

COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
COMMITTEE ON LAW AND GOVERNMENT

Room 400, City Hall
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Monday, February 9, 2026
1:45 p.m.

PRESENT:

COUNCILWOMAN KATHERINE GILMORE RICHARDSON,
CHAIR
COUNCILWOMAN KENDRA BROOKS, VICE-CHAIR
COUNCILWOMAN RUE LANDAU
COUNCILMAN ANTHONY PHILLIPS

ALSO PRESENT:

COUNCILWOMAN JAMIE GAUTHIER

BILL: 251098
RESOLUTIONS: 251108, 260029

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COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

RICHARDSON: Good afternoon. I now know that the hour has come to begin today's hearing. First, thank you all very much for your patience.

Clerk, will you please call the roll to take attendance. Members that are in attendance will please indicate that you are present when your name is called.

THE CLERK:

Councilmember Bass.

(No response.)

THE CLERK:

Councilmember O'Neill.

(No response.)

THE CLERK:

Councilmember Squilla.

(No response.)

THE CLERK:

Councilmember Phillips.

COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

1 Present.

2 THE CLERK:

3 Councilmember Landau.

4 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

5 Present.

6 THE CLERK: Vice-Chair

7 Brooks.

8 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

9 Present.

10 THE CLERK: Chair

11 Gilmore Richardson.

12 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

13 RICHARDSON: I am present. Thank
14 you. A quorum of this committee is
15 now called to order. I also note
16 the presence of our colleague
17 Councilmember Jamie Gauthier, who's
18 the sponsor of additional
19 legislation in this committee.

20 So a quorum of the
21 committee is present and the
22 hearing is now called to order.
23 This is the public meeting of the
24 Committee on Law and Government

1 regarding Resolution Nos. 260026
2 and 251108 as well as Bill No.
3 251098.

4 Clerk, will you please
5 read the titles of the bill and the
6 resolutions.

7 THE CLERK: Resolution
8 No. 260029, a resolution
9 authorizing the Committee on Law
10 and Government to hold a hearing on
11 the process to resolve a tangled
12 title in the City of Philadelphia.

13 Resolution No. 251108, a
14 resolution proposing an amendment
15 to the Philadelphia Home Rule
16 Charter, providing for the creation
17 of the Office of the Youth
18 Ombudsperson and providing for the
19 submission of the proposed
20 amendment to the electors of
21 Philadelphia.

22 Bill No. 251098, an
23 ordinance providing for the
24 submission to the qualified

1 electors of the City of
2 Philadelphia, of the proposal set
3 forth in resolution approved by
4 Council, proposing an amendment to
5 the Philadelphia Home Rule Charter
6 relating to the creation of the
7 Office of the Youth Ombudsperson,
8 and authorizing and directing the
9 appropriate officers to publish
10 notice and to make arrangements for
11 the special election.

12 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

13 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
14 very much.

15 Clerk, will you please
16 call the first panel we have to
17 testify on Resolution No. 2600 --
18 pardon me. Thank you. Thank you
19 very much.

20 Clerk, will you please
21 call the first panel we have to
22 testify on Resolution No. 260029.

23 THE CLERK: The
24 Honorable John Sabatina. Also

1 available for questions, Myasia
2 Williams.

3 (Witnesses approached
4 witness table.)

5 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

6 RICHARDSON: Thank you. As they
7 approach the witness table, I again
8 want to thank everyone for being
9 here this afternoon and thank you
10 so much for your patience.

11 As you all know, this is
12 an issue that continues to be near
13 and dear to my heart, tangled
14 titles. It's an issue that
15 personally we've experienced in my
16 family and we've helped many
17 constituents with over the years.
18 And I will tell you that we've
19 learned just how time-consuming,
20 how expensive and frustrating this
21 process can be as families try to
22 hold on to their family homes and
23 ultimately to their generational
24 wealth.

1 And having a tangled
2 title increases the risk for deed
3 fraud, it prevents the family or
4 individual's ability to purchase a
5 home insurance and it also
6 disqualifies owners from assistance
7 programs that may be offered via
8 the City of Philadelphia, including
9 tax relief, home repair grants and
10 utility support.

11 But most of all, it is a
12 massive barrier for many
13 Philadelphians just trying to hold
14 on to their family homes and keep
15 their generational wealth. And we
16 know that. According to the report
17 from Pew back in 2021, more than
18 10,000 homes that we can document
19 in the City of Philadelphia are
20 struggling with a tangled title or
21 deed, and it's more than \$1.1
22 billion worth of property here in
23 our city.

24 And we also know that a

1 large majority of those tangled
2 titles are really centered in
3 communities with higher Black and
4 Brown populations. The number one
5 district, being our colleague
6 Councilmember Jamie Gauthier in the
7 3rd Council District, but also the
8 4th, where we reside, represented
9 by Councilmember Curtis Jones.

10 And so, we've made
11 significant progress with the help
12 of so many of the partners who are
13 here today. I'm very encouraged by
14 your presence and by your continued
15 work and collaboration and
16 partnership to help these families.
17 And we can document now that more
18 than 2769 tangled title cases have
19 been resolved between 2022 and
20 2024, and that's according to
21 Philly Stat 360.

22 So 2769 tangled title
23 cases have come to resolution as a
24 result of the ongoing work and

1 collaboration over the last several
2 years. And so, we're very
3 encouraged and excited by that
4 progress, but we want to continue
5 that progress, which is why today's
6 hearing is so important and we will
7 continue to work through the
8 challenges throughout the process
9 and the challenges that many
10 families may face, but we want to
11 continue to invest in this work.
12 So we uplift, thank and appreciate
13 each of you.

14 With that, we will now
15 hear from the Honorable Register of
16 Wills John Sabatina, Esq. Thank
17 you.

18 REGISTER OF WILLS

19 SABATINA: Thank you, Chairman,
20 members of the committee. Thank
21 you for the opportunity to testify
22 today. These cases, as you well
23 know, disproportionately affect
24 low-income families, seniors,

1 communities of color. And the
2 result is homes falling into
3 disrepair, increased vulnerability
4 to fraud and possible displacement.

5 That is why I created
6 the Title Clearance Unit within the
7 Register of Wills Office. We saw a
8 growing number of families who
9 could not probate easily and
10 therefore could not obtain clear
11 title. They lack legal guidance,
12 resources and the ability to
13 navigate a complex system. The
14 Title Clearance Unit within my
15 office bridges the gap.

16 It helps residents help
17 themselves move from probate to
18 ownership by coordinating legal
19 assistance, resolving estate issues
20 and connecting families to city,
21 state and federal programs. This
22 is not about expanding bureaucracy.
23 It's about making government work
24 as intended. Clear title means

1 stability. It means families can
2 stay in their homes, invest in
3 their properties and pass on
4 generational wealth.

5 The Title Clearance Unit
6 is practically a preservative
7 solution to a problem that has
8 lingered for decades, and it is
9 already making a measurable
10 difference in our neighborhoods. I
11 have with me tonight -- today, I'm
12 sorry, my able-bodied assistant
13 Myasia Williams, who handles the
14 Title Clearance Unit in my office.
15 And she has a report to give to the
16 committee.

17 Go ahead, Myasia.

18 MS. WILLIAMS: So -- I'm
19 sorry.

20 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

21 RICHARDSON: Please state your full
22 name for the record and then
23 proceed.

24 MS. WILLIAMS: My name

1 is Myasia Williams with the Title
2 Clearance Unit. Our Title
3 Clearance Unit to date has cleared
4 118 titles. We've been working for
5 a little over a year being
6 proactive by informing constituents
7 throughout the city that their
8 property title may need to be
9 cleared.

10 At this point, we will
11 need some sort of assistance to
12 cover probate costs and other
13 expenses that may come up. We are
14 assisting the working-class
15 citizens of the city. And many of
16 them can afford to live, but they
17 unfortunately do not have the means
18 to cover the costs associated with
19 clearing the title. So we would
20 really appreciate some assistance
21 because we really could service
22 more constituents in the city if we
23 were to receive funding.

24 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

1 RICHARDSON: Thank you very much --

2 REGISTER OF WILLS

3 SABATINA: Go ahead.

4 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

5 RICHARDSON: You're good? Okay.

6 Excellent. So I do have questions
7 for this first panel. And I will
8 tell you we're going to try to get
9 through all of this as fast as we
10 can because we do have a hard stop
11 a little bit later. But relative
12 to your office's interface with
13 this process, can you just detail
14 for the record exactly what you all
15 do in sort of the service that you
16 provide as it relates to helping
17 clear the tangle title? And then
18 we'll go from there.

19 MS. WILLIAMS: Okay.

20 Due to our limitations, we can
21 assist with preparation of pro se
22 Orphans' Court matters, provide
23 guidance within the probate
24 process, assist with transferring

1 the title of the property into the
2 rightful heirs' names and provide
3 the resources for home improvement
4 and tax relief. Our ultimate goal
5 is to clear the property title so
6 we also are recording a new deed
7 for the rightful heirs.

8 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

9 RICHARDSON: Okay. And as it
10 relates directly to the functions
11 of your office, what specific role
12 do you all play in this process?
13 And I'm doing this in this way to
14 have a record at this hearing to
15 fully flush out what the process is
16 at every step, whether it relates
17 to interfacing with the Register of
18 Wills Office, whether it relates to
19 interfacing with the Department of
20 Records as an example, even folks
21 that have to interface with
22 Revenue -- who I see here as well,
23 thank you, Commissioner and your
24 team -- same thing with the Law

1 Department. Thank you very much.

2 Beckley. We appreciate all the
3 work that you do.

4 But I'm trying to build
5 and put together a puzzle, if you
6 will, for our constituents to say
7 this is each step in the process to
8 clear a tangled title as it relates
9 to how you interface with city
10 government.

11 MS. WILLIAMS: So our
12 process depends on the
13 constituents' needs. Some
14 constituents may need to file a
15 21-year petition with Orphans'
16 Court in order to qualify as the
17 administrator of the estate with
18 the Register of Wills. So we guide
19 them through that process. And
20 then when it gets to the probate
21 stage, we guide them through the
22 documentation required for them to
23 become the administrator of the
24 estate as well as guide them

1 through the post-probate process of
2 completing the tax forms and
3 probate documents.

4 We do not prepare the
5 documents. We guide them through
6 the entire process of the post-
7 probate. And then we work with the
8 Commissioner of the Recorder of
9 Deeds to clear the property title
10 and record it, and that's a
11 courtesy from their office. Then
12 after the deed is transferred over,
13 we provide resources and advise
14 them that they must go over to the
15 MSB building to transfer the
16 owner's name, the property taxes,
17 water, gas into their names and --
18 I'm sorry.

19 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS: In
20 the process you said you provide
21 resources. What would do you mean?
22 Is it money or?

