



**Testimony Presented to Philadelphia City Council**  
**Stefanie Arbutina, Vulnerable Youth Policy Director**  
**February 19, 2026**

Good morning, Council President Johnson and members of City Council.

My name is Stefanie Arbutina, and I am the Vulnerable Youth Policy Director at Children First. I am here today to testify in support of Resolution 251108 and Ordinance 251098 regarding the permanent establishment of the Office of the Youth Ombudsperson.

Four years ago, City Council held hearings on the dangers faced by children in institutional settings – including years of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and in some cases, even death. Existing oversight systems, largely at the state level, failed to recognize patterns of harm and intervene in time to prevent irreversible damage.

Mayor Kenney then established the Office of the Youth Ombudsperson (OYO) by executive order, an important step toward protecting Philadelphia youth. The OYO provides children in residential placements and their families with an independent, direct place to voice concerns about their care in facilities. Since their launch in 2023, the OYO has been able to respond to youth complaints, share information with City agencies and oversee investigations, ensure youth and parents understand their rights, and issue public reports on systemic issues facing children in placement. We hope to see the OYO expand its impact in the coming years.

We're grateful that the Parker Administration has supported the continuation of the OYO's work. But by their nature, executive orders are temporary. Our children's safety should not be. That is why we support efforts to make the OYO a permanent office in the City of Philadelphia. On any given day, more than 430 Philadelphia youth are residing in congregate care across the child welfare, behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems. Most are housed outside the city, many of them far from their families.

The risks to these children are real and ongoing. Since 2024, dozens of lawsuits have been filed alleging abuse in PA residential facilities. Facilities have been cited for failing to report suspected abuse. Investigative reporting has documented violence against youth in care. These are not isolated incidents; they reflect systemic weaknesses in oversight. Eighty-four percent of Philadelphia youth in child welfare congregate care facilities, and ninety-five percent of youth in juvenile justice detention centers are Black or Hispanic, meaning children of color are especially vulnerable to harm.

The problem is not that children and families lack reporting channels. It is that those systems are not independent. Codifying the OYO in the Charter would ensure that independence, along with accountability and sustained oversight -- regardless of who occupies the Mayor's Office. It's the City's responsibility to ensure that the children in its care are safe in facilities. Making the Office of the Youth Ombudsperson permanent helps the City fulfill that responsibility. I urge you all to vote yes on Resolution 251108 and Ordinance 251098.

Thank you.