



250 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite 350  
Washington, DC 20001  
T 202.467.4900 • F 202.467.4949  
[www.childrenslawcenter.org](http://www.childrenslawcenter.org)

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Youth Affairs  
May 12, 2026

Public Hearing:  
Budget Oversight Hearing  
Office of the Ombudsperson for Children

Leah Castelaz  
Senior Policy Attorney  
Children's Law Center

## **Introduction**

Good afternoon, 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 regarding the proposed Fiscal Year (FY) 2027 budget for the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children (OFC). We are glad to see that funding remains level for OFC.<sup>1</sup> For the first time since FY24, the Mayor has chosen not to defund OFC. An Office that has continued to operate due to the Council's efforts – through voting to establish the Office in 2020 and unanimously overriding the Mayor's veto in 2021, to fully funding the Office in FY22 and fully restoring funding for the Office when the Mayor defunded it the first time in FY23, and then again in FY25 and FY26.<sup>2</sup>

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 CFSA. We, like this Committee, know well the need for OFC as an independent, impartial, legislative office. OFC sits an equivalent posture to the DC Auditor office and specifically helps build the capacity of the DC Council to conduct oversight of the District's child welfare system.

The child welfare system is a system that encompasses many agencies beyond just Child and Family Service Agency (CFSA). 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. OFC serves a particularly unique and important role in the District and particularly with the DC Council as well as DC residents.

With continued funding, OFC will remain a place for children and families who are failed by the child welfare system to have a place to turn. We are hopeful that with continued funding stability – OFC can continue to work on implementation, their reach, and ultimately their impact.<sup>3</sup> We, therefore, ask the Committee to maintain funding for OFC.

Through our work we also know that the current funding level is not sufficient for OFC to realize its full potential to support the District. Therefore, we ask the Committee to consider (1) establishing a DYRS Deputy Ombudsperson and (2) how DC Council can better leverage OFC to overcome challenges of interagency coordination and ensure accountability in the Executive branch. These key investments will continue to expand the breadth and depth of OFC in the District, creating a bigger impact for children and families.

### **A DYRS Deputy Ombudsperson Would Strengthen Coordination for Dual-Jacketed Youth and Improve System Coordination**

The Ombudsperson for Children plays a critical role with respect to systemic issues impacting crossover youth – youth who experience both the foster care system and juvenile justice system.<sup>4</sup> Crossover youth experience significant challenges to their well-being and stability, too often moving between systems. They face even greater barriers to positive outcomes in adulthood – including difficulties in school and higher unemployment rates – than foster care youth involved in only one system.<sup>5</sup>

From Children’s Law Center’s own internal data, we 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. OFC is the only entity explicitly tasked by law to report annually on crossover youth and identify systemic issues impacting their outcomes. OFC’s role

ensures these youth and their problems do not remain invisible to the Council and the agencies responsible for their well-being.

As this Committee knows well – the Ombudsperson has made great strides in trying to access crossover youth data. We believe the District is moving closer to a more coordinated cohesive data collection process for crossover youth.<sup>6</sup> However, there is more work to be done – particularly on a subsection of crossover youth – those who are “dual-jacketed.” Dual-jacketed youth are youth who are simultaneously involved in both CFSA and the juvenile legal system. We are particularly interested in those youth who are committed to DYRS as a starting point to better address outcomes for dual-jacketed youth.<sup>7</sup>

Based on our own experiences supporting dual-jacketed youth, there is significant need for better practices, policies, and procedures, particularly for those who are simultaneously involved with DYRS and CFSA.<sup>8</sup> For example, when a youth’s DYRS placement ends, it is unclear whether DYRS or CFSA is responsible for establishing the youth’s next placement. There is no clearly established policy, and both agencies are left in limbo. OFC can play a role to help DYRS and CFSA to identify opportunities for better coordination, clearer policies, or other opportunities to improve outcomes for dual-jacketed youth.

Despite the clear need for a deeper working relationship with DYRS, OFC does not yet have a Deputy DYRS Ombudsperson. The Deputy CFSA Ombudsperson is able

to focus their attention on resolving complaints made to the Ombudsperson including supervising the Ombudsperson Analysts that work with the complainant.<sup>9</sup> The Deputy CFSA Ombudsperson also have an established office within CFSA as a way to create greater access for constituents.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the Deputy CFSA Ombudsperson plays a critical role in the day-to-day problem solving for those families engaged in the child welfare system.

