

**Gaby Fraser**  
**Department of Behavioral Health**  
**Budget Hearing Testimony**  
**Committee on Health**  
**Thursday, March 30th, 2023**

Good afternoon, Councilmember Henderson, members of the Health Committee and Health Committee staff.

In February 2020, DC youth were suffering from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood and can include violence, abuse, and growing up in a family with mental health or substance abuse problems. Toxic stress from ACEs can change a child's brain development and affect how their body responds to stress. Some youth are more at risk for mental health conditions than others, such as youth with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, LBGTQ+ youth, and other marginalized communities. The effects of mental illness can be temporary or long lasting and one can have more than one mental health disorder at the same time. Mental illness is a leading cause of disability.

Untreated mental illness can cause severe emotional, behavioral and physical health problems. Prior to COVID, if a child was regularly absent from school or came to school with bruises, the teacher would report it to CFSA. However, the pandemic changed the face of child abuse and forced these children to be locked inside with their abusers or in violent households for approximately 16 to 18 months!. This was in addition to everything else COVID. Ideally, most of our children will recover, however, realistically, some may never recover. The only good thing that came out of COVID-19 was that it brought the mental health issues that our children are facing to the forefront of society where it should always have been.

As adults, we've developed coping mechanisms skills and therefore most of us were able to deal with the Pandemic and all its ramifications: being cut off from family, friends and co-workers, staying indoors, watching the COVID numbers go up and the number of deaths continue. However, our children have not developed these coping mechanisms, so COVID was very hard on them. The sudden transition to virtual learning, staying inside, not seeing their friends, hearing and watching the fear in their Parents voices and eyes daily, and hearing the death toll rising contributed to "A" students failing, children becoming withdrawn, and children who were behind slipping more and more behind each month.

As a child growing up, the only person I ever knew who passed away with my Great Aunt. Today our youth in DC, and across the Nation face an unbelievable reality every day. Our children have

to deal with possibly knowing the person who was killed or knowing the killer, OR, knowing someone who knows either of those individuals, and being familiar with the area where the violence took place. Our Children see violence in their schools, on the bus, on the train, in their parks, on TV, and in front of their homes! That's a lot for ANYONE to deal with, especially an impressionable child or young adult. How a young person can compartmentalize, comprehend, or try to understand and deal with this is just mind-blowing!!

Today, in DC, approximately 63% of the schools now have a clinician, which means that approximately 37% do not have a clinician. THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE! We must step outside the box and explore every suggestion to rectify this. Reciprocity between the DMV is certainly a start; however, it must be done sooner rather than later. Every day that we delay costs our children. During the recent Performance Oversight Hearings, youth testified in droves about their friends who have died or are incarcerated, and how they are struggling with life. They spoke about how important it is to have someone to talk to and how social emotional learning practices were helping them to become engaged, which leads to better mental health outcomes. Additionally, restorative practices and restorative justice programs are another way for the youth to speak out, discuss how they are feeling, and be heard.

In order to ensure that our children are prepared educationally and emotionally to enter adulthood, we must ensure that any barriers they may have today are being addressed and resolved early and properly. We must provide them with the resources they need to live the lives they want. I say this so often I'm thinking about getting a tee shirt, "One day, the youth of today who grow up and choose to stay or come back to the District of Columbia, will be our Mayor, Councilmembers, Agency Heads, Principals, Lawyers, Police, Teachers and Parents." Mental health issues that are addressed and treated today, will determine the mental state of the individuals of tomorrow as they become the adults that are in charge of our City.

Best,

Gaby Fraser  
Citywide and Ward 7 PLE Board Member