23 MS. WILLIAMS: Resources
24 of the Homestead application after

1 the deed is transferred over. If
2 they qualify for the LOOP program,
3 we provide the application and we
4 also just advise them to visit the
5 MSB building to transfer the title
6 to the property to their name. If
7 they do need assistance with
8 payment arrangements, then we
9 provide them with the contact
10 information to receive that
11 assistance.

12 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

13 RICHARDSON: Excellent. So just
14 really quick, how do residents get
15 referred to your unit? And you
16 already talked about how you all
17 work with other city departments in
18 Orphans' Court to help with
19 resolving cases. At what point
20 would a referral be necessary to a
21 legal service partner or other
22 attorney for assistance or does
23 that happen?

24 MS. WILLIAMS: Yes, it's

1 a case-by-case basis. If we must
2 outsource, but then we also have
3 our own legal staff that can work
4 on specific cases.

5 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

6 RICHARDSON: Okay. And then how do
7 residents get referred to the unit?

8 MS. WILLIAMS: Most of
9 the constituents may visit our
10 office or the Probate Department at
11 the Register of Wills. If they're
12 sent over by -- most of the time
13 it's the MSB building or the
14 Recorder of Deeds when they're
15 looking to transfer deed over as
16 well as we are sending letters on a
17 weekly basis out to properties
18 notifying them that our services
19 are available to them.

20 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

21 RICHARDSON: Excellent. And how
22 can Council offices better
23 collaborate with you all to address
24 tangled titles and wills and

1 estates? And I have to say that
2 you all were represented very well
3 at our Homeownership Fair this
4 Saturday at Community College of
5 Philadelphia. With Councilman
6 Young's Office and Councilman
7 O'Rourke's Office, we had a
8 homeownership fair and your office
9 was there and represented.

10 In every event that we
11 have, we always have representation
12 from your office. So I want to
13 thank you very, very much for that.
14 And we specifically love working
15 with April. She has just been
16 stellar. The seniors love her over
17 at Wynne Plaza, but we appreciate
18 that work. But how can we better
19 collaborate with you all? And are
20 there any state changes that you
21 recommend that we continue to
22 advocate for with our state
23 partners?

24 REGISTER OF WILLS

1 SABATINA: If I might address that.
2 One of the reasons we're here is
3 because we don't have any
4 allocation for any expenses that
5 are incurred by the prospective
6 homeowners. We do everything
7 inhouse. Quite often we have to
8 rely on the individual to come and
9 pay the charges for title searches,
10 what have you, because we just
11 aren't in on the budget part of...

12 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

13 RICHARDSON: And I receive that.
14 And I will say that even -- and
15 that's why we're doing this to
16 fully understand the process. But
17 we do not now have a specific
18 direct grant program. It's
19 typically the funding that we have
20 been allocating to the legal
21 service community and the
22 collaboration that we've had, which
23 has been very longstanding with the
24 city department that also assists

1 constituents with tangled titles
2 and deeds.

3 And so, that's the
4 impetus of this entire process to
5 see who is responsible for what
6 part of this process, you know,
7 what the needs are, really to do a
8 needs assessment, if you will, on
9 each part of the process. But
10 historically, as far as I know,
11 this has been something that has
12 been funded via the work that our
13 city departments have done and
14 thus, the support that's received
15 for the legal service community,
16 because they have an intake process
17 and legal service agencies that
18 then work with constituents and
19 then pro bono attorneys that work
20 with constituents.

21 So I receive everything
22 that you're saying and I hear you,
23 and I'm glad we're getting this on
24 the record. But I just want you to

1 know that's not a result of our
2 lack of wanting to support the work
3 that you all are doing. It's
4 seeking to understand every step of
5 this process so we know what more
6 we need to be doing and addressing.

7 REGISTER OF WILLS

8 SABATINA: Yeah. Well, what I try
9 to get across to Council is we do
10 every aspect of trying to get
11 people's title clear. And I have
12 staff that does it. We have
13 lawyers on staff. It doesn't
14 require going from this agency to
15 that agency to try to do it. We
16 have one-stop shopping. A person
17 comes in with a problem and we
18 handle it from start to finish,
19 except we don't get funded for it.

20 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

21 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Are there
22 any state-level changes that you
23 all recommend that we advocate for
24 during this process?

1 REGISTER OF WILLS

2 SABATINA: Excuse me. I'm sorry.

3 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

4 RICHARDSON: Are there any state-
5 level changes that you believe we
6 should be advocating for?

7 REGISTER OF WILLS

8 SABATINA: No. We're operating as
9 we have been. It's just we could
10 do much more if we could get
11 funding to help some of these
12 people that may have difficulty
13 coming up with probate costs, title
14 searches, what have you. As it is
15 now, it's up to the individual to
16 provide those payments. And we've
17 been really successful. Like
18 Myasia stated, I think we did over
19 118 properties in less than a year
20 and all that with our own
21 initiative.

22 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

23 RICHARDSON: Excellent. Well,
24 thank you very, very much.

1 Are there any additional
2 questions for the Register of Wills
3 Office?

4 The Chair recognizes
5 Vice-Chair Brooks.

6 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

7 Thank you so much for all the hard
8 work you've done in helping
9 Philadelphians to work out their
10 tangled titles. I just have a
11 question. You guys said you helped
12 118?

13 REGISTER OF WILLS

14 SABATINA: That's correct.

15 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

16 Yeah, that's a great number. And I
17 was wondering what do we need to do
18 to scale up the process to
19 support -- I think we have 10,000
20 properties with tangled titles here
21 in the city. So what type of
22 support exactly would you need to
23 make that happen?

24 MS. WILLIAMS: So our

1 office would need some assistance
2 with covering those or providing a
3 grant rather for probate calls.
4 That can make a huge difference in
5 a family. Up to just \$1,000 could
6 really be beneficial for a family
7 in the city and we are free of
8 charge, so our services are free.
9 We just really need the funds,
10 because statutorily the Register of
11 Wills cannot waive probate fees.

12 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:
13 Okay. So that's the biggest
14 obstacle for you to scale up, that
15 families do not have about \$1,000
16 to cover the probate costs?

17 MS. WILLIAMS: Yes.

18 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:
19 And if they were able to do that,
20 they will be able to help more
21 families?

22 MS. WILLIAMS: Yes,
23 ma'am.

24 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

1 Okay. Do you have enough staffing
2 to be able to scale up?

3 MS. WILLIAMS: We will
4 assign additional staffing.

5 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

6 RICHARDSON: Thank you so much.

7 MS. WILLIAMS: You're
8 welcome.

9 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

10 RICHARDSON: Thank you.

11 Chair now recognizes
12 Councilmember Landau.

13 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:

14 Hi. Thank you so much for being
15 here. Can you tell us more about
16 the work you're doing, any
17 educational work you're doing to
18 inform the public about getting
19 wills or alternative documents in
20 place to pass along their house so
21 we don't get into the problems of
22 tangled titles going forward?

23 REGISTER OF WILLS

24 SABATINA: Yes. We have an

1 outreach program where we go out
2 into the community. So many of the
3 Council offices when they have
4 meetings within their district, we
5 go to those districts. We go to
6 the various unions. If they have
7 any kind of forum, we address them
8 all.

9 One other thing I might
10 add, the reason we can do so many
11 title clearances is because we are
12 not restricted by the income, the
13 very low income that has been put
14 on the books for some of the other
15 agencies. Now, I realized that
16 recently they recognized that and
17 they're going to try to upgrade the
18 amount of the income, but we are
19 already doing that. And we can
20 help some of your constituents that
21 may not be at the poverty level but
22 still need help, and we're there to
23 do that when we fill that gap.
24 Very sorry about that and I'll turn

1 this off(phone ringing).

2 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: My
3 second question is, I thought that
4 your office kind of sat in the
5 capacity that you could establish
6 an IFP fee waiver program; am I
7 incorrect about that?

8 MS. WILLIAMS: That's
9 Orphans' Court, ma'am.

10 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:
11 You can't do any of the fee waivers
12 within your office?

13 MS. WILLIAMS: No.

14 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:
15 Thanks.

16 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE
17 RICHARDSON: And I'll interject
18 here, if you will. I think I know
19 what you're referring to,
20 Councilmember Landau. I think
21 Councilmember Landau is referring
22 to the program that the former
23 Register had around waiving fees.
24 It was some type of waiving of

1 fees. Can you just describe what
2 that was?

3 MS. WILLIAMS: Yes. The
4 fee was not waived. It was
5 deferred. The probate fees became
6 a lien on the constituent's
7 property, that they ultimately
8 would have to pay the Register of
9 Wills back if they were to sell the
10 property.

11 REGISTER OF WILLS

12 SABATINA: The problem we
13 discovered when I came into office
14 is a lot of people had a
15 misconception that the fees were
16 waived, that they weren't. What my
17 predecessor did was she just put a
18 lien on the house for the payment
19 of that fee. So instead of
20 removing all the liens from the
21 property, she put an additional
22 lien on them which had to be
23 resolved in order for them to
24 proceed with sale or whatever they

1 wanted to do. So they didn't
2 provide a clean title.

3 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU: Is
4 there anything else with your
5 process that we can help with to
6 make things faster or more simpler,
7 anything that we can help with to
8 make that happen?

9 REGISTER OF WILLS

10 SABATINA: Yeah. Well, we would
11 appreciate getting in on a funding
12 cycle with all the other agencies
13 so that we could provide more help
14 to some of these people. There are
15 some cases where the fees are so
16 high that people can't go further
17 with the process, even though we've
18 helped them. So we had to sit back
19 and wait for them to come up with
20 the money to proceed.

21 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:
22 Okay. Thank you.

23 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

24 RICHARDSON: The Chair now

1 recognizes Vice-Chair Brooks.

2 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

3 I'm just trying to figure out how
4 much is the amount of money that
5 you said was tagged on as a lien?
6 How much money were we talking
7 about?

8 MS. WILLIAMS: It
9 varied. It's based off the value
10 of the property. The lien was
11 usually between \$400 to \$600 per
12 estate.

13 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:
14 Per who?

15 MS. WILLIAMS: Per
16 estate that was open.

17 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:
18 Okay. All right. Thank you.

19 MS. WILLIAMS: You're
20 welcome.

21 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

22 RICHARDSON: Excellent. Well,
23 thank you very much, colleagues.

24 Are there any further

1 questions for this panel?

2 (No response.)

3 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

4 RICHARDSON: Okay. Seeing none, we
5 thank you very much for coming in
6 this afternoon to our Register of
7 Wills and Myasia and your team. We
8 appreciate the work that you all
9 are doing. Thank you. Thank you so
10 much.

11 Will the Clerk please
12 call the next witness for the next
13 panel.

14 THE CLERK: James
15 Leonard, Commissioner of Department
16 of Records.

17 (Witnesses approached
18 witness table.)

