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Council Passes Councilmember Brianne K. Nadeau's Bill to Strengthen Oversight of District's Child Welfare System

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WASHINGTON, DC – During the last legislative meeting of Council Period 23, the Council of the District of Columbia unanimously passed the Office of the Ombudsman for Children Establishment Amendment Act of 2020, introduced by Councilmember Brianne K. Nadeau. The legislation establishes an Office of the Ombudsman for Children as an independent legislative agency tasked with improving outcomes for children involved in the child welfare system by holding all agencies that impact these children accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities under the law.

As Chair of the Council's Committee on Human Services, Councilmember Nadeau introduced the legislation to strengthen oversight of the District's child welfare system. "By establishing this office, we will be able to improve how the District handles not only individual cases, but also systemic issues. The legislation prioritizes independence and impartiality to increase credibility, all of which are critical to gaining and keeping the public's trust," said Nadeau.

The Office is largely based on best practices developed by the United States Ombudsman Association (USOA), and will have four broad categories of duties: (1) administration of the office, which includes receiving constituent complaints and maintaining a database of the complaints received; (2) promotion and coordination, which includes facilitating communications, interfacing with the Office of the Inspector General and the DC Auditor to

avoid duplication of efforts, and making referrals when a criminal or disciplinary proceeding may be appropriate; (3) performing investigations on its own initiative, including the investigation of broader systemic issues, and making policy recommendations; and (4) publishing an annual report as well as any additional reports as are needed.

Nadeau adds, “the annual report will provide us with a great deal of important information, but one of the most critical sections we can anticipate will be new reporting on crossover youth - children who interact with both the foster care system and the juvenile justice system. They experience significant challenges to their well-being and stability, too often rolling from one system into the next. The reporting will provide much needed information to help us better address what are really complex issues.”

The Office was also designed in such a way that its mission, scope, and duties could grow organically over time to include broader issues affecting DC children through the creation of additional subordinate agency-focused ombudspersons.

The legislation was co-introduced by Councilmembers Robert White, Charles Allen, Brandon Todd, David Grosso, Mary Cheh, and Elissa Silverman. Councilmember Nadeau expresses her deepest gratitude to all of the people who provided input in the drafting of this legislation ranging from former and current DC ombudsmen, ombudsmen from other states as well as representatives from the USOA, many stakeholders from the child welfare community, and stakeholders from the juvenile justice community. Councilmember Nadeau looks forward to working closely with the Mayor, agencies that serve children, and community partners to ensure a careful and smooth implementation of the legislation.

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