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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Youth Affairs
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Public Roundtable:
*PR26-0358, Director of the Child and Family Services Agency Tanya Torres Trice Confirmation
Resolution of 2025*

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Good morning, Chairperson Parker and members of the Committees. My name is Judith Sandalow. I am the Chief Executive Officer 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 60,000 children and families directly and multiplied our impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit hundreds of thousands more.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify regarding the confirmation of Tanya Torres Trice as the Director of the Child and Family Services Agency ("CFSA"). Children's Law Center has a long-standing policy of not endorsing or opposing mayoral appointments. We are, however, deeply invested in the work and services of CFSA. We would like to take this opportunity to share our thoughts on the attributes the Committee should be looking for in a new CFSA Director, and to reflect on our experiences with Director Trice to date.

Our opinions are grounded in our experience working directly with CFSA and with children and families facing myriad challenges. Children's Law Center attorneys serve as guardians-ad-litem for children in the care and custody of CFSA.¹ Currently, we

represent approximately half the children involved with CFSA – several hundred children in foster care and protective supervision each year.² Children’s Law Center also has teams of attorneys dedicated to helping families secure special education services for their children, address unhealthy housing conditions, and obtain custody or guardianship of children in their extended family.³ A small part of this work is funded by a grant from CFSA with a goal of providing support to parents in order to prevent their children from entering foster care. As a result, we not only have expertise in the issues impacting children who are already in the care and custody of CFSA, we also have insight into systemic issues affecting the broader population of families most likely to be impacted by CFSA’s policies and practices.

For the past several years, CFSA has been working to transform the District’s child welfare agency into a “child and family well-being system” that seamlessly connects children and families with resources in their communities, “with the goal of them never having to come to the attention of CFSA.”⁴ To this end, the agency has significantly invested in prevention strategies intended to meet families in need with resources, rather than separating children from their families.

By some measures, this work has been successful – the number of children in care has decreased dramatically over the past 10 to 15 years. CFSA has expanded the types of programs and services it offers to support families – including building out their in-home services, re-establishing the 211 warmline, and most recently, launching their Opt-In

program, which will provide direct assistance to families on the cusp of child welfare involvement.

In other ways, it is clear we still have a long way to go. We still have hundreds of children in foster care, and thousands more touching the child welfare system to some degree (and experiencing the harm of that involvement). The vast majority of CFSA's cases are still neglect cases (versus abuse cases), which are inextricably intertwined with conditions of poverty.

Further, CFSA continues to struggle with consistently providing critical services and supports that meet the needs of children in foster care, their families, and their caregivers. As a result, children in care, including many of our clients, have inconsistent experiences – with some of them experiencing instability and lack of support to a degree that is harmful to their well-being, and at times worse than the circumstances from which they were removed. Resolving these practice and implementation problems will require improvements in internal communications and practice standards, as well as increased levels of supervision and internal accountability from the agency.

To address these challenges, and to continue moving CFSA forward on its path to transformation, we believe CFSA needs a leader with a clear vision for the future of the agency, a willingness to be open and transparent about gaps and shortfalls in the agency's current performance and practices, and a partnership approach with community and individuals with lived experience.

We have worked with Director Trice for many years, in her varying roles at CFSA. As former Director Matthew's Chief of Staff, she was deeply involved in the development of the Thriving Families Safer Children initiative, now known as Keeping DC Families Together. Neglect statute reform, reconstitution of the 211 Warmline, and the development of the Opt-In program all grew out of this work – and we have been very pleased to see Director Trice continue to move this work forward rapidly as Interim Director and now Acting Director. Successful transformation requires sustained commitment, and Director Trice's shared vision on this front has enabled this work to continue smoothly and uninterrupted despite shifts in the agency's leadership.

We have also appreciated Director Trice's willingness to engage with us regarding our concerns about agency practices and problems our clients are experiencing while in the agency's care. Director Trice has a monthly standing meeting with us and is always responsive to our inquiries. She also supports our engagement with a broader group of agency leaders to enable problem-solving at a programmatic level. We believe that this willingness to openly discuss and address problems with the agency's performance is vital to achieving the systemic changes necessary to secure better outcomes for our clients.

Finally, under Director Trice's leadership, the agency has continued to expand its partnership work with community members, advocates, and individuals with lived experience. In addition to bringing us in to work with the agency on neglect statute

reform and the development of the SOUL legislation, under Director Trice's leadership, the agency has partnered with us to provide prevention legal services to families. Bringing community in is essential to supporting the vision of keeping families safely together and meeting them with resources whenever possible, and we hope to see CFSA continue this collaborative approach to its work.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I welcome any questions the Committees may have.

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 DC Children's Law Center, About Us, *available at*: <https://www.childrenslawcenter.org/content/about-us>.

³ Children's Law Center, Our Impact, *available at*: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/our-impact/>.

⁴ Robert L. Matthews, Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services, Performance Oversight Hearing Fiscal Year 2022, Child and Family Service Agency, (February 24, 2023), *available at*: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/kod57y5ukqmwopg/AAAGPTIiA_GzfrtaDmi8CcKca/2023%20Folders/2.24.23%20-%20POH%20for%20CFSA%20and%20Ombuds%20for%20Children/Government%20Testimony?e=2&preview=CFSA+FY22+Performance+Oversight+Hearing+Testimony_Director+Robert+L+Matthews-Final.pdf&subfolder_nav_tracking=1&dl=0.