19 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

20 RICHARDSON: Excellent. Thank you
21 so much, Commissioner Leonard, for
22 being here. We truly appreciate
23 the work of your office. You all
24 have worked so hard to work with a

1 number of constituents and have
2 very innovative programs to help
3 our constituents across the city.
4 So please state your name for the
5 record and proceed with your
6 testimony.

7 COMMISSIONER LEONARD:

8 James Leonard, Commissioner of the
9 Department of Records. Good
10 afternoon, Chairperson Gilmore
11 Richardson and members of the
12 Committee on Law and Government. I
13 am James Leonard, Commissioner of
14 Records for the City of
15 Philadelphia. Thank you for
16 holding this important hearing on
17 tangled title resolution processes.
18 I'm going to edit some of my
19 testimony in the interest of time,
20 but you have my written testimony
21 that we submitted.

22 My department sits at
23 the intersection of this crisis.
24 We record deeds and maintain

1 property ownership records. When
2 someone dies without a will or an
3 estate plan, their property becomes
4 trapped. The deed never transfers
5 to heirs, creating ownership
6 uncertainty that can span
7 generations.

8 Preserving homeownership
9 through the reduction and
10 prevention of tangled titles is
11 central to Mayor Parker's H.O.M.E.
12 Initiative. All of the Department
13 of records work on this issue,
14 supports the initiative's goal of
15 preserving homeownership and
16 building generational wealth.
17 While we must improve resolution
18 processes, we must also prevent new
19 tangled titles from forming.

20 In summer of 2024, I
21 submitted a letter to the
22 Pennsylvania House on behalf of the
23 Mayor's administration supporting
24 what's called the Uniform Partition

1 of Heirs Property Act enacted in 26
2 states and pending in 5 more,
3 including Pennsylvania, where it
4 has passed the House. This
5 legislation provides important
6 protections for co-owners of
7 inherited property, ensuring fair
8 buyout procedures and preventing
9 forced sales below fair market
10 value when one co-owner seeks to
11 partition the property.

12 Pennsylvania House Bill
13 2124, the Uniform Real Property
14 Transfer On Death Act, is another
15 promising proposal that would allow
16 homeowners to designate
17 beneficiaries through a simple deed
18 recording. The Department of
19 Records is committed to enhancing
20 public education about estate
21 planning, continued partnership
22 with legal services providers and
23 improved data sharing.

24 We've conducted 173 deed

1 fraud and tangled title outreach
2 events reaching nearly 13,000
3 residents since 2023 and stand
4 ready to expand. The city's
5 Division of Housing and Community
6 Development also plays a pivotal
7 role in addressing this issue.
8 DHCD works with a strong coalition
9 of legal aid organizations,
10 including Philadelphia VIP,
11 Community Legal Services,
12 Philadelphia Legal Assistance and
13 Senior Law Center.

14 In Fiscal Year 2026,
15 DHCD allocated over \$3 million to
16 these organizations to provide free
17 legal counsel to clients with
18 tangled titles as well as estate
19 planning services. A portion of
20 that funding is granted to clients
21 through the Tangled Title Fund.
22 DHCD takes a multi-pronged approach
23 to outreach and intake. While some
24 clients are referred to the

1 mortgage foreclosure diversion
2 program, there's also a hotline
3 managed by Philadelphia Legal
4 Assistance, walk-in support at some
5 of our partner sites and referrals
6 from City Councilmember offices.

7 Additional information
8 about the program is housed within
9 our network of Neighborhood
10 Advisory Committee organizations,
11 several of which provide direct
12 referrals to our legal aid
13 providers and licensed housing
14 counselors.

15 Finally, we take a data-
16 informed approach to targeting our
17 outreach by doing mailings and
18 conducting community information
19 sessions in neighborhoods where
20 they're most likely to occur. In
21 Fiscal Year 2025, our legal aid
22 partners completed 275 successful
23 title transfers, prepared 530
24 wills, and we're still addressing a

1 substantial volume of open cases by
2 year's end. This work often
3 impacts low-income households.

4 For example, 64% of the
5 households with successful title
6 transfer or will preparation were
7 in the lowest income bracket, under
8 30% AMI. On average, our legal aid
9 partners open around 280 tangled
10 title cases and 170 estate planning
11 cases per quarter. Thank you for
12 shining a light on this critical
13 issue. The administration is ready
14 to be a full partner in helping
15 families reclaim and preserve their
16 homes. And I'm happy to answer any
17 questions.

18 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

19 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
20 very much, Commissioner Leonard.
21 We certainly appreciate all of the
22 hard work that you and your team
23 have been doing over the years,
24 even collaborating with us on the

1 legislation that we work together
2 with the funeral homes on. And so,
3 we just appreciate your work.

4 For residents who need
5 to interface with city departments,
6 how do we help identify when
7 someone has a tangled title and
8 what is the process to connect them
9 to the right resource? How do you
10 all navigate that part of the
11 process?

12 COMMISSIONER LEONARD: I
13 would say we encounter people two
14 ways. One, at all of our community
15 events we regularly encounter
16 folks. And then we have folks who
17 just walk in or call or contact our
18 offices regularly. The most common
19 question we receive is, my parent
20 or a loved one, usually my parent
21 or parents have passed away, I need
22 to get the deed in my name. It
23 usually starts with that simple
24 question. And folks, you know,

1 most commonly don't -- and I don't
2 expect them to -- understand that
3 beyond that simple question, it is
4 a process that you elaborated on,
5 the Register elaborated on, that
6 can be quite complex for a
7 layperson to navigate.

8 So when folks come in
9 and ask that question, our research
10 team will typically look up their
11 ownership history on the property,
12 see where things stand there. And
13 often times if it is a tangled
14 title, we'll direct them to
15 resources at the Register of Wills
16 and legal aid organizations.

17 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

18 RICHARDSON: Excellent. Excellent.
19 And so, for planning purposes --
20 and I know we have a variety of
21 city departments and agencies
22 represented here, and I want to say
23 thank you all for being here
24 because we work with many of you on

1 policy-specific changes. And I'm
2 looking at our Revenue Commissioner
3 because we've done some great work
4 from a policy perspective with
5 their office, but we have been
6 working now with our NAC partners
7 to expand to each community across
8 Philadelphia to ensure that we are
9 educating communities around
10 tangled titles or deeds.

11 So if we could just have
12 someone come up and talk about the
13 NAC interface from a city
14 perspective and just how we can
15 continue to better collaborate with
16 the administration from a Council
17 Office perspective?

18 (Witness approached
19 witness table.)

20 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

21 RICHARDSON: Oh, Mark Dodds, I
22 didn't see you here. How are you
23 doing? How we can better
24 collaborate with you all to ensure

1 we're reaching as many constituents
2 as possible?

3 MR. DODDS: Hello. Good
4 afternoon.

5 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

6 RICHARDSON: Say your name for the
7 record and proceed with your
8 testimony. I didn't see you.

9 MR. DODDS: I wasn't
10 trying to hide back there. Mark
11 Dodds, Division of Housing and
12 Community Development. I'm the
13 Director of the Division. We
14 currently partner with three NACs,
15 GPCA, Strawberry Mansion and
16 Hopeful to provide kind of like an
17 intake for the public for tangled
18 title services. They each operate
19 with a budget of \$30,000 a year,
20 specifically for those purposes.

21 That includes people
22 coming in off the street that just
23 have questions. That includes
24 organizing events. And each one is

1 directly connected with one of our
2 legal aid organizations, so there's
3 a direct pipeline for legal help if
4 they need it. We are --
5 obviously the H.O.M.E. bond, there
6 is money in there to expand our
7 tangled title work. I know that's
8 something you're interested in.

9 We are thinking about
10 different models that might be
11 effective where some of the NACS
12 that are operating in this pilot
13 capacity could potentially work
14 with other organizations to, you
15 know, we've talked about a train-
16 the-trainer model in the past. We
17 think that rolling this out over
18 time would probably be the most
19 effective way to do that,
20 particularly where there are gaps
21 in services right now with only
22 three NACs. That's obviously not
23 citywide coverage. So we're
24 definitely open for expansion in

1 that area.

2 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

3 RICHARDSON: That would be awesome.

4 And last question for you is

5 relative to sort of I guess the

6 original work that was done from a

7 city perspective with your office

8 on tangled titles.

9 Prior to the expansion

10 of the work that we did under the

11 NPI program and now under the

12 H.O.M.E. Plan, there was a specific

13 process that you all followed.

14 This is even before the expansion

15 of the NAC support as an example.

16 What was that process? That was

17 back when I think we did the

18 250,000 every year for tangled

19 titles through your department.

20 What was that specific

21 process? What did you all sort of

22 do with those funds? Those funds

23 were to help and assist the legal

24 service agencies, correct? And I'm

1 talking about this is going back
2 before NPI, before we did the 7.6
3 million for NPI which is the 1.9
4 each year. What was the original
5 process? And the only reason why
6 I'm asking is to, one, get it on
7 the record, but two, to show how
8 the city process worked.

9 MR. DODDS: Yeah. We
10 can go back and look at what we've
11 done historically from the very
12 beginning of the program. My
13 understanding is that's always been
14 in coordination with the Department
15 of Records. We've always had a
16 good relationship there. I can't
17 speak to the very, very beginning
18 stages.

19 But more recently, kind
20 of the process for intake is we've
21 attempted to cast a really wide
22 net, and that means that you can
23 call the hotline. That's a great
24 way for folks to get access to

1 services, PLA, Philadelphia Legal
2 Assistance manages that hotline.
3 We fund them to do so. You don't
4 get turned away. If there is lack
5 of capacity for whatever reason at
6 one of the organizations, they'll
7 be able to refer you to another
8 one. But I don't get the sense
9 that there's these complicated
10 handoffs.

11 I think that our
12 partners are very accustomed to
13 working with one another, which
14 creates a seamless way to get
15 services. We also provide funding
16 for a Tangled Title Fund, which is
17 administered by Philadelphia VIP.
18 And that's another great way for
19 folks to get access to resources to
20 help them with their tangled title
21 issues.

22 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

23 RICHARDSON: Sure. And when we get
24 to the next panel, we're going to

1 talk more with PLA and also with
2 Philly VIP to just talk about their
3 process from start to finish, but I
4 just wanted it to be on the record
5 from a city perspective, that we
6 provided support through your
7 office to these organizations that
8 provide the intake part of the
9 process for tangled titles and
10 deeds.

11 MR. DODDS: That's
12 right. And it can look different.
13 So sometimes that referral comes
14 for a household that's going
15 through one of our programs, like
16 our Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion
17 program. They could be accessing
18 housing counseling services. They
19 could be going to a NAC that isn't
20 one of the three NACs that
21 implement the pilot program, and
22 they're still well-versed in the
23 services we provide so they can
24 make referrals. It's really a

1 number -- and also through Council
2 offices as well. So there's a
3 number of different ways that we
4 work on intake.

