



DC KinCare Alliance
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**Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole**

**Public Hearing
PR 24-784, Ombudsperson for Children
Shalonda L. Cawthon Appointment Resolution of 2022
June 30, 2022**

**Marla Spindel
Executive Director, DC KinCare Alliance**

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson and Members of the DC Council. My name is Marla Spindel and I am the Executive Director of DC KinCare Alliance. Our mission 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 when the children's parents are not able to care for them due to mental health and substance use disorders, incarceration, death, abuse and neglect, and/or deportation. We are the only organization in DC focused solely on serving relative caregivers raising DC's at-risk children. In the five years since our founding, we have helped over 500 relative caregivers raising more than 650 DC children.

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count Data Center, in 2019, 16,000 District children are living with relatives in kinship families. These relatives are primarily Black women who live in Wards 7 and 8. They often live at the economic margins of our society, even before they are called upon to raise a relative child. Many also report a significant disability.

The children who come into their care often have serious mental health or medical needs and suffer from trauma. Most have been touched by the child welfare system. Relative caregivers need financial help and stable housing to raise these children. However, the established systems are set up for traditional families, not kinship families, resulting in severe barriers to access benefits by relative caregivers.

Our work with relative caregivers, children, and families touched by the DC child welfare system has led us to advocate for various supports and services for this vulnerable and underserved population. Of particular significance to our work is ensuring the establishment and appointment of the Ombudsperson for Children.

The independent Ombudsperson for Children will be a critical protection for DC's most vulnerable children. This is because, as legislated, it will: conform to nationally

recognized standards; mediate, investigate, and advocate for DC children; and not be beholden to the agencies it oversees. We thank the DC Council for recognizing this need and enacting the Ombudsperson for Children Establishment Amendment Act of 2020, and funding the position.

The final and most important step is appointing a well-qualified individual to implement the essential functions of the position. The Council has conducted a nationwide search for the first DC Ombudsperson for Children and has put forward Shalonda Cawthon as the best candidate. We have met virtually with Ms. Cawthon and believe she is eminently qualified and experienced to hold the position. Ms. Cawthon deserves the opportunity to create the Office envisioned by the Council, and relative caregivers, DC children and families deserve the opportunity to have an Ombudsperson help them navigate complex child welfare issues. We look forward to working with Ms. Cawthon to mediate concerns our clients may have with the DC Child and Family Services Agency, as well as assist with identifying and addressing systemic issues that limit CFSA's ability to meet its mission of protecting DC's abused and neglected children and stabilizing families.

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Our children are the leaders of tomorrow. We must safeguard and protect them, lift them out of poverty, and provide them with opportunities to grow and thrive in safe and stable homes. I am pleased to answer any questions.