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D.C. Council Names First Ombudsperson for Children

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Washington -- After three years of the Council fighting to create and fund a critical new child welfare oversight agency, Shalonda Cawthon has been named the first Ombudsperson for Children. The appointment follows a nationwide executive search led by Ted Ford Webb Associates, a leading public sector search firm.

"Protecting child welfare is one of the most critical functions of our government," said Councilmember Brianne K. Nadeau, chairperson of the Committee on Human Services and author of the legislation that established the office. "With her experience serving children across the nation, Shalonda Cawthon is exactly who District children need in their corner."

"I am pleased to nominate Shalonda Cawthon to serve as the District of Columbia's first Ombudsperson for Children," said Council Chairman Phil Mendelson. "Ms. Cawthon has the vision and experience to take on the challenges of this unique role, as well as a demonstrated passion for helping children."

"I am honored to have been selected to serve as the Ombudsperson for Children," said Cawthon, expressing the desire "to establish an office that will be built on the foundation of service, accountability and collaboration, with recognition that the lives and voices of the most vulnerable of the District's children are the driving force and their wellbeing is the central focus."

The District's child welfare system is exiting three decades of federal court oversight as part of the LaShawn A. v. Bowser settlement. Several years ago, District families and advocates for children raised the need for an impartial, independent Office of the Ombudsperson capable of holding accountable those tasked with protecting the District's children. In response, in September 2019, Nadeau introduced legislation creating an agency responsible for investigating systemic concerns related to children involved in the child welfare system and supporting system-involved families presenting complaints. Crafted in collaboration with national experts and community stakeholders, Nadeau's bill created a model child welfare watchdog at the intersection of innovation and best practice.

In December 2020, the Office of the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act passed the Council unanimously. The Council then overrode Mayor Bowser's veto and re-funded the Office after the Mayor eliminated its funding in the FY 23 budget.

Now, Chairman Mendelson has nominated Ms. Cawthon to serve as the first Ombudsperson. A nationwide search produced several outstanding candidates ready and eager to provide visionary leadership to the Office. Ms. Cawthon, however, stood out even among an exceptional group of finalists. She currently serves as a Regional Program Manager for the Children's Bureau, where she provides leadership and strategic direction to the Bureau out of the Atlanta Regional Office. Ms. Cawthon has a long track record of collaborative, values-driven child welfare leadership with the federal government and in Georgia and Tennessee. She has stood up programs and offices, successfully managed teams, and is a subject matter expert focused on working with the Child and Family Services Agency to improve outcomes for families.

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