5 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

6 RICHARDSON: Excellent. Well,
7 thank you very, very much.

8 The Chair now recognizes
9 Councilmember Phillips.

10 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

11 Thank you all so much. And also, I
12 want to thank the Commissioner as
13 well for his work around this
14 issue. I've seen it firsthand.

15 Quick question: Does the city
16 track how long tangled title cases
17 take to resolve? And also, if they
18 fail at it? Does your
19 department --

20 COMMISSIONER LEONARD:

21 I'm not aware -- the Department of
22 Records doesn't track them.

23 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

24 Okay.

1 MR. DODDS: So we do
2 have pretty robust data behind the
3 program and we coordinate with all
4 four partner agencies at any given
5 point in time. We can tell you how
6 many cases are open versus how many
7 are closed. What gets tricky from
8 a data standpoint is that cases can
9 go past fiscal years. And I would
10 think that if we needed to dig a
11 little further, we could probably
12 get information about the length of
13 time.

14 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: So
15 you are clear about how many
16 tangled titles exist in the city,
17 like the exact number?

18 MR. DODDS: We are clear
19 about how many open tangled title
20 cases exist that our partners are
21 working on. And I know there's
22 research that points to estimates
23 in the city.

24 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

1 Would it be helpful if City Council
2 required or requested reporting on
3 outcomes of these cases or what's
4 being worked on and certain
5 addresses, especially if we want to
6 know from a district standpoint?

7 MR. DODDS: Through the
8 H.O.M.E. program, through the
9 H.O.M.E. bond, we are committed to
10 actively reporting on everything
11 that gets funded through that
12 initiative, tangled title included.

13 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
14 And my final question is when I
15 read the testimony from the
16 Commissioner, this really struck
17 me, and also when I listened to
18 you, you just said for families --
19 resolving tangled titles currently
20 requires navigating multiple city
21 agencies, Register of Wills,
22 Orphans' Court, Department of
23 Revenue, our office, and that
24 requires a lot of families to hire

1 certain attorneys, average costs,
2 people are making money off of
3 this.

4 What is a better way,
5 especially for low-income families
6 or for even moderate-income
7 families, right, that you all can
8 collaborate together with all of
9 these offices so it doesn't feel
10 like there's one person to
11 intercede for all of these offices
12 that does every single thing for
13 that individual as opposed to
14 having do all these? Is there a
15 better way to reduce costs for
16 families?

17 COMMISSIONER LEONARD: I
18 think the statistic from -- the
19 best data we have is from the Pew
20 Charitable Trust study from a few
21 years ago, and that estimates about
22 an average of \$9,200 to resolve a
23 tangled title and legal costs. And
24 I think the difficulty,

1 Councilperson, is all the agencies
2 here know is it requires legal
3 intervention or legal proceedings
4 to resolve each one of these,
5 including probate and perhaps
6 others, depending on the
7 complexity. And there can also be
8 more than one estate, as we call
9 it, at issue, if you have multiple
10 deceased parties over sometimes
11 successive generations.

12 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: Is
13 there a one-page cheat sheet that
14 will help a family that just
15 recently got into this to
16 understand exactly what they need
17 to do like 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7?

18 COMMISSIONER LEONARD:
19 Mark and DHCD can comment too. I
20 think the Council or the
21 Chairperson's legislation that
22 required funeral services providers
23 to hand out a tangled title
24 information sheet, which I actually

1 worked with the Register of Wills
2 last week on the update, and the
3 Chairperson's team is reviewing it
4 now. I think that provides a good
5 snapshot for laypeople of what to
6 do.

7 It sort of goes back to
8 what the Chairperson mentioned at
9 the beginning, which is trying to
10 create sort of like a step-by-step
11 map of this process. I think that
12 that cheat sheet is a good attempt
13 to do that.

14 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
15 And my last quick question, what
16 information do residents often lack
17 at the start of the process?
18 What's the thing that they commonly
19 don't have available when they
20 start this process?

21 COMMISSIONER LEONARD: A
22 lot of times they may think they
23 own the property. From a legal
24 standpoint, they own the property.

1 For example, they don't necessarily
2 know that their name doesn't
3 automatically go on the deed. If
4 the understanding was within the
5 family that let's say a son or
6 daughter or child was to inherit
7 the property, sometimes when they
8 come to our respective offices,
9 there's a belief that we can sort
10 of change that at the counter. I
11 think only to find out that it's a
12 much more, as I said, complex,
13 sometimes legal process that
14 requires the Register of Wills and
15 others. So part of it is education
16 a lot of times when folks come in
17 and just sort of help -- sort of
18 back up a step.

19 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
20 Well, listen we have another
21 hearing after this so I'm not going
22 to hold all my questions. But I
23 just -- I don't know. I just think
24 that we just -- the ones that

1 exist, just get to the people, get
2 to them right away. Let them know.
3 I'm not sure how well we're getting
4 to those people because I would
5 want to know now.

6 So thank you, Chair.

7 COMMISSIONER LEONARD: I
8 the thing I want to say in
9 response, as we are looking at -- I
10 had mentioned data sharing in my
11 testimony, and part of what we're
12 looking at is trying to figure out
13 how to potentially identify the
14 actual folks who are in tangled
15 title versus aggregated numbers in
16 order to be able to potentially
17 design earlier intervention
18 programs instead of waiting to
19 encounter them either in our
20 offices when they're in crisis or
21 at community events.

22 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

23 RICHARDSON: A targeted, proactive
24 approach seeking to help the

1 families resolve the tangled title
2 prior to them getting in crisis.
3 Because at the point that we
4 typically receive them, they're in
5 crisis. And there's several
6 estates sometimes back. And so, it
7 requires the untangling of multiple
8 estates to even get to the process
9 of actually recording the new deed,
10 so we appreciate that work.

11 We're hopeful we can
12 work with you all to continue to do
13 that. But thank you to Mark Dodds
14 and the entire team at DHCD for
15 your continued work in
16 collaboration with the NACs and
17 supporting the legal service
18 agencies. We have them on the next
19 panel, so we'll be able to talk
20 about their part of the process.

21 But, Commissioner
22 Leonard, you have been stellar.
23 Thank you for working with us on
24 the tangled title information

1 sheet. I have the updates in this
2 folder. I'm going through them in
3 advance of the press conference
4 we'll have tomorrow with Madam
5 Mayor on the new deed for
6 legislation that was just passed by
7 this body. So thank you very, very
8 much and we look forward to the
9 continued collaboration.

10 I apologize. We have
11 two more questions -- you good?
12 Okay. We have one more question
13 from Councilmember Landau.

14 So the Chair now
15 recognizes Councilmember Landau.

16 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:
17 Thank you so much. I'll be quick.
18 I am the Chair of the Technology
19 and Information Services Committee,
20 so you were already starting to
21 talk about what I was most
22 interested in. It sounds like we
23 have moved to a phase in the world
24 where we can do more proactive

1 research. And I know some other
2 departments in the city are
3 starting to do it.

4 Can you just tell us
5 quickly a little bit more about
6 what you're looking into and if
7 there's anything else from a data
8 sense that we can utilize that will
9 make this process go quicker and
10 easier?

11 COMMISSIONER LEONARD:

12 Yeah. Without getting overly
13 technical, what we're working on
14 with OIT, the Office of Information
15 Technology, is having some -- well,
16 it's trying to recreate internally
17 the results of the Pew Study, the
18 aggregate numbers. So we created a
19 data set of the acts -- right now
20 we have census tract level data, so
21 we're working with folks a lot
22 smarter than I am in this stuff in
23 OIT who are wonderful. Shout-out
24 to them to try and, my words,

1 reverse engineer that so we can
2 have a data set of the actual
3 properties to then open up new
4 avenues to design earlier
5 intervention programs that are
6 directed at the actual folks that
7 are in this condition, but a lot of
8 whom don't know that they are.

9 MR. DODDS: I'll just
10 add, some of our partners are also
11 actively working in that space too
12 on the tech front to identify
13 individual properties. And we
14 currently have a somewhat smaller
15 network, but we are actively
16 working to expand through grant
17 funding and other means.

18 Our community connector
19 program, which kind of exists
20 within NACs where folks can go
21 door-to-door, representing, you
22 know, maybe there are people that
23 the residents are familiar with and
24 more likely to open the door when

1 they come. We found a lot of
2 success with flyers. So I think
3 we're all on the same page that we
4 want to use data to help inform
5 this process.

6 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

7 RICHARDSON: And we appreciate the
8 work of Philly 360 Stat for
9 providing that information, so I
10 think that'll be helpful as well.
11 Thank you very, very much.

12 No additional questions
13 for this panel?

14 (No response.)

15 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

16 RICHARDSON: Okay. Seeing none,
17 thank you very much.

18 COMMISSIONER LEONARD:

19 Just give a quick shout-out. I
20 gave each of you a little flyer
21 from our City archives inviting you
22 all or anybody here to come down
23 and see our Black History Month
24 Exhibit that just went up last

1 week, that features the theme of
2 Black educators in Philadelphia and
3 Black education throughout history.

4 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

5 RICHARDSON: Thank you. We
6 appreciate that work, Commissioner
7 Leonard, to you and to your team.
8 And each one of these historical
9 figures in our city played a very
10 important role in education, but
11 none other than Philadelphia High
12 School for Girls graduate
13 Dr. Constance E. Clayton. Now, the
14 Board of Education building is
15 named in her honor at 440 North
16 Broad Street. She was a teacher,
17 first woman and first Black
18 superintendent of the School
19 District of Philadelphia. So we
20 uplift and honor her legacy.

21 Also, Dr. John Turner,
22 first Black person to serve on the
23 Board of Public Education in
24 Philadelphia. And Carolyn LeCount,

1 activist and teacher. She was
2 engaged to our activist that we
3 have, our statue here at City Hall,
4 but she was prominent in her own
5 right. Not only was she engaged
6 Octavius V. Catto, but she was
7 prominent in her own right. And I
8 think she was also affiliated with
9 the Institute for Colored Youth as
10 well, which is now Cheyney
11 University.

12 And so, we uplift and
13 honor this Black History Month
14 moment. And we appreciate you all
15 for sharing this and we look
16 forward to visiting your City
17 archives. Thank you very much.

18 COMMISSIONER LEONARD:

19 Thank you.

20 (Applause.)

21 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

22 RICHARDSON: Will the Clerk please
23 call the next panel.

24 THE CLERK: Kevin

1 Boswell and Adam Weintraub-Barth
2 from Senior Law Center; Roxanne
3 Crowley from Philadelphia Legal
4 Assistance; Kelly Gastley from
5 Philadelphia VIP and Michael
6 Froehlich and Anna Brickman from
7 Community Legal Services.