The role of the Deputy CFSA Ombudsperson is needed because no matter the skill and kindness of the social workers involved, CFSA is and always will be an agency with enormous power over children and families. CFSA has the power to remove children from their parents, significantly influences where and with whom those children will live and determine the conditions under which families can be reunited, if ever. Because of this power dynamic, child welfare-involved children and families are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to raising concerns about agency policies or practices. As an independent office with system expertise and good relationships within CFSA, the Deputy CFSA Ombudsperson is a safe place for children and families to go when they have concerns or need help.

DYRS leverages similar power over families but the level of oversight, day-to-day problem solving, and support to DYRS-involved children and families is missing. There has been no clear mechanism for independent oversight of DYRS, especially since the work of the Office of Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight (OIJJFO) was

ended in the District.<sup>11</sup> OIJJFO was instrumental in independently monitoring conditions at DC's juvenile detention facilities – ensuring the public could see what happened behind locked doors.<sup>12</sup> As the FY27 budget proposes an expansion of juvenile detention facilities – we must ensure proper oversight.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, DYRS has also never had a mechanism for the day-to-day problem solving that is provided through a complaint system. Instead DYRS-involved youth and families and their attorneys most often turn to the court to resolve any issues regardless of whether the court is the most appropriate setting to provide this support.

We, therefore, see an opportunity to expand OFC to include the functions of OIJJFO and beyond to include the complaint functions and other systemic investigations in the arena of DYRS to better support the crossover youth and dual-jacketed youth efforts in the District.<sup>14</sup> Given our unique perspective in serving dual-jacketed and crossover youth, Children's Law Center supports the expansion of OFC to include a Deputy DYRS Ombudsperson that would function similar to that of the Deputy CFSA Ombudsperson. As discussed below, OFC was always envisioned to be more expansive and to support all DC children and families navigating complex systems like child welfare, juvenile legal system involvement, human services, behavioral health access, healthcare, etc. Expanding OFC to include DYRS is a step in the right direction to ensuring independent oversight of Executive agencies that impact the day-to-day of DC residents, particularly children and families. We, therefore, ask this Committee to include

funding for a Deputy DYRS Ombudsperson in the FY2027 budget. We welcome the opportunity to work with this Committee to develop appropriate legislative language to establish the Deputy DYRS Ombudsperson.

### **DC Council Should Leverage OFC to Overcome Challenges of Interagency Coordination and Ensure Accountability in the Executive Branch**

A recently published letter from the Committee on Youth Affairs spoke to the “teen takeover” phenomenon and efficacy on designated curfew zones. The letter discussed discrete policy solutions to better support District youth including a reference to the District Office for Children.<sup>15</sup> Children’s Law Center understands the motivation that underlies the District Office for Children – which was originally identified in the Streamlining Services Act.<sup>16</sup> The District needs to have clearly coordinated efforts to ensure children and families are getting the resources, support, and services they need to thrive. We have testified to this exact point across numerous agencies and work streams – citing the difficulties of navigating complex health, economic, and education systems and ensuring collaboration.<sup>17</sup>

We see the utility of interagency spaces and the need for coordination in this area as well as numerous others. We must, however, express our concerns about creating a District Office for Children with an existing Executive agency or within the Executive at all. Specifically, a standalone Executive agency would not provide the level of independence intended for the District Office for Children. Many of the challenges and frustrations of interagency coordination are rooted in a lack of transparency and

communication from Executive agencies. By creating another Executive agency, we would likely perpetuate the frustrations we already have across interagency coordination. To achieve the true goals, we believe the District should leverage the already-existing Ombudsperson for Children to execute the intent behind the District Office for Children.

The OFC's core functions – effective oversight, systemic trend analysis, interagency coordination, and investigation and day-to-day problem solving – make the OFC uniquely positioned to achieve the objectives of better interagency coordination. Specifically, OFC is already required to think systemically about the governmental agencies' roles in the lives of DC families and children, address interagency coordination, and build relationships with all agencies involved in the District's child welfare system.<sup>18</sup> If the Council were to create a new agency to serve as the District Office for Children, it would report to the Executive with oversight from the Council. By leveraging OFC, the Council has a direct line to engage on these issues through this legislative Office and does not have to rely on the Executive.

