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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Youth Affairs  
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Office of the Ombudsperson for Children

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## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairperson Parker, and members of the Committee. My name is Leah Castelaz. I am a Senior Policy Attorney 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 today regarding the Mayor's proposed FY2026 budget for the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children ("Office"). We are deeply concerned by the Mayor's decision once again to defund the Office and repeal the legislation establishing this critical Office.<sup>1</sup> 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 Mayor's desire to cut the Office is not about cost savings and will instead cause harm to children and families. During these uncertain and difficult

times, as District agencies are pulling back services and support, 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.

We thank the DC Council for their decisive action in the past and once again call on them to fully restore funding to the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children and strike the repeal language from the Budget Support Act. Thank you, Councilmember Parker, for your direct statements of support during both performance oversight and the budget hearings.<sup>2</sup> We understand that it is critical for this Committee to hear more about the work of the Office and the tangible impact it is having on children and families in the District. To this end, my testimony today will: (1) discuss the current work of the Office and how it will support District children and families during uncertain, stressful times, (2) highlight the need for the Office during a time of a precarious budget by helping to ensure proper oversight of child and family facing agencies; and (3) underscore how the Mayor's continued attempted evisceration of this Office is a direct challenge to Council's oversight power.

The Office plays a critical role in facilitating both oversight, systemic review, and constituent services across the District. We cannot afford to lose the progress that has already been made by the uniquely positioned Office of the Ombudsperson for Children. We look forward to working with the Committee on Youth Affairs, the whole DC

Council, the Office, and child welfare system agencies to strengthen the important and crucial work of the Ombudsperson for Children.

**The Office, While Still in its Infancy, Has Proven to Be a Critical Tool Across the District for Children, Families, Community Organizations, and Government Agencies**

*The Office of the Ombudsperson for Children has Been a Valuable Resource for Children's Law Center's Work in the Child Welfare System*

Children's Law Center knows both the need for and value of this Office because we see firsthand how children in foster care and their families and caregivers struggle to navigate the child welfare system on their own. 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).<sup>3</sup> And each year, we see our clients fail to have their needs met by the child welfare system in the District – a system that encompasses many agencies beyond just CFSA.<sup>4</sup> The Department of Behavioral Health (DBH), the Department of Human Services (DHS), the Department of Health (DC Health), 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), to name a few, all have a role to play in ensuring the District fulfills its responsibilities to foster children and their families. In the past year, the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children has begun to assist in holding relevant city

agencies accountable for meeting the needs of child welfare-involved families and actively facilitate interagency communication and coordination.<sup>5</sup>

During the performance oversight hearing in February 2025, we were able to discuss the significant progress of the Office in two short years as well as highlight opportunities for advancement.<sup>6</sup> The Ombudsperson for Children has continued to grow its capacity to problem-solve on behalf of individuals and families involved in the child-welfare family, deepen its connections to and impact in the community, and provide valuable insights to the Council in support of its oversight of the child welfare system. The Ombudsperson for Children helps children and families navigate the complexities of the child welfare system through its many functions.<sup>7</sup>

Earlier this year, we recognized that there was a gap in connecting our attorneys with the Office. We reached out to the Office to navigate how to strengthen their relationships not just with Children's Law Center's attorneys, but attorneys across the city representing child welfare involved youth and families. As part of this work, the Office has come to the Children's Law Center offices twice to present on their work and connect with our attorneys. Being community facing and spending time doing this level of outreach is critical for building trust in a system riddled with distrust. Being public facing and spending time building relationships with Children's Law Center and across the District has allowed this Office to deepen its connections and be more impactful in its work. The Office has worked directly with several guardians-ad litem in their cases to

help navigate persistent issues. Our attorneys have noted the value of being able to reach out to the Office, even if they are not filing a formal complaint, they see it as a space to access critical resources and information. The Office has agreed to come to Children's Law Center on a more regular basis to create an easier touch point for the guardians-ad litem and clients. While still in its pilot phase, we look forward to reporting to this Committee on how this level of commitment and engagement by the Ombudsperson has an impact on our work by helping to navigate complicated systems and resolves issues that do not require court involvement.