8 (Witnesses approached
9 witness table.)

10 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

11 RICHARDSON: We thank each of you
12 for being here and truly the work
13 that you all have been doing. We
14 ask that as you approach the
15 witness table, that you state your
16 name for the record, proceed with
17 an abbreviated version of your
18 testimony because we want to hear
19 from all six of you.

20 And I will say that we
21 also have witnesses for the next
22 bill that are tuning in from
23 Los Angeles, California and they
24 have a very hard stop at 3 o'clock.

1 And so, I want to honor their time
2 because we're running a little bit
3 behind today. And so, we will
4 receive the testimony, the
5 important testimony of the legal
6 service agencies because you all
7 are doing sort of the initial
8 intake and seeing the cases
9 through, but please provide an
10 abbreviated version of your
11 testimony. And then we want to ask
12 you as many questions as we can so
13 that we can get to the last panel,
14 so that we can then hear from the
15 experts who have joined us from
16 Los Angeles County. Is that okay?

17 All right. Excellent.
18 Okay. Please state your name for
19 the record and proceed with your
20 testimony.

21 MS. CROWLEY: Good
22 afternoon. My name is Roxanne
23 Crowley. I supervise the Tangled
24 Title Team at Philadelphia Legal

1 Assistance. Thank you,
2 Councilwoman Gilmore Richardson,
3 committee members for having me
4 here today. I've had the
5 opportunity to collaborate with
6 tangled title advocates from across
7 the country, and I can attest to
8 the fact that Philadelphia remains
9 a leader in tangled title, and that
10 is largely through the ongoing
11 investment by Council and the city
12 into this work.

13 Prior to receiving
14 funding through NPI in 2022,
15 Philadelphia Legal Assistance
16 didn't have significant resources
17 to address tangled title cases.
18 However, since then we've been able
19 to build our first small but mighty
20 tangled title team. We've obtained
21 record ownership for over 300
22 clients. We currently have 250
23 open and ongoing tangled title
24 cases, and we provided advice to

1 1000 Philadelphians with tangled
2 title issues. So thank you for
3 your support in that great work.

4 What I would like to
5 address now are two policy issues
6 briefly that we think that we need
7 more tools to develop. My
8 colleagues here also have a couple
9 of policy issues they'd like to
10 address and we all collectively
11 agree and support on these issues.
12 What we need right now are new
13 tools to resolve cases with missing
14 errors and uncooperative errors.

15 As you know -- and,
16 Councilman, as you mentioned --
17 some of our probate and estate
18 cases span generations. We may
19 have a client who was born and
20 raised and continued to reside in
21 his great-grandmother's home.
22 Through working with us to try to
23 resolve his title, he may learn for
24 the first time that a second,

1 fourth or fifth cousin also has a
2 legal right in that property.

3 Right now in
4 Pennsylvania there's no legal
5 mechanism that recognizes our
6 client's greater right to that
7 house through possession and
8 residing there and maintaining the
9 property. There's no legal
10 mechanism that recognizes our
11 client's greater right over the
12 cousin that family hasn't seen in
13 decades.

14 That's why we need
15 legislative change to our adverse
16 possession law in Pennsylvania to
17 permit heirs to adversely possess
18 against other heirs or co-tenants
19 to adversely possess against other
20 co-tenants. States such as New
21 York and Texas have these laws, and
22 we could model Pennsylvania laws
23 after theirs. This legislative
24 reform would allow us to clear more

1 titles, because right now these are
2 cases we have to close and where we
3 can assist the clients. The --

4 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

5 RICHARDSON: Can we pause there for
6 one second because that's huge. Can
7 you walk us through the pros and
8 the cons of that process?

9 MS. CROWLEY: I'm very
10 biased. I really only see the
11 pros. So very technically, right
12 now in Pennsylvania you can only
13 adversely possess against another
14 heir or co-tenant, maybe someone
15 else who's on the deed with you, if
16 you go through a performance called
17 ouster. And very simply, and this
18 is in my written testimony, ouster
19 could be taking someone's stuff and
20 throwing it out of the house and
21 changing the locks. And that
22 doesn't happen in estate cases.

23 Like the client I
24 mentioned, she didn't even know her

1 distant cousin had a legal right to
2 this house. So we can't prove the
3 element of ouster. However, in
4 other states they don't have to
5 overcome that hurdle to then file
6 an adverse possession claim against
7 the other heirs. The hurdle I
8 guess I would see is in the United
9 States property rights are held
10 with high regard, and they don't
11 want people to lose their property
12 right without what they would
13 consider proper notice. So I think
14 the concern would be that the
15 distant cousin might not get proper
16 notice, that she had a right in the
17 property and might be divested.
18 But we also have notice
19 requirements that we can use to
20 overcome that.

21 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

22 RICHARDSON: Interesting. I want
23 to talk more about that, because
24 that's something I think we need to

1 take to our state partners in our
2 Philadelphia delegation and sort of
3 talk through what that would look
4 like and what the potential pros
5 and cons may or may not be. Okay.

6 MS. CROWLEY: Looking
7 forward to it.

8 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

9 RICHARDSON: Okay. But you had a
10 second one.

11 MS. CROWLEY: One more
12 and then passing it on. The other
13 is we have uncooperative heirs, so
14 these could be very simple cases
15 legally. For instance, I have a
16 client who's living in his deceased
17 mother's house. The house is a
18 mortgage foreclosure. The only
19 other heir is his brother, who
20 lives in Florida in his own home.
21 In order to save this home in
22 Philadelphia, our client needs sole
23 title, so only his name on the
24 deed, so he can then assume the

1 loan and then modify it to make it
2 affordable to him.

3 The Florida brother
4 would rather see this property lost
5 to foreclosure than to just give
6 his brother his one half of the
7 house. Florida brother wants a
8 buyout. And our clients do not
9 have access to the capital needed
10 to buy out other heirs. So for
11 this reason, we were really
12 thrilled. And I very recently
13 learned that Council added an
14 addition to the One Philly Mortgage
15 program that created a carve-out
16 for heir buyouts. I think that
17 would be a magnificent tool for our
18 clients.

19 And the city continues
20 to develop this program, I
21 encourage you to look to other loan
22 products, such as the one provided
23 by Sustainable Neighborhoods in
24 New York City. They offer an heir

1 buyout loan for low-income New York
2 City residents. And that loan is
3 offered at low to no interest
4 without regard to marketable title
5 or lien priority, so it's very
6 accessible.

7 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

8 RICHARDSON: Now, that's huge,
9 because that's most of the cases
10 we've received recently. In fact,
11 I just got a case just now -- I
12 guess they must be watching on
13 Channel 64 -- that I just sent to
14 my staff while I was sitting here
15 that we have to send to you all.
16 And it's the same challenge of the
17 heir buyout. So that's
18 interesting. And that's in New
19 York City proper, not in New York
20 state?

21 MS. CROWLEY: You know,
22 I can't remember for sure if that
23 program extends to the state. But
24 sustainable neighborhoods is a

1 CDFI. So they offer a variety of
2 loan products and this is one of
3 their newer ones.

4 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

5 RICHARDSON: Received. Excellent.

6 MS. CROWLEY: I'm happy
7 to answer other questions. But at
8 this time, I'd like to pass it to
9 my colleague Kevin.

10 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

11 RICHARDSON: Sure. And this is
12 what we're going to do, because I
13 want to ensure that we hear from
14 these folks from LA. So we'll take
15 the testimony here, if this is
16 okay, colleagues. Let's take the
17 testimony.

18 We'll go through
19 questions that we have. If we have
20 anything additional, we'll submit
21 the questions directly to you for
22 response for the committee. Then
23 we will pause this resolution. We
24 will go into Bill No. 251098 and

1 Resolution No. 251108 to hear from
2 the folks from LA, because they
3 have a hard stop at 3:00, correct?

4 COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:
5 (Inaudible).

6 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE
7 RICHARDSON: No, are you guys --
8 okay. I just want to make sure.
9 All right. So we'll take the
10 testimony. Then we'll stay at
11 260029. We'll get Panel 3 for the
12 last one. Then we'll go directly
13 to them when we hear the next one.
14 Okay. Thank you.

15 Please state your name
16 for the record and proceed with
17 your testimony.

18 MR. BOSWELL: Good
19 afternoon. My name is Kevin
20 Boswell. I'm supervising attorney
21 with the Housing Justice Team at
22 Senior Law Center. Thank you,
23 Chair Gilmore Richardson, Vice-
24 Chair Brooks and the rest of the

1 Committee on Law and Government and
2 City Council for having this
3 hearing, allowing us to speak here
4 today.

5 I will highlight very
6 briefly points from our written
7 testimony of congratulations,
8 gratitude and advocacy. I first
9 want to congratulate City Council
10 on its work addressing the tangled
11 title epidemic in Philadelphia.
12 Rather than looking the other way,
13 previous and current City
14 Councilmembers face the challenge
15 enacted, not just through words or
16 platitudes, but by passing
17 legislation and allocating funding.
18 You put your money where your mouth
19 is.

20 Senior Law Center is the
21 only nonprofit organization in
22 Philadelphia -- or excuse me, in
23 Pennsylvania with its mission
24 dedicated strictly to seeking

1 justice for older adults, one of
2 very few in the nation. Thanks to
3 your continued support through
4 funding and legislation, older
5 homeowners are in a better place
6 today than they were in 2021.

7 Since the allocation of
8 funding, Senior Law Center has
9 advised or represented nearly 1000
10 older individuals facing tangled
11 titles. Three-quarters of those
12 cases are from the hardest-hit
13 areas in West and North
14 Philadelphia. We've recorded 67
15 deeds, transferring titles to
16 homeowners after extended
17 litigation or probate. And
18 furthermore, we've executed almost
19 1500 estate planning documents to
20 prevent further tangled titles.

21 While this progress is
22 extraordinary, many obstacles still
23 remain. We've heard of some of
24 those from Roxanne. Today I'd like

1 to highlight that city and state
2 laws currently disqualify heirs
3 from the estate exemption when they
4 inherit their homes subject to
5 mortgage. This increases the
6 obstacles to recording their deeds.

7 As currently structured,
8 this constitutes a regressive
9 poverty tax. It perversely exempts
10 the affluent heir through a debt-
11 free estate from the transfer tax,
12 while stripping the exemption from
13 those struggling to preserve their
14 family homes under the weight of a
15 mortgage. This policy creates a
16 tax on debt as opposed to wealth,
17 an absurd and surely unintended
18 result.

