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Written Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
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Public Hearing:
Budget Oversight Hearing
B26-0260 - Fiscal Year 2026 Local Budget Act of 2025
B26-0262 - Fiscal Year 2026 Local Budget Emergency Act of 2025
B26-0263 - Fiscal Year 2025 Revised Local Budget Emergency Act of 2025
B26-0264 - Fiscal Year 2025 Revised Local Budget Temporary Act of 2025
B26-0265 - Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Support Act of 2025
B26-0261 - Fiscal Year 2026 Federal Portion Budget Request Act of 2025

Judith Sandalow
Chief Executive Officer
Children's Law Center

Good Morning, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee. My name is Judith. I am the Chief Executive Office at Children's Law Center and a resident of the District. 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 testify on behalf of Children's Law Center regarding both the FY26 Local Budget Act and the Budget Support Act. Over the last three and half weeks, Children's Law Center has testified at sixteen hearings in eight DC Council Committees.¹ We highlighted key funding strategies, some disappointing cuts, and some opportunities for investment in the Mayor's proposed FY26 budget. Today, I am here to testify on the Mayor's proposal to defund the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children (Office) but also point to our many other written testimonies that speak more extensively about a variety of critical topics including Access to Justice grants, School-Based Behavioral Health funding, crisis response for youth (ChAMPS), and effective housing assistance for families.²

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). We also represent many relative caregivers of children in CFSA custody and parents trying to avoid having their children enter foster care. Thus, we know both the need for and value of the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children because we see firsthand how children in foster care and their families and caregivers struggle to navigate the child welfare system on their own. We are deeply concerned by the Mayor's decision once again to defund the Office and repeal the legislation establishing this critical Office. We are asking that the Council fully restore funding to the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children and strike the repeal language from the Budget Support Act.

While it is true that the District is facing a difficult budget reality, the Mayor's hostility to this Office is longstanding and predates the current budget crisis. In fact, the Mayor has opposed the creation of this Office from the beginning and has repeatedly sought to override the Council's legislative powers in establishing this Office. The defunding of the Office is a clear dismissal of the Council's authority, undermines the Council's role, and demonstrates serious disregard for legislative entities in the District.

We are concerned that without the Ombudsperson for Children there will be significant setbacks in the progress made to improve the child welfare system. Specifically, the Office fills gaps left by the end of the court monitor's reporting for the

LaShawn litigation. Per the enacting legislation, the Office has access to relevant records and databases, CFSA facilities and staff, as well as holds subpoena power to fulfill its duties. The Office has direct access to CFSA data in the same way as the court monitor and is responsible for regularly reporting data trends and analysis to the Council, just as the court monitor did. Because of this, the Office is uniquely positioned to support and inform the Council's oversight of CFSA and other government agencies working with District children and families.

The Office was specifically put under the legislative branch to ensure independence and impartiality while supporting the Council's oversight of government agencies. As a part of the legislative branch, the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children has the ability to conduct impartial and independent investigations which are critical to address the very real structural power differential among the child welfare-involved children, youth, and caregivers and the case-carrying social workers and agency leadership. Although CFSA has made efforts in recent years to focus on prevention services that aim to keep families together and avoid removals whenever possible, the fact remains that families involved with DC's child welfare system are facing the possibility that their children may be taken away from them. This is a terrifying prospect that inevitably creates a significant power imbalance between CFSA and the families it serves. The Office can be an essential tool for re-balancing this power dynamic, providing

families with a safe place to get information and raise concerns – but only if families believe the Office is an independent entity that can be trusted to help them.

Finally, during these uncertain and difficult times, as District agencies are pulling back services and supports, the vulnerable children and families that the Office serves need help and support more than ever. The Office plays a critical role in listening to families when their needs are not met and helping them navigate the District systems that are supposed to be serving them. The Mayor’s desire to cut the office is not about cost savings and will in fact harm children and families. Therefore, the Council must fully restore funding to the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children and strike the repeal language from the Budget Support Act. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions the Committee may have.³

¹ Children’s Law Center testimony before DC Council, *available at*: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/audience/policy-testimony/>.

² *Id.*

³ To view our testimony submitted to the Committee on Youth Affairs for the Office of the Ombudsperson FY26 Budget Oversight hearing, please see Leah Castelaz, Children’s Law Center, testimony before the DC Council Committee on Youth Affairs (May 29, 2025), *available at*: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/fy26-budget-testimony-office-of-the-ombudsperson-for-children/>.