Ultimately, OFC is meant to be a tool for the Council – to extend their oversight functions. The Ombudsperson's core functions allow it to play a critical role in assisting the Council with holding DC agencies accountable for their role in protecting and uplifting DC's most vulnerable children and families. We believe OFC could be leveraged significantly more to support the goals of both that legislation and, more broadly, those

of the DC Council and this Committee. DC Council, however, must act to better integrate OFC into the functions of the legislative branch.

OFC is an important part of Council's authority. By leveraging OFC, the Council has a direct line to engage on these issues through this legislative Office and does not have to rely on the Executive. Our hope is that OFC continues to work with the DC Council and show how they can be an asset to their oversight work. In turn, we ask that the DC Council continue to integrate OFC into their work – providing them with resources and insight into navigating the District. This Committee should first ask OFC what additional resources would better support these goals. Additionally, we ask that this Committee work with all DC Council members to engage with OFC – whether that be asking for a report, asking them insights, or to help create interagency coordination. We must all work together to fully utilize the potential of this Office.

### **Conclusion**

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

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<sup>1</sup> FY2027 Proposed Budget, Office of the Ombudsperson for Children, Table RO0-1, p. E-92.

<sup>2</sup> Leah Castelaz, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Youth Affairs, (May 29, 2025), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/L.-Castelaz\\_Testimony-before-CYA\\_OFC\\_-FY26-Budget\\_final.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/L.-Castelaz_Testimony-before-CYA_OFC_-FY26-Budget_final.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Leah Castelaz, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Youth Affairs, (January 28, 2026), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/L.Castelaz\\_OFC-Performance-Oversight\\_2026\\_final-1.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/L.Castelaz_OFC-Performance-Oversight_2026_final-1.pdf).

<sup>4</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); Judith Sandalow, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee on Human Services, (October 28, 2019); Judith Sandalow, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole, (June 7, 2021), *available at*:

[https://childrenslawcenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/07/Sandalow\\_Childrens-LawCenterTestimony-for-June-7-2021-Committee-of-theWhole-Budget-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL-1.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/07/Sandalow_Childrens-LawCenterTestimony-for-June-7-2021-Committee-of-theWhole-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/Sandalow\\_Childrens-Law-CenterTestimony-for-June-25-2021-Committee-of-the-Whole-Budget-Oversight-Hearing-FINAL.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Sandalow_Childrens-Law-CenterTestimony-for-June-25-2021-Committee-of-the-Whole-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/wpcontent/uploads/2021/07/SGreer\\_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-June-22-2021-City-AdministratorBudget-Oversight-Hearing\\_FINAL.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/07/SGreer_Childrens-Law-Center-Testimony-for-June-22-2021-City-AdministratorBudget-Oversight-Hearing_FINAL.pdf); Tami Weerasingha-Cote,

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Human Services, (March 24, 2022), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/03/TWeerasingha-Cote\\_Childrens-Law-CenterTestimonyfor-Mar.-24-2022-CFSABudget-Hearing\\_Final-1.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/03/TWeerasingha-Cote_Childrens-Law-CenterTestimonyfor-Mar.-24-2022-CFSABudget-Hearing_Final-1.pdf);

Sharra E. Greer, Testimony Before the District of Columbia 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-theCommittee-on-Facilities-and-Family-Services\\_Office-of-the-Ombudsperson\\_final.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Sharra-E.-Greer_Testimony-for-theCommittee-on-Facilities-and-Family-Services_Office-of-the-Ombudsperson_final.pdf);

and 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/LeahCastelaz\\_Testimony-before-the-Committee-on-Facilities-and-Family-Services\\_Ombudsperson-forChildren\\_2.21.24\\_final.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/LeahCastelaz_Testimony-before-the-Committee-on-Facilities-and-Family-Services_Ombudsperson-forChildren_2.21.24_final.pdf);

Leah Castelaz, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Youth Affairs, (February 13, 2025), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/L.-Castelaz\\_Childrens-Law-Center\\_FY24-Performance-Oversight-Hearing-for-OFC\\_2.13.25.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/L.-Castelaz_Childrens-Law-Center_FY24-Performance-Oversight-Hearing-for-OFC_2.13.25.pdf);

Leah Castelaz, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Youth Affairs, (May 29, 2025), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/L.-Castelaz\\_Testimony-before-CYA\\_OFC\\_-FY26-Budget\\_final.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/L.-Castelaz_Testimony-before-CYA_OFC_-FY26-Budget_final.pdf);

and Leah Castelaz, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Youth Affairs, (January 28, 2026), *available at*: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/L.Castelaz\\_OFC-Performance-Oversight\\_2026\\_final-1.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/L.Castelaz_OFC-Performance-Oversight_2026_final-1.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Yampolskaya, Svetlana. “Doorways to Adversity: Challenges of Youth Involved in Multiple Systems.” *Child Welfare*, vol. 101, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–28. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48749455>; Annie E.