19 Councilmember Gilmore
20 Richardson has sponsored a bill to
21 expand the estate exemption to
22 cover properties inherited subject
23 to a mortgage. It is a narrowly
24 tailored fix that will place

1 low-income heirs on the same
2 footing as wealthy heirs and expand
3 the path to homeownership. We urge
4 you to pass this commonsense
5 litigation to ensure that this past
6 progress continues through
7 tomorrow.

8 With fixed incomes
9 eroded by inflation, (inaudible) by
10 disability, frailty and mobility
11 challenges, the specific needs of
12 older homeowners are too often
13 ignored. To address our housing
14 crisis, we must prioritize sensible
15 regulatory reforms that help older
16 residents age in place with
17 dignity, thereby securing the most
18 accessible form of affordable
19 housing, the homes that they
20 already own. Thank you very much
21 for your time.

22 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

23 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
24 very much for your testimony and

1 for all the work and the bill idea.
2 We are moving forward with that
3 legislation thanks to the work of
4 your team. We're very
5 appreciative.

6 I mean, I was subject to
7 that as well. I inherited two
8 properties, both with mortgages and
9 I had to purchase them from my
10 parents' estate. And I paid out of
11 pocket for everything, which is why
12 I know every part of this process
13 most intimately because of what
14 happened to my family and I. And I
15 remember, I think we spent over
16 \$10,000 just in almost lawyer fees.
17 That doesn't include all the
18 separate fees for each part of the
19 process, and then of course to
20 acquire both of the properties.

21 And so, we appreciate
22 that work. We look forward to
23 presenting that legislation to my
24 colleagues and working towards

1 their support and ultimate passage.

2 So thank you so much.

3 We'll take your
4 testimony. Please proceed. State
5 your name for the record.

6 MS. BRICKMAN: Good
7 afternoon, members of the
8 committee. My name is Anna
9 Brickman. I am a supervising
10 attorney in the Homeownership and
11 Consumer Rights Unit at Community
12 Legal Services, where I focus on
13 resolving tangled titles. I am
14 pleased to testify here alongside
15 our legal partners today about
16 CLS's ongoing work to address
17 tangled titles.

18 As Council knows, CLS
19 was established by the Philadelphia
20 Bar Association in 1966. As the
21 city's largest provider of free
22 legal services, we assist
23 approximately 14,000 of
24 Philadelphia's poorest residents

1 with their legal problems every
2 year. Thousands of people in
3 Philadelphia face barriers to
4 achieving homeownership because
5 they have a tangled title.

6 CLS has worked on these
7 issues in conjunction with its
8 foreclosure work for many years,
9 starting in 2021 with the city's
10 historic investment to help
11 homeowners with tangled titles. As
12 part of the Neighborhood
13 Preservation Initiative, CLS has
14 been able to focus more resources
15 on helping clients with these
16 issues. Today we have a dedicated
17 team of nine advocates, a
18 combination of attorneys and
19 paralegals focused exclusively on
20 representing clients with tangled
21 titles.

22 In 2025, we worked with
23 673 clients with tangled titles.
24 We successfully cleared 118 titles

1 in that year. We also wrote wills
2 for 274 homeowners and we
3 participated in 90 wills clinics
4 and outreach events, many with our
5 close partners, affordable housing
6 centers of Pennsylvania. The work
7 on tangled titles remains robust
8 and ongoing, requiring continued
9 collaboration with our legal
10 partners, city agencies and elected
11 officials.

12 We are grateful to City
13 Council and the administration for
14 its focus and investment in
15 addressing tangled titles. Over
16 the past few years, our team has
17 gained greater expertise and become
18 more efficient in raising estates,
19 resolving titles, litigating in
20 Orphans' Court and executing estate
21 planning documents. We are also
22 working to address systemic issues
23 that pose unnecessary hurdles and
24 impediments.

1 In March 2025, we
2 convened the first statewide
3 conference of legal advocates,
4 helping clients to resolve tangled
5 titles. It was attended by over 80
6 practitioners from across the
7 Commonwealth. Out of that
8 conference, we began to plan for a
9 statewide legislative campaign to
10 enact transfer-on-death-deed
11 legislation to ease the transfer of
12 family homes after death.

13 Transfer-on-death deeds,
14 also known as TODDs permit a
15 homeowner to declare in their deed
16 the name of the person to whom
17 their home should pass upon their
18 death. It serves as an alternative
19 to an expensive estate planning and
20 probate process. During a
21 homeowner's life, the beneficiary
22 named on the TODD has no interest
23 in the property and the owner
24 retains full power to transfer or

1 encumber the property or to revoke
2 or amend the deed.

3 Upon the homeowner's
4 death however, the beneficiaries,
5 typically the children or other
6 heirs, can record a new deed
7 recognizing this interest. If the
8 family home is the only estate
9 asset, the heirs need not go
10 through the cumbersome and
11 expensive probate process. Similar
12 legislation has been adopted in 22
13 states. And I'm happy to report
14 that last Wednesday, House Bill
15 2124 passed out of the House
16 Judiciary Committee on a unanimous,
17 bipartisan vote.

18 Untangling a title is a
19 complicated, expensive and time-
20 consuming, yet absolutely critical
21 method to address the racial wealth
22 gap for low-income and minority
23 communities through homeownership.
24 We appreciate City Council's

1 ongoing support of our work in this
2 area and look forward to continued
3 collaboration as we seek solutions
4 to this problem. Thank you to the
5 committee for convening this
6 hearing and thank you to all of
7 City Council for your continued
8 support of our work.

9 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

10 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
11 very much for your testimony.

12 Please state your name
13 for the record and proceed.

14 MS. GASTLEY: Thank you.
15 My name is Kelly Gastley. I'm the
16 managing attorney at Philadelphia
17 VIP. VIP has been helping clients
18 with tangled title and estate
19 planning issues for over 20 years.
20 We are very grateful for the
21 support of City Council and DHCD on
22 this issue. At VIP, we recruit,
23 train and support volunteer
24 attorneys who represent our clients

1 pro bono.

2 From 2022 to 2025, our
3 staff and volunteers helped almost
4 300 clients get title to their
5 homes and they also helped another
6 427 homeowners get wills, and many
7 of those clients receive powers of
8 attorney as well. Our partnership
9 with a private bar expands legal
10 services, but it also builds long-
11 term investment and expertise
12 across our legal community.

13 We have volunteers from
14 a broad range of settings, law
15 firms like Troutman Pepper Locke
16 and White & Williams, inhouse
17 counsel at companies like Accenture
18 and Vanguard, and growing
19 engagement from affinity groups
20 like the Barristers' Association
21 and the South Asian Bar
22 Association. In fact, Barristers'
23 President Samantha Fitzpatrick,
24 shout-out to her, she's making

1 volunteering on VIP's estate
2 planning work a priority during her
3 term.

4 VIP also coordinates
5 with all of our legal services
6 partners up here today and
7 collaborates with the DHCD on the
8 reporting of data, something I know
9 you were asking about,
10 Councilmember Phillips. We
11 coordinate to make sure we're
12 providing data for the NPI
13 dashboard, and our data and
14 analytics manager meets with the
15 DHCD monitoring department to make
16 sure that it has the data that it
17 needs. We appreciate this
18 opportunity to work with DHCD and
19 our partner agencies to make sure
20 this important information and data
21 is getting out there.

22 VIP also administers the
23 Tangled Title Fund, which we've
24 heard about today, which covers the

1 legal and administrative costs of
2 resolving tangled title issues,
3 which clients really cannot afford
4 to pay on their own. The Tangled
5 Title Fund distributed over
6 \$400,000 to nearly 300 low-income
7 applicants just in 2025 alone.

8 Expenses like probate
9 filing fees, transfer taxes and
10 inheritance taxes are covered.
11 With rising property values, the
12 amount requested particularly for
13 transfer taxes has been increasing
14 and a deed cannot be recorded
15 without that being paid. Thanks to
16 the partnership of DHCD and
17 Department of Records Commissioner
18 Jim Leonard, who we heard from
19 earlier, the Tangled Title Fund has
20 been able to expand the cap per
21 household and ensure that
22 homeowners with particularly high
23 transfer tax bills can still have
24 their deed recorded.

1 The next step I want to
2 focus on is continued collaboration
3 with our partners at the Register
4 of Wills, who we heard from
5 earlier. Working with them is
6 really a key component of our work
7 because these cases involve so many
8 nuances that present unique
9 challenges in the probate process.
10 When those issues arise, we need to
11 work through them constructively
12 with the staff at the Register of
13 Wills. Together, we look for
14 practical solutions that balance
15 adherence to the law with avenues
16 that allow petitions for probate to
17 move forward.

18 We appreciate the
19 opportunities we've had to have
20 inperson discussions during the
21 Register's first year in office and
22 we look forward to future
23 discussions to continue to help
24 more homeowners. Thank you again

1 so much for having this hearing and
2 for your continued support and
3 attention to this issue.

4 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

5 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Well,
6 thank you very much for your work,
7 and we've worked very closely with
8 many of you through the past six
9 years now on the tangled title
10 issue, so we appreciate your
11 continued work and support.

12 I wanted to ask a couple
13 questions. You, Kelly, just spoke
14 about the current cap per client
15 for the Tangled Title Fund. We
16 want to ensure that we are placing
17 enough dollars in the fund
18 specifically because, as you
19 stated, with housing prices rising
20 across the city of Philadelphia, we
21 have noted also that the transfer
22 tax fees are increasing.

23 And so, I know that you
24 all have just had a discussion

1 relative to increasing the cap. If
2 you could just talk about the
3 Tangled Title Fund and how folks
4 are connected to the fund, that
5 would be great. And then for each
6 of you here on the panel
7 representing each of the legal
8 service agencies, if you could just
9 talk about from a city perspective
10 how the city can do a better job of
11 collaboration.

12 And when I say that, I
13 mean are there any pain points in
14 the process that may need to be
15 addressed to make your life easier
16 as it relates to resolving tangled
17 titles for clients, whether it
18 would be the first part of the
19 process with the Register of Wills
20 Office or if we need to be doing
21 more from a Council perspective,
22 just let us know what we need to do
23 to further help the work that you
24 all are doing on the ground?

1 And I see Michael back
2 there. I thought you would be up
3 here. And I got to give you a
4 shout-out, Michael Froehlich,
5 because we call you all the time.
6 Thank you. Thank you very, very
7 much for always answering the call.
8 And we have another constituent
9 coming your way that we just sent
10 during the hearing. So thank you
11 very, very much.

12 MS. GASTLEY: So many of
13 our Tangled Title Fund applicants
14 come from our fellow legal services
15 agencies, folks who they are
16 already helping to resolve their
17 tangled title issues and need to
18 access the fund in order to move
19 forward with their case. The fund
20 is also available beyond those
21 agencies.

