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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
December 20, 2023

Public Roundtable:
PR 23-542, the Ombudsperson for Children Petrina Jones-Jesz Appointment Resolution
of 2023

Children's Law Center

Introduction

Children's Law Center believes every child should grow up with a strong foundation of family, health and education and live in a world free from poverty, trauma, racism and other forms of oppression. Our more than 100 staff – together with DC children and families, community partners and pro bono attorneys – use the law to solve children's urgent problems today and improve the systems that will affect their lives tomorrow. Since our founding in 1996, we have reached more than 50,000 children and families directly and multiplied our impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit hundreds of thousands more.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding the nomination of Petrina Jones-Jesz as the Ombudsperson for Children. Each year, Children's Law Center attorneys serve as guardians-ad-litem for several hundred children in foster care and protective supervision – over half of all children in the care and custody of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA).¹ Over the years, we have seen improvements to DC's child welfare system – but many of our foster children still struggle to have their needs met including accessing services and achieving stable placement.² The Office of the Ombudsperson for Children is designed to help address these concerns by supporting child welfare-involved children and families at both the systemic and individual levels by exercising independent, impartial oversight and providing solutions.

As a community organization, we have appreciated the partnership and engagement by the Office of the Ombudsperson. The transparency and communication by the Office have allowed us significant insight into the Office and the role it is playing in the District. It is clear to us that the Office is a critical tool to exercise effective oversight of DC's child welfare system – a system that encompasses many agencies beyond just 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.

In summary, the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children plays instrumental role in the well-being of CFSA-involved children and families in the District.³ We appreciate the Council's continued support of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children. This nomination allows the Office to move forward with a fully staffed leadership team and continue to implement the roles identified in the legislation.

A Fully Staffed Leadership Team for the Office of the Ombudsperson is Critical to Ensure that All the Work of the Office Can Be Accomplished

In June 2022, the Children's Law Center testified that the inaugural nomination of the Ombudsperson for Children was crucial step forward in establishing the Office.⁴ Although we were disappointed by the early departure of the inaugural Ombudsperson,

we appreciated her work to set up the Office including hiring of the Chief Deputy Ombudsperson, Petrina Jones-Jesz, and the Deputy CFSA Ombudsperson, William Thomas. Losing a critical leadership position would have likely halted many offices from moving forward. However, both Ms. Jones-Jez and Mr. Thomas were not deterred and moved swiftly to ensure the children and families would not experience a gap in the Office's availability or services. Ms. Jones-Jesz stepped into the leadership role of the Acting Ombudsperson for Children at a time of great activity including community engagement efforts, going live with the complaint form, establishing permanent, physical office space, and hiring the two analyst positions. Despite, missing a critical role on the Office's leadership team, the Office of the Ombudsperson was able to accomplish these activities and more.

While we applaud the work done thus far, we also know that without securing a permanent Ombudsperson for Children, the roles and duties defined in the enacting legislation cannot be meaningful fulfilled. The intent of the legislation is clear – there are to be three distinct leadership roles within the Office of the Ombudsperson: (1) the Ombudsperson for Children; (2) the Chief Deputy Ombudsperson for Children; and (3) the CFSA Ombudsperson.⁵ Each leadership role has their own required duties to ensure the Office is independent and effective in:⁶

- helping children and families navigate the complexities of the child welfare system and resolve everyday problems and individual issues;

- establishing connections with community organizations and members;
- building relationships with other government agencies and identifying areas where interagency coordination must be improved to better meet the needs of DC's foster children;
- thoroughly reporting on data, metrics, and trends within the Office's purview of information including the District's crossover youth population; and
- identifying and offering solutions for systemic issues.

We, therefore, appreciate that the Office over the last 10 months has been transparent in needing more support to meet all their legislative mandates and their own Office's goals.

The nomination of Ms. Jones-Jesz means the Office can move forward with hiring a new Chief Deputy Ombudsperson. Our hope is that the Office moves efficiently to ensure the leadership team of the Office is fully staffed so it can grow on its already significant work and continue to build out more systemic efforts. Given the work that has been done in the last year and half, we can only imagine what this Office will be able to accomplish at full leadership capacity.

Conclusion

We are glad the Council has continued to be supportive of this Office including moving forward this nomination. As we look ahead to 2024, we ask that the Council continue to work with the Ombudsperson Office and continue to see it as a resource that

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

¹ Children’s Law Center attorneys represent children who are the subject of abuse and neglect cases in DC’s Family Court. CLC attorneys fight to find safe homes and ensure that children receive the services they need to overcome the trauma that first brought them into the child welfare system. DC Children’s Law Center, About Us, available at: <https://www.childrenslawcenter.org/content/about-us>. The term “protective supervision” means a legal status created by Division order in neglect cases whereby a minor is permitted to remain in his home under supervision, subject to return to the Division during the period of protective supervision. D.C. Code § 16-2301(19).

² Sharra E. Greer, Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (April 11, 2023), available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Sharra-E.-Greer-Testimony-before-DC-Council-Budget-CFSA-4.11.23.pdf>; Sharra E. Greer, Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 24, 2023), available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Sharra-E.-Greer-Childrens-Law-Center-Performance-Oversight-FY2022-23-CFSA-final.pdf>; and Children’s Law Center, Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Health and Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (December 6, 2023), available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Dec-6-2023-Hearing-on-B25-0500-and-Foster-Youth-Behavioral-Health-FINAL.pdf>.

³ Judith Sandalow, Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Human Services, (October 28, 2019), available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/FINAL-CLC-Testimony-before-the-DC-Council-on-B23-437.pdf>; Judith Sandalow, Testimony before the DC Council Committee on 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 DC 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 DC Council Committee on Housing and 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>; Tami Weerasingha-Cote, Testimony before the DC 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>; Judith Sandalow, Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Human Services, (June 30, 2022), available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/JSandalow-CLCTestimony-Public-Roundtable-Ombudsperson-for-Children-June-30-2022-final.pdf>; Sharra E. Greer, Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 24, 2023), available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Sharra-E.-Greer-Testimony-for-the-Committee-on-Facilities-and-Family->

[Services Office-of-the-Ombudsperson_final.pdf](#); and Sharra E. Greer, Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (April 11, 2023), *available at*:

https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Sharra-E.-Greer_Testimony-before-DC-Council_Budget_CFSA_4.11.23.pdf.

⁴ Judith Sandalow, Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Human Services, (June 30, 2022), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/JSandalow_CLCTestimony_Public-Roundtable-Ombudsperson-for-Children_June-30-2022_final.pdf

https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/JSandalow_CLCTestimony_Public-Roundtable-Ombudsperson-for-Children_June-30-2022_final.pdf

⁵ D.C. Law 23-270. Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act of 2020.

⁶ *Id.*