As part of these more regular touchpoints the Office will also be spending time with guardians-ad litem on key systemic issues that the guardians-ad litem see across their cases. We believe this will be an excellent opportunity to support the Office's other critical function – to independently investigate systemic concerns relating to CFSA children, including issues relating to interagency communication and coordination. Children's Law Center is acutely aware of trends across the clients we serve. For example, during Performance Oversight, we touched on CFSA's failure to properly implement the Social Security Income requirements in the Preserving Our Kids' Equity Through Trusts and Fostering Stable Housing Opportunities Amendment Act of 2022 ("POKETT").<sup>8</sup> This is deeply impacting Children's Law Center clients. Being able to connect with the Ombudsperson on this wide-spread systemic issue will help many of our clients in the long run. For example, the POKETT Act requires CFSA to screen every child in care for

social security benefit eligibility. However, this is not happening consistently and as a result clients are missing out on benefits they should have received. The Ombudsperson is in the right position to further investigate where the gaps are in the system that are causing these failures. This is just one example of the deeper systemic work that we hope to engage in with the Ombudsperson for years to come.

*The Ombudsperson Serves a Critical Role of Connecting Across the Community and Government Agencies to Ensure Vulnerable Families are Heard*

This deep level of systemic work is not just happening with Children's Law Center, but across the District. The Office of the Ombudsperson for Children is in a critical position to provide interagency coordination. The Office has hit many speedbumps trying to engaging executive agencies – an issue this Council is all too familiar with. However, the Office has persisted in opening up numerous opportunities for engagement, including focus groups that bring together community-based organizations and government officials as well as attending events and facilitating one-on-one conversations across both community stakeholders and the government.<sup>9</sup>

Across the two and half years of operation, the Ombudsperson has prioritized engagement with a variety of stakeholders. The Ombudsperson continues to make significant efforts to do outreach to the community to share the mission and goals of the Ombudsperson. In FY2024, the Ombudsperson engaged in monthly and quarterly child welfare advocate meetings, presented at Foster and Adoptive Parents Advocacy Center (FAPAC) Youth and Parent Summit, and facilitated a town hall for the Mayor's Advisory

Committee on Child Abuse & Neglect (MACCAN) – just to name a few examples of engagement.<sup>10</sup> Being community facing is a critical component to help DC residents see the Ombudsperson as a tool to help resolve concerns and issues arising in the child welfare system.

Moreover, the Ombudsperson deepened their connections with government stakeholders. It is particularly important to highlight that CFSA and the Ombudsperson have a strong relationship as evidenced by: the Deputy CFSA Ombudsperson has an established office within CFSA;<sup>11</sup> the Office meets with the CFSA Director, Chief of Staff and Special Assistant to the Director on a bi-weekly basis;<sup>12</sup> and the Office has been able to directly engage with CFSA staff, including social workers.<sup>13</sup> It is also important to note that in response to the establishment of this Office, the agency eliminated its internal ombudsman. If the Ombudsperson is defunded in FY26 there will be no Ombudsperson overseeing CFSA at all. This is extremely alarming and closes a door on vulnerable children and families, especially during a time when District agencies are pulling back services and supports. 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 Office of the Ombudsperson for Children is the Only District Agency Making Progress on Tracking and Systematically Reporting on Crossover Youth*

The level of engagement is needed not just with CFSA but across the District. The Ombudsperson has been working on strengthening its relationships with other



government agencies and supporting interagency coordination. In particular, we have seen the Office expend significant resources to improve the systems engaged with District's crossover youth – children who experience both the foster care system and juvenile justice system.<sup>14</sup>

Crossover youth experience significant challenges to their well-being and stability, too often rolling from one system into the next – from foster care to DC's homeless or juvenile justice systems, for example. They face even greater barriers to positive outcomes in adulthood – including more difficulties in school and higher unemployment rates – than foster care youth involved in only one system.<sup>15</sup> From Children's Law Center's own internal data, we see a significant number of our youth become involved in the juvenile or adult criminal legal system – on average, over the last four years, 85 percent of our clients ages 14 years and older have had some involvement in a criminal case, signifying a significant overlap between the child welfare and the criminal legal system. We also know that over 40 percent of Children's Law Center crossover youth clients experienced placement issues or problems with receiving services from CFSA due to their juvenile or adult criminal legal system involvement.<sup>16</sup>

Currently, no District agency comprehensively tracks crossover youth or conducts systemic analyses on factors affecting their outcomes. As a result, these youth and their problems have remained largely invisible to the Council and the agencies responsible for

their well-being. The Ombudsperson for Children is explicitly tasked by law to report annually on crossover youth and identify systemic issues impacting their outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