Casey Foundation, *Is there an effective model for serving youth involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems?*, (November 22, 2022), *available at*: <https://www.casey.org/crossover-youth-practice-model/>;

Georgetown University, Center for Youth Justice, *Crossover Youth Practice Model*, *available at*: <https://cyj.georgetown.edu/our-work/crossover-youth-practice-model/>.

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<sup>6</sup> Leah Castelaz, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Youth Affairs, (May 29, 2025), available at: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/L.Castelaz\\_OFC-Performance-Oversight\\_2026\\_final-1.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/L.Castelaz_OFC-Performance-Oversight_2026_final-1.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> The juvenile legal system is complicated. See Department of Youth Rehabilitation Systems, Juvenile Justice System, available at: <https://dyrs.dc.gov/page/dc-juvenile-justice-system>. For many youth, they are primarily engaged with Court Social Services and are not committed to DYRS. Court Social Services is a federal agency, so it is more difficult to address on a local level, therefore, starting with DYRS as a local agency is a good step forward to better addressing crossover and dual-jacketed youth. This also requires significant engagement with Public Defender Services and the Office of the Attorney General – particularly OAG because their attorneys engage in both CFSA and juvenile legal system and therefore oversee those youth involved in CFSA, Court Social Services, and DYRS.

<sup>8</sup> Leah Castelaz, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Youth Affairs, (May 29, 2025), available at: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/L.-Castelaz\\_Testimony-before-CYA\\_OFC\\_-FY26-Budget\\_final.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/L.-Castelaz_Testimony-before-CYA_OFC_-FY26-Budget_final.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> D.C. Law 23-270. Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act of 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Ted Oberg, et al., *Assaults, crowding continue inside DC youth jail as independent oversight ends*, News4, (December 8, 2025), available at: <https://www.nbcwashington.com/investigations/assaults-crowding-dc-youth-jail-independent-watchdog/4025856/>.

<sup>12</sup> Jenny Gathright, *DC Opts to Preserve Independent Office That Inspects Youth Jail*, DCist, (November 10, 2023), available at: <https://dcist.com/story/23/11/10/dc-independent-juvenile-justice-monitor-closing-browser/>.

<sup>13</sup> FY2027 Proposed Budget, Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, Table JZ0-4, p. c-40.

<sup>14</sup> OIJFO focused primarily on facilities – however the role of Deputy DYRS Ombudsperson would provide an expansion of this oversight with opportunities for DYRS involved youth and their families to file complaints and for OFC to provide a more systemic review of DYRS beyond just facilities.

<sup>15</sup> Councilmember Zachary Parker, Response to “Teen Takeover” and Designated Curfew Zones, (April 28, 2026), available at: [https://www.scribd.com/document/1032999330/4-27-CMZP-Letter-Youth-Alternatives-to-Teen-Takeovers-](https://www.scribd.com/document/1032999330/4-27-CMZP-Letter-Youth-Alternatives-to-Teen-Takeovers-1?_gl=1*e11ulg*_up*MQ..*_ga*MTk1NDYzNDg0My4xNzc3NDkzNzE4*_ga_Z4ZC50DED6*czE3Nzc0OTM3MTckbzEkZzAkdDE3Nzc0OTM3MTckajYwJGwwJGgw*_ga_8KZ8BV0P5W*czE3Nzc0OTM3MTckbzEkZzAkdDE3Nzc0OTM3MTckajYwJGwwJGgw)

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<sup>16</sup> B26-0406 - Streamlining Services for Children Amendment Act of 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Leah Castelaz, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee on Youth Affairs, (November 19, 2025), available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/testimony-streamlining-services-for-children-increasing-support-for-grandparent-and-relative-caregivers-and-empowering-parents-in-cfsa-investigations/>.

<sup>18</sup> D.C. Law 23-270. Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act of 2020.