Aiesha Walker-HCJFS 25 Year Service Speech

As my bio mentions, my passion is advocating for children and families of this county. In thinking about attending this ceremony, and what it means to commemorate my 25th year of service to HCJFS, I decided that it's less about me showing up to receive this honor, and instead more about how I can take yet another opportunity to advocate. I knew I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to do so. I have been proud to work at HCJFS, being a servant to the children and families of Hamilton County, and being a servant leader to many staff, managers and projects over the years. I am most proud of the years I worked in the Children's Services Division. Many Children are kept safe as well as vulnerable families are served by the work of HCJFS. But those good works require us to acknowledge our inadequacies and commit to make necessary changes, and I can continue to be proud, only, if I advocate for the changes we need to make.

There has been a lot of recent focus on the heroin epidemic, the foster care numbers that are increasing because of that epidemic and a push for funding for more services, foster parents and staff to handle the associated workload. But there is another population in the child welfare system that needs the same attention and airtime- and that's the population of African American Children who are disproportionately represented in the foster care system. This problem has been acknowledged in the child welfare system for a long time, but the efforts to resolve it have not been enough. In 2016 Hamilton County Children's Services was identified to have foster care numbers that were rapidly climbing and higher than both the state and the national average. Those numbers were identified before the profound impact of the heroin epidemic. Today there are over 2200 children in Hamilton County's foster care system. At least 1400 of them are African American and Bi-Racial children, compared to 813 who are white. It's time to put the work in to find out why and make changes. Our recent "Bring Back 40" campaign to recruit more foster families to bring back the 40% of the Hamilton County foster children who are placed out of the county is a good example of how we might reevaluate our approach. Rather than recruiting for more foster families to keep foster children in care but in a different placement, we should do something more courageous and intentional. Let's work to reduce disproportionality by 40%, let's get 40% of the children (of all races) who are in custody back home or within their families safely. Let's question whether some of those children should have even been in foster care to begin with. Let's look at our leadership, our decision making, our training, our cultural competence, our prejudices and biases, whether we're staying true to our core social work values, whether we're making decisions out of the paralyzing fear that we'll be scapegoated if a child is hurt, whether we're ignorant of someone else's race or insensitive to their conditions, or whether in our decision making, we are cowering to political pressure or political relationships with other entities. Perhaps if we examine some of these themes, we will no longer be overpowered by such a crippling workload that we don't have the head space to make thorough decisions.

Please don't hear my plea as dismissive of the many staff and managers who do good work, and want to do good work, for they have one of the most difficult jobs there are. I am asking you to require change from JFS Children's Services. Continue, or start to probe, and listen. Don't allow exiting employees who write letters to you to be dismissed as disgruntled; don't allow members of the public who have an interest in our practices and how public dollars are spent to be dismissed as bitter because they weren't awarded a contract, most of all don't allow families with active cases who call you for help to be dismissed as irrational, and don't allow me as I stand here today to be dismissed as anything but passionate.

Please don't continue to say we're doing the best we can with what we have. Require us to do better with what we have. Require change. Failure to do so will forever have unjust and disparate outcomes for children and families of this county, particularly those who are African American.

Thank you for listening and thank you for the honor of serving for 25 years.