For years, the District has struggled to even identify this population let alone understand the systemic challenges this population faces. This is rooted in the fact that responsibility for this population is spread across multiple agencies including courts and federal agencies that do not answer to the District government. In establishing data collection on crossover youth, the Office encountered several obstacles including differing data collection process by CFSA and Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS), working with the courts and the Office of the Attorney General to access records, and confidentiality concerns of juvenile records which limited full data collection.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these persistent barriers, the Office has made substantial steps in collecting data on crossover youth in the District. We commend the Office's persistence and ongoing collaboration with both agencies to establish entry level data for the District's crossover youth population.<sup>19</sup> Without the Office's tenacity and relationship-building, the District would not even have a baseline of data on crossover youth including the number of youths in dual status, the placement type, and pathways to involvement trends.<sup>20</sup>

While the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children still has more work to do to establish data for crossover youth – we cannot afford to lose the progress that has already been made. The Office has been at the center of partnering, developing, and instituting

data sharing agreements between the two agencies to understand the full scope of the crossover youth population. Additionally, the Office has been directly working with the courts, speaking with the administration staff, and judges to better understand how to access the records of crossover youth. The Ombudsperson should continue to work with the integration of STAAND with Odyssey, the court's data system, to ensure they are able to better capture data on crossover youth. There are clear continued opportunities to deepen this work, and the Office is in the best position to serve as a convening for the various groups working on crossover youth in the District given their unique position and legislatively mandated requirements.

If the District loses the Ombudsperson, it will lose the progress being made on crossover youth in the District. Without an Ombudsperson, there will no longer be oversight on a population that no one else is monitoring or supporting – sending a clear message that this population will continue to be deprioritized despite a growing need for investment and support. Investment in the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children is investment in the District's crossover youth population.

We acknowledge there is room for improvement, and look forward to working with the Office, the Council, and the community to continue to strengthen the Office, we must also note that the Office has built a strong foundation to continue to its impact on the District. Cutting the Office would end their already significant investments and disallow opportunity to further grow. The Office is still in its infancy – two years is not a

long time to set up an Office from the ground up. We are committed to this Office and see the immense need and value for the Office in the District.

**The Office is Needed, Now More Than Ever, to Support District Families Navigating Difficult and Uncertain Times**

As a result of the District's current budget challenges, many of the government agencies and programs focused on meeting the needs of the most vulnerable District children and families are facing drastic cuts. The Office is needed to ensure this Committee, and the Council can fully understand the scope and impact of these cuts, and exercise oversight accordingly. There also needs to be significant communication between child and family-serving agencies to identify opportunities to share resources and ensure residents are connected with the appropriate support and services. The Office is in the best position to provide this much needed level of monitoring and cross-agency coordination.

*The Goal of Creating the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children was to Ensure Transparency and Accountability in the Child Welfare System*

To provide a little further context on the critical role of the Ombudsperson during difficult times, we need to go back thirty-one years. Beginning in 1989, CFSA was under the supervision of a court-appointed monitor as a result of *LaShawn A. v. Bowser* ("LaShawn") – a federal class action lawsuit filed in 1989 on behalf of abused and neglected children in the District of Columbia.<sup>21</sup>

In September 2022, the Mayor announced the official exit from the federal court oversight.<sup>22</sup> The exit meant an end to the Center for the Study of Social Policy (“CSSP”) monitoring and reporting on the District’s progress in implementing the extensive remedial order imposing numerous requirements, changes, and reforms in every area of the child welfare system. As the court monitor, CSSP was able to collect data, documents, and other information from CFSA. CSSP, in turn, provided this information to the public and the Council in the form of regular reports and testimony.<sup>23</sup>

CSSP reports were essential to creating transparency and accountability within the District’s child welfare system. CSSP’s work went far beyond just collecting data from CFSA. CSSP had access to case records in CFSA’s FACES.NET to collect supplementary data and verify performance on activities across the agency.<sup>24</sup> As part of its monitoring, CSSP would present it to a panel consisting of CFSA representatives and other CSSP staff to ensure reliability of the information and better inform data collection practices for the agency. Per CSSP, over its time as the court monitor the data reporting by CFSA improved significantly due to CSSP involvement.<sup>25</sup>