22 We actually have a
23 meeting tomorrow and I was
24 reviewing materials before coming

1 here and we have a pro se
2 applicant. So sorry, that's
3 attorney lingo. But we have
4 someone who applied and actually
5 had already resolved most of her
6 tangled title issue on her own, but
7 needed access to the Tangled Title
8 Fund to pay transfer taxes for her
9 deed, you guessed it. And so, she
10 reached out to us and our Tangled
11 Title Fund administrator helps her
12 put her application together and
13 get everything in, helped her order
14 a title report and get everything
15 into the committee so that we can
16 hopefully approve it at tomorrow's
17 meeting and get her a check to pay
18 those transfer taxes and have her
19 deed recorded.

20 So there's a variety of
21 ways. There's no one right way for
22 someone to get to the Tangled Title
23 Fund. Most folks are getting to us
24 through some other advocate who

1 they have already reached out to
2 and is helping them to resolve
3 their tangled title issue. Because
4 title issues are so involved and
5 complicated to resolve without some
6 sort of legal advice or assistance,
7 usually folks are connected to us
8 through another legal advocate.

9 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

10 RICHARDSON: Okay. Well, we thank
11 you very, very much. If any of you
12 can answer the question relative to
13 the interface with all the city
14 departments and agencies, Council,
15 just want to ensure that we are
16 doing all that we can on our side
17 to make the process and the
18 interface for you all as easy as
19 possible? And I'll say this, if
20 there's additional information that
21 you all can share offline as well,
22 that would be helpful.

23 MS. BRICKMAN: I guess
24 this is frankly not an answer. But

1 what I want to say in response to
2 that question is that I think that
3 what we're doing is working. We
4 have a robust system of intake and
5 of collaboration both with city
6 agencies, with Council, with
7 different Councilmember's offices,
8 with the Save Your Home Philly
9 Hotline, with the NACs.

10 The costs associated
11 with our cases are funded by the
12 Tangled Title Fund. We work
13 together. You've heard all of our
14 numbers. And so, in response to
15 saying what can we do better, I
16 would like to also point out that I
17 think that what we do is working
18 really well and you've heard all of
19 our numbers, to say that we are
20 helping address the tangled title
21 problem in Philadelphia.

22 Are we doing it all,
23 like could there be more done?
24 Certainly, there could be more.

1 There are more cases that we
2 haven't reached yet, but the
3 clients that come to us, we are
4 handling them and we are handling
5 them as expeditiously as possible.
6 But to honestly answer your
7 question, I think that the
8 legislation that was brought up
9 earlier by Roxanne from
10 Philadelphia Legal Assistance
11 regarding transfer taxes and
12 mortgages is a very significant
13 hurdle that could have meaningful
14 impact on our clients immediately.

15 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

16 RICHARDSON: Okay. That would be
17 great. So we're working on that
18 legislation and we look forward to
19 processing that through the Council
20 legislative process. Kelly, and
21 then the Chair will recognize Vice-
22 Chair Brooks for a question.

23 MS. GASTLEY:

24 Councilmember, I would also add

1 that I think -- I can speak for the
2 other agencies to say, I think we
3 have a lot of clients who are
4 coming in our doors right now, and
5 we're working through helping them
6 on their cases. I don't know what
7 that's going to look like in a year
8 or two years and there may be a
9 point where we come to you and say,
10 we've got more capacity. There's
11 nothing close to a backlog, right.
12 If we get to that point where we
13 need more help spreading awareness,
14 I think the city has done a
15 tremendous job in the last five
16 years of spreading awareness about
17 this issue, which is amazing.

18 When I used to testify
19 on this issue before City Council,
20 I'd have to start by explaining
21 what tangled title is and that's no
22 longer the case anywhere in
23 Philadelphia. Everyone knows what
24 it is. And so, we have a lot of

1 clients who are coming in to us.

2 And, yes, clients are coming in, in
3 crisis, but we have more clients
4 coming in not in crisis than we've
5 ever had, which is really great.

6 Folks who are just saying, I know
7 this is an issue and I know I need
8 to resolve it. And that's really,
9 really amazing and so heartwarming
10 to see that we can help folks
11 before there's a crisis and before
12 too much time has passed.

13 And so, I think as we
14 continue to kind of catch up on
15 this issue, so to speak, we will
16 reach a point where we will need
17 more of your help in making sure
18 we're continuing to push the word
19 out and that this issue hasn't been
20 resolved. It's not going to be
21 resolved in the next year or two.
22 It's a long-term issue. And your
23 continued support and help when we
24 reach that point and need to keep

1 pushing out awareness, we really
2 look forward to your partnership in
3 doing that.

4 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

5 RICHARDSON: Well, that's really
6 good news, and that's thanks to the
7 work that we all have been doing
8 together. It's been a we thing.
9 So thank you very, very much, but
10 you all are on the front lines.
11 You were seeing all of the cases,
12 so we definitely appreciate you so
13 much.

14 Chair recognizes Vice-
15 Chair Brooks.

16 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

17 Thank you so much, Chair.

18 So several of you
19 mentioned about state laws and
20 policies that would be helpful.
21 And I was trying to figure out what
22 are the most important ways our
23 partners in Harrisburg could help
24 you address some of these tangled

1 title issues. We're doing great
2 here in Philly, but what more could
3 be done with state laws and policy?

4 And Part 2 is, what
5 would you like to see in this
6 tangled title program over the next
7 five years? You said we've come a
8 long way in five years now. What
9 about the next five years? How
10 could we make positive changes here
11 with the tangled title program?

12 MS. CROWLEY: With the
13 state laws and the policy, I think
14 as Philadelphians we kind of always
15 frame things as a Philadelphia
16 problem, so helping us think
17 critically and big picture about
18 how some of the legislation we want
19 passed, such as adverse possession
20 against other heirs, will impact
21 people throughout the state of
22 Pennsylvania. So maybe limiting it
23 to residential properties, have it
24 not apply to big tracts of

1 farmland, things like that, I think
2 we could use up in that area.

3 MR. BOSWELL: And I
4 would just mention as far as the
5 first part of your question for
6 state law, the estate exemption
7 carve-out for properties that are
8 inherited subject to mortgage is a
9 Philadelphia law. It's also a
10 state law. So we can set an
11 example by passing that here at the
12 City Council level and send a
13 message to the state legislature
14 that it would be beneficial for
15 them to do the same thing.

16 MS. GASTLEY: As for
17 the -- do you want me to continue?
18 Okay. As for your question about
19 what should we be focusing on and
20 doing in the next five years, I
21 think a really important piece will
22 be trying to focus on getting to
23 homeowners sooner. After someone
24 has passed away, owning a home,

1 something that Councilmember
2 Gilmore Richardson's funeral home,
3 I call it very informally, the
4 funeral home bill, but what that
5 bill was trying to get to was let's
6 try to get to folks early because
7 these cases can be resolved much
8 more quickly and much more simply,
9 if we get to them not too long
10 after a family member has passed
11 away, before all the heirs have
12 scattered and gone back to wherever
13 they may live and while folks are
14 kind of maybe working more
15 cooperatively and constructively
16 together. And if we can do that, I
17 think we can really move the needle
18 much more quickly on these matters,
19 getting to folks earlier.

20 I know for legal
21 services, we can help someone in
22 that situation. If mom passed away
23 a few months ago, it's a very
24 different case in a positive way

1 than when mom passed away 10 years
2 ago. And so, if we can keep
3 working on trying to let people
4 know, I know it's hard when someone
5 has passed away, but we can make it
6 simpler in the long run if we deal
7 with these issues together.

8 MS. BRICKMAN: With
9 regard to the question about
10 working on a statewide level, I
11 think in addition to all of the
12 excellent policy ideas that we are
13 working on and that we've discussed
14 today, I think one of the --
15 there's so many reasons why such
16 excellent work is being done in
17 Philadelphia. But one of the many
18 is that the Pew report came and
19 identified the problem and really
20 put numbers behind the problem.

21 And I think that really
22 galvanized a lot of the work, and
23 there's not an equivalent study of
24 the number and identity of tangled

1 titles on a statewide level. And I
2 think that with those numbers would
3 come, obviously would come
4 hopefully, of investment, and if
5 you can identify the problem and
6 fund work to solve the problem, I
7 think you first need to identify
8 the problem. And so, it's easier
9 here in Philadelphia because we can
10 point to these very concrete
11 numbers.

12 And I think just to add
13 to the five-year piece, I think to
14 echo what Kelly Gastley said
15 earlier, I think that one of the
16 most important things is that we
17 need to continue to work
18 cooperatively with the Register of
19 Wills. We cannot solve these
20 problems without the Register of
21 Wills because almost every case
22 goes through the Register of Wills
23 with few exceptions. And so, we
24 value our relationship with I think

1 with their staff, all members of
2 their staff, because I think we're
3 probably in that office every day,
4 and without that office or at least
5 several times a week, without that
6 office we couldn't do the work.
7 They truly are the gatekeepers of
8 this work.

9 And so, I think that
10 continuing to collaborate and think
11 creatively with the ROW staff about
12 how we can work together is crucial
13 for our success over the next five
14 years, because truly nearly every
15 case touches that office.

16 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

17 RICHARDSON: Received. And we love
18 working with the Register of Will's
19 Office, particularly not only on
20 our community events, but also I
21 found that Lou DiRenzo and Colleen
22 have been excellent and everybody
23 there. I don't want to start
24 calling names because then you get

1 in trouble. But they all have been
2 excellent.

3 But you said you all
4 have to physically go there each
5 day. Is there an electronic
6 process that we could work towards
7 implementing that could be helpful
8 for some of the documents that
9 maybe you all could receive
10 electronically, because you have to
11 physically go there almost every
12 day, you said?

13 MS. BRICKMAN: Every
14 time we probate a case, we have to
15 go there. So I would guess that we
16 go there at least weekly, if not
17 several times a week, but to
18 probate. But certainly, there
19 are -- the communication that we
20 have in terms of them
21 electronically sending us files,
22 when that can happen, that's very
23 helpful.

24 But currently, probate

1 in Philadelphia is primarily done
2 in person, though I know that when
3 I've appeared in Delaware County,
4 their first line of probate is
5 actually electronic, so that's
6 something that we could think
7 about.

8 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

9 RICHARDSON: I think that's a great
10 idea. And I'm looking at Rue, the
11 Chair of our Technology Committee.
12 I'm like tap in, Rue, because that
13 could be an opportunity for us to
14 streamline the process a bit to
15 figure out how we can be better
16 collaborators from a city
17 perspective and ensuring that maybe
18 if it's not the very first meeting,
19 because I remember that first
20 meeting, my sister and I went in,
21 we had to sit down, fill out the
22 paperwork, but maybe some of the
23 subsequent needs that can be done
24 electronically that we are working

1 towards that end, I think that
2 would be great.

