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**Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole**

**Public Hearing:
FY 2023 Budget Legislation
April 8, 2022**

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Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and Members of the Council. My name is Raquel Wollaston and I am an attorney with DC KinCare Alliance and a proud DC resident. The mission of DC KinCare Alliance is to support the legal, financial, and related service needs of relative caregivers who step up to raise DC children in their extended families in times of crisis. As a member of the Fair Budget Coalition, we support a just and equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

My testimony today is a petition with more than 200 signatures, regarding DC's proposed 2023 Budget and, specifically, to ensure there is adequate funding for the Ombudsperson for Children.

Dear Members of the DC Council,

We, the undersigned DC concerned citizens, community leaders, advocacy organizations, journalists, lawyers, and others urge you to ensure the DC Ombudsperson for Children is fully funded today and in the future. The "Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act of 2020" became law, over the Mayor's veto, on April 5, 2021, and the Office was funded with \$935,000 of local funds in DC's 2022 Local Budget Act. Regrettably, the Mayor omitted funding for the position in her 2023 budget, and went even further to defund the moneys already allocated to the position for 2022, even though the Council has already invested time and funds to attract the best talent to fill this critical Office.

The Ombudsperson is "tasked with improving outcomes for CFSA children by holding agencies accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities under the law." The importance of this position for DC's children and families is particularly critical now, as the LaShawn class action litigation is coming to a close along with the Court Monitor's oversight of CFSA's operations. Indeed, there are many day-to-day operational as well as systemic

issues that were not resolved by that litigation and require an independent arbiter to ensure the wellbeing of our children and families. As CFSA often describes, DC child welfare is a system that encompasses many agencies, organizations, and individuals. Specifically, children and families involved with the child welfare system often intersect with many other agencies and programs, including the juvenile justice system, DC Public Schools, domestic violence programs, health and mental health services, and many others. Accordingly, the work of the Ombudsperson will be broad in scope to ensure the success, safety, and security of our young people across all these agencies and government-funded programs.

Mayor Bowser is attempting an end-run around the DC Council's decision to establish an Ombudsperson for Children. What the Mayor could not stop with a veto, she now seeks to undercut with an overreach of her authority. We implore you not to allow this, but rather to move swiftly together to identify and reallocate funds to the Ombudsperson.

Please send a message to Mayor Bowser: In the District of Columbia, we prioritize the safety of our children and the well-being of our families, and we will not allow the Mayor to undermine the oversight of District agencies.

Thank you.