Understanding the significant impact CSSP had on improving the District’s child welfare system, the Council agreed that it could not afford to lose this level of oversight. The Council recognized that while there were other existing sources of systemic accountability of CFSA – the Citizen Review Panel on Child Abuse and Neglect (“CRP”), Council performance oversight, and the court monitor for LaShawn – these entities did

not have the deep access necessary to provide sufficient oversight of CFSA and are not designed to consider broader systemic issues affecting children.<sup>26</sup>

The Office of the Ombudsperson for Children fills gaps left by the end of the court monitor's reporting. 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.<sup>27</sup> The Ombudsperson for Children 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, DYRS was under a court monitor for an extensive period of time and the Office is well positioned to support DYRS oversight as well.<sup>30</sup>

*The Office Can and Should Play a Role in Helping Government Agencies Navigate Difficult Budget Decisions to Ensure Minimal to No Impact on Children and Families*

The reality is that budget cuts may result in cuts to staff and services at CFSA or DYRS for example, and we must do everything to ensure that these agencies and others do not backtrack in their services and support for District children and families. Harsh budget realities will require difficult decisions. The Office can provide a critical third party to help navigate those decisions and bring folks to the table. The Office can also monitor the impact of those cuts and ensure that agencies do not engage in past actions that lead to significant harm to children and families. Maintaining funding for the Office

is a critical investment in prevention. The District, as do many jurisdictions, often defer maintenance and do not invest in prevention. If investments are not made now in the Office, this is where we will be heading. The Office will help us weather this storm and grow the District's strength to fight off future storms.

It is clear that the Office has already been an incredible support to families navigating the complicated child welfare system.<sup>31</sup> Given the connections the Office has already made with residents, community-based organizations and other government agencies, elimination of the Office would be strongly felt across the District.

In addition to the impact on families, there will be consequences for the District's economy in the long run. Just as eviction is a short-term fix that is ultimately more costly than prevention services like rental assistance, it is ultimately better to sustain programs through a tough budget year than to try to rebuild them later. The District has already invested a significant number of resources – time, energy, and money – into the Office. To walk back on this investment would result in a loss of trust and reputation built within the community, further financial implications, and missed opportunities.

### **The Mayor Continues to Impede on the Council's Legislative Power By Defunding the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children**

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. Children's Law Center has been a staunch supporter of the Council's

extraordinary efforts to establish this Office for many years – through unanimously voting to establish the Office in 2020<sup>32</sup> and unanimously overriding the Mayor’s veto in 2021,<sup>33</sup> to fully funding the Office in FY2022<sup>34</sup> and fully restoring funding for the Office when the Mayor defunded it the first time in FY2023 and FY2025.<sup>35</sup>

The Mayor has, for the third year in a row, imperiled accountability and transparency for DC’s most vulnerable families. Moreover, her primary objection of continuing to cut this Office focuses on the power dynamics with the Council and not supporting District children and families. Her political machinations demonstrate a callous disregard for children and families across the District, especially those connected to the child welfare system.

The Office is a legislative agency and much like the Advisory Neighborhood Commission, the DC Auditor, and the Council itself – the Mayor does not have authority over the Office, the Council does. The Office was specifically put under the legislative branch to ensure independence and impartiality while supporting the Council’s oversight of government agencies. The Mayor’s continued decision to cut this Office is a clear dismissal of the Council’s authority, undermines the Council’s role, and is a serious disregard for legislative entities in the District.

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 significant 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.<sup>36</sup> This is a terrifying prospect that inevitably creates a significant power imbalance between CFSA and the families it serves. The Ombudsperson for Children can be an essential tool for rebalancing this power dynamic, providing families with a safe place to get information and raise concerns – but only if families believe the Ombudsperson for Children is an independent entity that can be trusted to help them.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear the Office plays an important role in resolving the day-to-day problems, addressing the systemic concerns of the District's children and families, and building Council's capacity to have effective oversight – and is why the Council must act to preserve the Office. Therefore, we ask that the Council stand up to the Mayor, protect its authority, and fully restore funding to the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children and strike the repeal language from the Budget Support Act.<sup>37</sup> Thank you for the opportunity to testify and we welcome any questions the Committee may have.

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the Chief Financial Officer, Fiscal Impact Statement – “Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Support Act of 2025,” May 27, 2025, available at:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bbd09f3d74562c7f0e4bb10/t/6835dee493ad9c1c05cb325c/1748360932599/FIS+Fiscal+Year+2026+Budget+Support+Act+of+2025+as+introduced+May+27+2025.pdf>; Mayor’s Proposed FY 2026 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 4 Agency Budget Chapters – Part 3, Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, p. E-99.

