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**Testimony of the Council for Court Excellence
Before the Committee on Youth Affairs
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Budget Oversight Hearing for the
Office for the Ombudsperson for Children**

May 12, 2026

Thank you, Chairperson Parker and members of the Committee, for this opportunity to present testimony today on the budget for the Office for the Ombudsperson for Children (OFC). My name is Tracy Velázquez, and I am the Policy Manager at the Council for Court Excellence (CCE). CCE is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization which conducts research, educates, and advocates to make D.C.'s unique legal systems more just, equitable, and accountable to the community. For over 40 years CCE has worked to improve the administration of justice in the courts and related agencies in D.C. through research and policy analysis, convening diverse stakeholders, and creating educational resources for the public. Please note that, in accordance with our policy, no judicial members of CCE participated in the formulation or approval of this testimony. This testimony does not reflect the specific views of, or endorsement by, any judicial member of CCE.

As a quick reminder, OFC was formed when the District's child welfare system was exiting three decades of federal court oversight that was part of a settlement. Councilmembers wisely realized that an impartial, independent Office of the Ombudsperson that reported to them, not the executive branch, was needed to hold accountable those tasked with protecting the District's most vulnerable children. The Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act passed the Council unanimously in December 2020.

Every year since then, the Mayor has failed to fund the office in her proposed budget, and every year the Council has restored the funding, so the Ombudsperson

could do their important work. Except this year, when the proposed FY27 budget has retained the Office and full funding, even shifting some funding from rent, which I presume is no longer needed, to increased staffing. CCE wants to thank the Mayor for recognizing that OFC is a vital office that both acts as a watchdog and is the only agency that is specifically charged with investigating and reporting on outcomes for crossover youth – that is, young people who have been or are involved with both the delinquency and neglect systems.

Given this you may be wondering why I am testifying today, given that OFC is fully funded at FY26 levels. Well, of course, I am asking you to retain this full funding in your budget. I know that you have lots of fiscal pressures, but this is truly bare bones for a functional office. Their FY25 report showed some of the important work they have been engaged in, including investigating the circumstances behind three fatalities in FY25 of children who had been involved with CFSA, which is particularly important given that the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner has not publicly released an “annual” report from the Child Fatality Review Committee since 2020. Additionally, they have been examining whether CFSA was appropriately screening out 77% of calls to the CFSA child abuse and neglect hotline. OFC has also been an integral part of the work done this year to improve D.C.’s response to crossover youth, under the CJCC project headed up by Georgetown University’s Center for Youth Justice.

I’m also here to ask you to consider devoting a small additional amount of FY27 funding to study whether OFC could do more, as your oversight agency, to protect the District’s most vulnerable youth. You heard my colleague Magdalena Tsiongas talk about the dire need for independent oversight – and by independent, I mean under Council’s control – of the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS). Like CFSA, DYRS was under a consent decree and federal oversight for decades due to inadequate care of youth. And like with CFSA, D.C. Council created an independent oversight body to make sure that, as we left federal control, there was no backsliding and our kids were kept in safe and healthy environments. While Council has continued to maintain OFC, its sister agency, the Office for Independent Juvenile Justice Facilities Oversight, (OIJJFO) was allowed to sunset. And the provisions of the ROAD Act that would ensure kids in DYRS custody were cared for in a way that meets our own and constitutional standards was not funded. In small part, this was due to lack of an appropriate independent agency not part of the executive administration to take it on, given OIJJFO was allowed to sunset.

The need for independent oversight of DYRS has been demonstrated over and over again in the past year. Rising populations. Delays in placement. Violence and injuries in facilities. Inadequate fire safety systems in buildings our children are locked in. We cannot wait and HOPE that under a new administration, with new agency leadership, the long-building problems in DYRS will be instantaneously, or even quickly, resolved. We must put in place a body to truly hold this agency, which acts in loco parentis – that is, as a parent - accountable. If DYRS was held to the same standards as a child's parent, OIJFO and CFSA would be demanding that their custody be terminated.

Councilmember Parker and other members of the county, you have the body – the framework – you need to restore independent oversight of DYRS right in front of you, with the Office for the Ombudsperson for Children. Yes, it would need additional expertise and funding. And yes, there would need to be legislation to clarify their broader mission. But the cost of not doing so – in terms of both outcomes for our children and the lawsuits and possible resumption of federal control – are certainly greater. Funding a FY27 study to Council to evaluate and recommend key details of such an expansion of OFC's mandate would be a worthwhile investment. Thank you.