



501 3rd Street, NW · 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20001
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949
childrenslawcenter.org

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
June 30, 2022

Public Roundtable:

PR 24-784, Ombudsperson for Children Shalonda L. Cawthon Appointment Resolution of
2022

Judith Sandalow
Executive Director
Children's Law Center

Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson and Councilmembers. My name is Judith Sandalow. I am the Executive Director of Children's Law Center¹ and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of Children's Law Center, which fights so every DC child can grow up with a stable family, good health, and a quality education. With nearly 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the nomination of Shalonda L. Cawthon as the first Ombudsperson for Children. As you know, Children's Law Center has testified to the urgent need for this Office many times over the past few years.² We commend the Council for its decisive action to establish and fund this Office despite many obstacles and we are very excited at the prospect of this appointment, which will take us one step closer to having this Office up and running.

The Nomination for the Ombudsperson for Children Is the Next Step Forward, But There Will Be More Work to Do

The first Ombudsperson for Children will be responsible for creating all the procedures and operational structures of the Office, staffing the Office, and building relationships across the District government.³ The Ombudsperson for Children must be able to execute these essential functions effectively for this Office to realize its purpose and provide meaningful services to foster children and their families. It is critical that the

Ombudsperson for Children have the experience, knowledge, and skills to set up and successfully implement an independent Office that is trusted by children and families and can work effectively with Executive agencies.

A nationwide executive search has yielded a candidate with such experience gained from a career in child welfare. Ms. Cawthon brings knowledge and skills from across sectors within child welfare and from jurisdictions across the country. The breadth and depth of Ms. Cawthon's experiences will be critical as she establishes this new office.⁴

We applaud the Council for engaging in such a thoughtful hiring process. In particular, we commend the decision to retain a professional search firm that specializes in identifying candidates for high-level government positions to conduct a national search for this position.⁵ We appreciated the search firm's engagement with us and other community stakeholders during the search process – and we are hopeful that this thorough and inclusive process has yielded a candidate that can meet the challenges ahead.

Upon the approval of Ms. Cawthon's nomination, the work begins. The Ombudsperson has the important task of setting up an Office that is independent and effective in:

- helping children and families navigate the complexities of the child welfare system and resolve everyday problems and individual issues;
- identifying areas where interagency coordination must be improved to

better meet the needs of DC's foster children; and

- identifying and offering solutions for systemic issues.

This work cannot be done alone.

The Council Has an Important Role to Play in Standing Up the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children

The Council must provide the necessary support to ensure the Ombudsperson is able to fulfill the goals of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act of 2020 ("Establishment Act").⁶ As an independent, legislative agency, there will likely be challenges in standing up this Office. We ask the Council to help the Ombudsperson overcome obstacles to performing their duties and executing their powers.

The Office is a critical tool that this Council needs to fulfill its duty to children and families in the foster care system and to exercise effective oversight of DC's child welfare system – a system that encompasses many agencies beyond just the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). The Department of Behavioral Health (DBH), the Department of Health Care Finance (DHCF), the Office of the Superintendent of Education (OSSE), District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS), the DC Housing Authority (DCHA), and the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) all have a role to play in ensuring the District fulfills its responsibilities to DC's foster children and their families. The Ombudsperson for

Children can help the Council hold all relevant city agencies accountable for meeting the needs of child welfare-involved families and actively facilitate interagency cooperation.

Conclusion

We are excited about this step forward in establishing the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children. There is a tremendous opportunity within this Office to address long-standing issues children and families face in the child welfare system.⁷ It is our hope that as CFSA embarks on its next chapter, the agency will come to see the Ombudsperson for Children as a partner that supports the agency's own goal of continuing to improve the agency's ability to serve children and families. Although not without its challenges, effective oversight is a critical tool for identifying and raising up strengths, as well as pointing out and helping address blind spots and weaknesses. Further, as the agency seeks to transform the child welfare system into a "child well-being" system,⁸ the need to strengthen and empower families involved with the system becomes even more essential.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

¹ Children's Law Center fights so every child in DC can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. Judges, pediatricians, and families turn to us to advocate for children who are abused or neglected, who aren't learning in school, or who have health problems that can't be solved by medicine alone. With more than 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. And, we multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children

² Judith Sandalow, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole, (June 7, 2021), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/JSandalow_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-June-7-2021-Committee-of-the-Whole-Budget-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL-1.pdf; Sharra E. Greer, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Human Services, (June 10, 2021), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/SGreer_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-June-10-2021-CFSA-Budget-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL.pdf. Sharra E. Greer, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Housing & Executive Administration, (June 22, 2021), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/SGreer_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-June-22-2021-City-Administrator-Budget-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL.pdf; and Tami Weerasingha-Cote, Testimony Before the

District of Columbia Council, Committee on Human Services, (March 24, 2022), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TWeerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Mar.-24-2022-CFSA-Budget-Hearing_Final-1.pdf.

³ Judith Sandalow, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole, (June 7, 2021), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/JSandalow_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-June-7-2021-Committee-of-the-Whole-Budget-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL-1.pdf.

⁴ Shalonda Cawthon shared in the press release announcing her nomination, “I am honored to have been selected to serve as the Ombudsperson for Children.” Cawthon expressed the desire “to establish an office that will be built on the foundation of service, accountability and collaboration, with recognition that the lives and voices of the most vulnerable of the District’s children are the driving force and their wellbeing is the central focus.” *See* Councilmember Brianne K. Nadeau, *D.C. Council Names First Ombudsperson for Children*, June 3, 2022, *available at*: <https://www.brianneknadeau.com/updates/press-release/dc-council-names-first-ombudsperson-children>.

⁵ Councilmember Brianne K. Nadeau, *D.C. Council Names First Ombudsperson for Children*, June 3, 2022, *available at*: <https://www.brianneknadeau.com/updates/press-release/dc-council-names-first-ombudsperson-children>. *See* Ted Ford Webb Associates Job Posting for the Ombudsperson for Children, *available at*: <https://www.usombudsman.org/wp-content/uploads/DC-Ombudsperson-for-Children.docx>.

⁶ D.C. Law 23-0207, Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act of 2020.

⁷ Judith Sandalow, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole, p. 2, (June 7, 2021), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/JSandalow_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-June-7-2021-Committee-of-the-Whole-Budget-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL-1.pdf.

⁸ CFSA Stakeholder Engagement Forum, October 2021, slides on file with the Children’s Law Center