<sup>2</sup> Committee on Youth Affairs, Councilmember Parker, Performance Oversight – Office on African American Affairs, CFSA, and Ombudsperson for Children, (February 13, 2025), *available at*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgFMIYKk0nw&t=18771s>; Committee on Youth Affairs, Councilmember Parker, Budget Oversight Hearing: CFSA, and Ombudsperson for Children, (May 29, 2025), *available at*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTbCrAbDjhA&t=25397s>.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Human Services, (February 25, 2021), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TWeerasinghaCote\\_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-25-2021-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TWeerasinghaCote_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-25-2021-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL.pdf); Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Human Services, (February 27, 2022), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_ChildrensLaw-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-17-2022-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TWeerasingha-Cote_ChildrensLaw-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-17-2022-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL.pdf); Tami Weerasingha-Cote, Children’s Law Center, Testimony before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Human Services, (September 22, 2022), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_CLC-Testimony-for-Sept.-22-2022-Hearing-on-B24-0857B24-0941\\_FINAL.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/TWeerasingha-Cote_CLC-Testimony-for-Sept.-22-2022-Hearing-on-B24-0857B24-0941_FINAL.pdf); Sharra E. Greer, testimony before 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-LawCenter\\_Performance-Oversight\\_FY2022-23-CFSA\\_final.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Sharra-E.-Greer_Childrens-LawCenter_Performance-Oversight_FY2022-23-CFSA_final.pdf); Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 21, 2024), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL-002.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL-002.pdf); Leah Castelaz, testimony before DC Council Committee on Youth Affairs, (February 13, 2025), *available at*: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/2024-25-oversight-testimony-office-of-the-ombudsperson-for-children/>.

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<sup>5</sup> District of Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report, January 11, 2024, *available at*:

[https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc\\_office\\_of\\_the\\_ombudsperson\\_for\\_children\\_annual\\_report\\_fy\\_2023\\_final2.pdf](https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc_office_of_the_ombudsperson_for_children_annual_report_fy_2023_final2.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Leah Castelaz, testimony before DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 13, 2025), *available at*: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/2024-25-oversight-testimony-office-of-the-ombudsperson-for-children/>.

<sup>7</sup> First, the Ombudsperson works to resolve everyday problems by providing the space for children, families, and agency staff to work through and resolve these conflicts together or ensure children and families can connect with the right person to meet their needs in a timely manner. Additionally, the Ombudsperson is a critical resource for information and referrals which provides the Office with additional insights into what District families may be looking for with regards to resources, services, and supports. Second, the Ombudsperson plays a crucial role in making connections across the community and the government that help to facilitate information sharing as well as improved communication, coordination and connectiveness in the District. Finally, the Office is responsible for identifying trends and systemic issues impacting children and families involved in the child welfare system and developing recommendations based on this analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Tami Weerasingha-Cote, testimony before DC Council Committee on Youth Affairs, (February 13, 2025), *available at*: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/2024-25-oversight-testimony-child-and-family-services-agency/>.

<sup>9</sup> District of Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, FY2024 Annual Report, *available at*: [https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/page\\_content/attachments/OFC\\_FY2024\\_Annual\\_Report.pdf](https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/page_content/attachments/OFC_FY2024_Annual_Report.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> District of Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report, January 11, 2024, *available at*:

[https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc\\_office\\_of\\_the\\_ombudsperson\\_for\\_children\\_annual\\_report\\_fy\\_2023\\_final2.pdf](https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc_office_of_the_ombudsperson_for_children_annual_report_fy_2023_final2.pdf); District of Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson for

Children, FY2024 Annual Report, *available at*: [https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/page\\_content/attachments/OFC\\_FY2024\\_Annual\\_Report.pdf](https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/page_content/attachments/OFC_FY2024_Annual_Report.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> District of Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report, January 11, 2024, *available at*:

[https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc\\_office\\_of\\_the\\_ombudsperson\\_for\\_children\\_annual\\_report\\_fy\\_2023\\_final2.pdf](https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc_office_of_the_ombudsperson_for_children_annual_report_fy_2023_final2.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> District of Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, Fiscal Year 2023 Mid-Year Report, July 31, 2023, *available at*:

[https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/office\\_of\\_the\\_ombudsperson\\_for\\_children\\_ofc\\_mid-year\\_report\\_fy2023\\_rev.pdf](https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/office_of_the_ombudsperson_for_children_ofc_mid-year_report_fy2023_rev.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> District of Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report, January 11, 2024, *available at*:

[https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc\\_office\\_of\\_the\\_ombudsperson\\_for\\_children\\_annual\\_report\\_fy\\_2023\\_final2.pdf](https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc_office_of_the_ombudsperson_for_children_annual_report_fy_2023_final2.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Council of the District of Columbia Committee on Human Services, Committee Report on Bill 23-0437, the “Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Act of 2020,” p. 15, (November 24, 2020),

*available at*: [https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/43171/Committee\\_Report/B23-0437Committee\\_Report2.pdf?Id=114187](https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/43171/Committee_Report/B23-0437Committee_Report2.pdf?Id=114187).

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<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Internal Children's Law Center Data Collection, "GAL Deep Dive," June 2022 through May 2023; Internal Children's Law Center Data Collection, "GAL Deep Dive," June 2023 through May 2024.

<sup>17</sup> D.C. Law 23-270. Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act of 2020.

<sup>18</sup> District of Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report, January 11, 2024, *available at*:

[https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc\\_office\\_of\\_the\\_ombudsperson\\_for\\_children\\_annual\\_report\\_fy\\_2023\\_final2.pdf](https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc_office_of_the_ombudsperson_for_children_annual_report_fy_2023_final2.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> *LaShawn A v. Kelly*, 887 F. Supp. 297, 298 – 300 (D.D.C. 1995). *See* Children's Law Center, *Overview of the LaShawn A. Litigation*, Practice Kit, *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/files/attachments/resources/PK4\\_II.%20LaShawn%20A.%20Information\\_0.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/files/attachments/resources/PK4_II.%20LaShawn%20A.%20Information_0.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Executive Office of the Mayor, *With the End of a Three-Decade Class Action Lawsuit, Mayor Bowser Announces a New Era for the DC Child and Family Services Agency*, September 9, 2022, *available at*: <https://mayor.dc.gov/release/end-three-decade-class-action-lawsuit-mayor-bowser-announces-new-era-dc-child-and-family>.

<sup>23</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy, *Class Action Litigation: Washington DC's Child and Family Services Agency Reports*, *available at*: <https://cssp.org/our-work/projects/our-projects/class-action-litigationwashington-dcs-child-and-family-services-agency/>.

<sup>24</sup> Examples of the activities the Monitor reported on include: (1) the quality and timely initiation of investigations; (2) collaborative referrals for low or moderate risk families; (3) visits between parents and workers and parents and children; (4) CFSA's case load; (5) quality service reviews; (6) social worker and supervisor training; and (7) timely licensure of foster and adoptive parents. *See* Center for the Study of Social Policy, *LASHAWN A. V. BOWSER PROGRESS REPORT FOR THE PERIOD January 1 – December 31, 2020, (March 31, 2021)*, *available at*: <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/LaShawn-A-v.-Bowser-Report-for-Period-Jan-Dec-2020.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> A 2015 report found that CFSA was responsible for data irregularities in reporting to the Court Monitor. *See* A Better Childhood, *LaShawn A. V. Mayor Bowser*, *available at*: <https://www.abetterchildhood.org/washington-dc>. At the time of the Settlement Agreement, CFSA had made significant strides in their reporting. Judith Meltzer, CSSP president and one of the original members of the monitoring team. "CSSP has been instrumental in the District's changes through its independent research and data tracking, technical assistance, and problem-solving approach to monitoring the District's reform efforts." *See* Center for the Study of Social Policy, *Final Settlement Agreement in LaShawn A v. Bowser Approved*, (June 4, 2021), *available at*: <https://cssp.org/about-us/connect/press-room/final-settlement-agreement-in-lashawn-a-v-bowser-approved/>.

<sup>26</sup> Committee on Human Services, *Report on Bill 23-0437, the "Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act of 2020,"* (November 24, 2020), *available at*: [https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/43171/Committee\\_Report/B23-0437-Committee\\_Report2.pdf?Id=114187](https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/43171/Committee_Report/B23-0437-Committee_Report2.pdf?Id=114187).

<sup>27</sup> D.C. Act 23-617. The Office of the Ombudsperson for Children. Sec. 106. Powers. (a)(1)-(8). ((1) records from agency, an agency-licensed or contracted service and placement provider, or an entity that must operate under or comply with guidance from an agency; (2) log-in directly to CFSA's web-based case management and electronic data systems that service CFSA children without having to first obtain CFSA's consent or provide notice; (3) conduct inspections of the premises, or any part thereof, without prior notice, of CFSA and licensed or contracted placement providers, including secure facilities and

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group homes and without prior notice, of single-family foster homes and contracted or licensed service providers; (4) issue a subpoena, enforceable in Superior Court of the District of Columbia, to compel the attendance and testimony; and (5) communicate privately with CFSA child (who wishes to speak with the Ombudsperson) and agency employee.).

<sup>28</sup> D.C. Act 23-617. The Office of the Ombudsperson for Children. Sec. 108. Reporting.

<sup>29</sup>D.C. Act 23-617. The Office of the Ombudsperson for Children. Sec. 108. Reporting. The Office is required to produce an annual report which is an important avenue for the Office to share out this critical reporting. However, recognizing a need for greater transparency, the Office has gone further and produced a mid-year report as well. We commend the Office for taking this extra step. The reporting done by the Office thus far serves as a solid foundation from which to expand future reporting on the full child welfare system. In the second annual report, the Office highlights the unique position of the Ombudsperson to help children and families, provide critical data, and inform systemic reform. The second annual report highlights issue pertaining to placement, kin caregiver supports, and safety measures, which reflect some of the same concerns Children’s Law Center has for our own clients. We are glad to see these issues being highlighted by the Ombudsperson as it helps amplify the issues and provide solutions to long-term, persistent concerns. *See Leah Castelaz, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 21, 2024), available at: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Leah-Castelaz\\_Testimony-before-the-Committee-on-Facilities-and-Family-Services\\_Ombudsperson-for-Children\\_2.21.24\\_final.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Leah-Castelaz_Testimony-before-the-Committee-on-Facilities-and-Family-Services_Ombudsperson-for-Children_2.21.24_final.pdf)*; District of Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report, January 11, 2024, *available at: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/54520/Introduction/RC25-0115Introduction.pdf?Id=182575>*.

<sup>30</sup> DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, et al., Appellants, v. JERRY M., et al., Appellees. No. 96–CV–1408. Decided: September 03, 1998; Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, *Mayor Bowser Announces the End of Court Oversight of the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services*, (December 1, 2020), *available at: <https://dyrs.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-announces-end-court-oversight-dc-department-youth-rehabilitation-services>*.

<sup>31</sup> District of Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report, January 11, 2024, *available at: [https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc\\_office\\_of\\_the\\_ombudsperson\\_for\\_children\\_annual\\_report\\_fy\\_2023\\_final2.pdf](https://ofc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ofc/publication/attachments/dc_office_of_the_ombudsperson_for_children_annual_report_fy_2023_final2.pdf)*; Petrina Jones-Jesz, Testimony Before the DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 21, 2024), *available at: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/253>*.

<sup>32</sup> Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act of 2020, Legislative History, *available at: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B23-0437>*.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> Judith Sandalow, Children’s Law Center Testimony before the DC 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](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)*.

<sup>35</sup> Judith Sandalow, Children’s Law Center Testimony before the DC Council Committee of the Whole, (April 8, 2022), *available at: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/JSandalow\\_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-April-8-2022-Committee-of-the-Whole-Budget-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL-Exhibits-A-and-B-1.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/JSandalow_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-April-8-2022-Committee-of-the-Whole-Budget-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL-Exhibits-A-and-B-1.pdf)*; Leah Castelaz, Children’s Law Center Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (April 25, 2024),

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available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/fy25-budget-testimony-office-of-the-ombudsperson-for-children/>.

<sup>36</sup> Tami Weerasingha-Cote, Testimony Before the DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, (February 21, 2024), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL-002.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TWeerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-Feb.-21-2024-CFSA-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL-002.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Office of the Chief Financial Officer, Fiscal Impact Statement – “Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Support Act of 2025,” May 27, 2025, *available at*: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bbd09f3d74562c7f0e4bb10/t/6835dee493ad9c1c05cb325c/1748360932599/FIS+Fiscal+Year+2026+Budget+Support+Act+of+2025+as+introduced+May+27+2025.pdf>; Mayor’s Proposed FY 2026 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 4 Agency Budget Chapters – Part 3, Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, p. E-99.