3 MS. CROWLEY: I just
4 want to add on to that. I know in
5 Montgomery County, I was able to
6 probate electronically for no
7 additional cost. There isn't an
8 additional fee here in Philadelphia
9 to do it online. I wanted to add
10 on, and this is pie in the sky, no
11 guarantees, none of us have
12 probably staff to do this. But I
13 think it would be great because I
14 agree with Kelly that we are
15 dealing with so many clients in
16 crisis, that if Register of Wills
17 is able to identify people who need
18 help with deeds, if Department of
19 Records have people coming in who
20 need help with their own tangled
21 title, if they can somehow get us
22 that information and that we can
23 proactively reach out to them.

24 We run the hotline. We

1 can add them as a callback. I
2 mean, my boss isn't here, but of
3 course more staff for that. But I
4 think once someone has gone in and
5 been told no and then they have to
6 call another number, you kind of
7 lose gas and kind of want to push
8 an issue.

9 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

10 RICHARDSON: Received.

11 MS. CROWLEY: But with
12 more resources, I think we could
13 all work together that way.

14 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

15 RICHARDSON: That's a great idea.

16 Chair now recognizes
17 Councilman Phillips.

18 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

19 Quick question: Just to the TODD
20 legislation, it has to go to the
21 Senate or is it over? Is it
22 officially a law now signed by the
23 Governor?

24 MS. BRICKMAN: It's not

1 yet. It was just voted out of the
2 House Judiciary Committee --

3 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: So
4 we got a couple more -- is it going
5 to be successful out of the Senate,
6 you think?

7 MS. BRICKMAN: I would
8 like to think so. We have put
9 together a diverse group of
10 stakeholders from across the state
11 from the AARP to the --

12 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: It
13 sounds like it will solve half, if
14 not the majority, of our problems
15 if it passes.

16 MS. BRICKMAN: I don't
17 think we have numbers about how
18 much of the problem we think it's
19 going to solve, but we think it's
20 going to be a very effective tool
21 to use for low and moderate-sized
22 estates. But that is going
23 forward. It's not going to
24 solve -- it's a deed that you would

1 sign now so that it would help
2 going forward, but it wouldn't help
3 any of the currently existing
4 tangled titles.

5 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

6 Okay. Thank you.

7 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

8 RICHARDSON: All right. Well,
9 thank you all so much.

10 Seeing no additional
11 questions for this panel -- you
12 said, Councilman -- okay. Seeing
13 no additional questions for this
14 panel, we thank you all for all the
15 great work that you've been doing
16 and we look forward to our
17 continued partnership and
18 collaboration. Have a wonderful
19 day. Thank you.

20 If the Clerk could
21 please call Panel 3. And we'll ask
22 that as you approach the witness
23 table, please state your name for
24 the record, proceed with an

1 abbreviated version of your
2 testimony so that we can get to the
3 last bill and resolution. Thank
4 you.

5 THE CLERK: Charlotte
6 Bradley, Katie McGrath and Amanda
7 Colon Smith, please approach.

8 (Witnesses approached
9 witness table.)

10 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE
11 RICHARDSON: Thank you very much
12 for your presence and for your
13 patience. Please state your name
14 for the record and proceed with an
15 abbreviated version of your
16 testimony. Thank you.

17 MS. BRADLEY: Good
18 afternoon, Chairwoman Gilmore
19 Richardson, Vice-Chairwoman Brooks
20 and members of the Law and
21 Government Committee. Our names
22 are Charlotte Bradley --

23 MS. McGRATH: And Katie
24 McGrath.

1 MS. BRADLEY: We are
2 both members of Greater
3 Philadelphia Association of
4 realtors known as GPAR. We thank
5 the Majority Leader for the
6 invitation to testify today with
7 regards to Resolution 260029. GPAR
8 represents more than 3400 licensed
9 real estate agents and industry
10 service providers throughout
11 Philadelphia.

12 Realtors see the
13 negative impact of tangled titles
14 every day. These are not rare
15 legal issues. They are widespread
16 barriers that prevent families from
17 fully owning, protecting and
18 sustaining and ultimately
19 benefiting from homeownership.
20 When a title is tangled, a property
21 often cannot be sold, transferred,
22 refinanced or properly insured,
23 leaving long-time residents or
24 their heirs stuck in legal limbo,

1 even if they have lived in and
2 cared for the home for decades.

3 As the Pew Charitable
4 Trust reported in 2021, more than
5 10,000 tangled title cases were
6 unresolved and the true number is
7 likely higher. As cited in the
8 resolution, Philly Stat 360
9 reported that only 2769 of these
10 cases were resolved from 2022 to
11 2024. Over \$1.1 billion in
12 Philadelphia property is affected,
13 concentrated in predominantly Black
14 and Brown neighborhoods that have
15 also seen steep increases in
16 property values.

17 Rising values should
18 help families build generational
19 wealth. Instead, without a clear
20 title, many are locked out of that
21 opportunity and face greater risk
22 of deed fraud, displacement and
23 predatory practices, not to mention
24 the added cost of remedying the

1 issue. Tangled titles also block
2 access to critical resources.
3 Homeowners without clear titles may
4 be denied homeowner insurance and
5 often ineligible for tax relief,
6 repair grants and utility
7 assistance.

8 We regularly see homes
9 that need repairs to remain safe
10 and to sustain homeownership, but
11 families are barred from accessing
12 help because of the unresolved
13 title issues. The process of
14 fixing the tangled title is
15 complex, time-consuming and
16 expensive. Pew estimates that
17 legal costs average more than
18 \$9,000, which is an impossible
19 amount for many seniors and heirs
20 and low-income households.

21 The process is not only
22 costly, it is convoluted, often
23 involving multiple offices,
24 including the Register of Wills,

1 Orphans' Court, Department of
2 Records and the Department of
3 Revenue, for residents already
4 dealing with grief or financial
5 hardship. This system can be
6 overwhelming.

7 MS. McGRATH: That's why
8 this hearing and the solutions that
9 can follow are so important: As
10 professionals who represent
11 homebuyers and sellers every day,
12 we urge the city to consider
13 stronger interagency coordination.
14 I'm going to abbreviate this for
15 you. Expanded funding for the
16 Tangled Title Fund and legal
17 services, proactive outreach and
18 education, data sharing and
19 tracking and prevention strategies,
20 including public education around
21 estate planning and simple will
22 preparation to reduce future
23 tangled titles.

24 Clear titles are the

1 foundation of stable homeownership
2 and a healthy housing market.
3 Addressing this crisis is essential
4 to preserving generational wealth,
5 preventing displacement and keeping
6 Philadelphia families in their
7 homes. GPAR strongly supports this
8 resolution and stands ready to be
9 partners in solutions. Thank you
10 all for welcoming us today.

11 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

12 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
13 very much for your testimony.

14 Please state your name
15 for the record and proceed.

16 MS. COLON-SMITH: Hello.
17 Amanda Colon-Smith. Good
18 afternoon, Chairperson Gilmore
19 Richardson and members of the
20 committee. Thank you for the
21 opportunity to testify today. My
22 name is Amanda Colon-Smith and I'm
23 an officer at the Pew Charitable
24 Trust Philadelphia Research and

1 Policy Initiative.

2 At Pew, we conduct
3 non-partisan, independent research
4 and engage with policymakers and
5 civic partners to address important
6 challenges. Today I'd like to read
7 a summary of the testimony we have
8 already submitted to the committee.

9 In August 2021, Pew released a
10 detailed report on tangled titles,
11 which is available on our website.
12 Our key research findings, in
13 addition a chart of tangled titles
14 by Council District are included in
15 the submitted testimony.

16 Pew has found at least
17 10,000 Philadelphia households were
18 impacted by tangled titles.
19 Collectively, the affected homes
20 are valued at more than \$1.1
21 billion, a significant amount of
22 family wealth potentially at risk.
23 We also examined where tangled
24 titles are found and saw that they

1 affect some neighborhoods more than
2 others. The incidence is highest
3 in parts of North, Upper North,
4 West and Southwest Philadelphia,
5 areas that account for more than
6 half of the city's tangled titles,
7 but only a third of all residential
8 properties.

9 In recent years, the
10 City of Philadelphia, along with
11 the legal services community,
12 launched the Tangled Title Fund,
13 developed legislation to engage
14 funeral homes and education and
15 outreach, and actively promoted
16 estate planning and the creation of
17 more wills to try to prevent future
18 tangles from being created.

19 This collective effort
20 has been noted by many communities
21 around the country. Pew
22 specifically has received direct
23 inquiries from cities and states
24 like Boston, Cincinnati, Detroit

1 and Maryland, who all want to
2 understand and replicate Pew's
3 methodology to quantify this issue
4 in their own communities. Many
5 have also reached out, not just
6 about the data, but to also better
7 understand the interventions taken
8 by the city.

9 Pew has directly heard
10 from organizations like Neighbor
11 Works America, Fannie Mae and LISC,
12 who want to spotlight the many
13 local programs and efforts
14 happening in Philadelphia. Pew is
15 continuing to monitor this
16 important issue and we are
17 carefully examining future areas
18 where we may be able to add value.
19 We acknowledge that there are so
20 many great organizations already
21 engaged in this work. Thank you to
22 the committee for the opportunity
23 to share our research and recent
24 updates on this important issue.

1 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

2 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
3 very much for your work. Thank you
4 to GPAR because we know you all
5 probably see many clients that are
6 struggling with this issue and we
7 appreciate the feedback that you
8 stated in your testimony.

9 You gave five specific
10 points on how we as a city can do a
11 better job relative to continued
12 interagency cooperation and
13 coordination, expanding the Tangled
14 Title Fund, which we talked about
15 in the last panel, and continue
16 proactive outreach and education
17 data sharing, which is what we have
18 displayed today based on the
19 results from Philly Stat 360
20 relative to how we're doing on sort
21 of resolving cases and then
22 additional prevention strategies,
23 which is what we're continuing to
24 work on, not only with Commissioner

1 Leonard and his team, but with all
2 of our agencies and our partners
3 and even through the funding with
4 the H.O.M.E. Plan.

5 So I just wanted to
6 thank you all for that and also
7 uplift the work of Pew, because I
8 thank you all for doing that
9 report. Really that report was a
10 key piece, missing piece of the
11 puzzle for so many of us who have
12 been working on this issue. And
13 once that report came out, it
14 really shined a light on this issue
15 in a way that I think helped folks
16 to understand just how deep of an
17 issue it is here in the city of
18 Philadelphia, but also who it's
19 impacting the most.

20 And it was a
21 disproportionate amount of Black
22 and Brown Philadelphians who have
23 been impacted by this issue, which
24 is also what we have displayed on

1 the chart there. And it's
2 something that we want to continue
3 to address because we know that the
4 quickest way to wealth is through
5 homeownership. And so, we want to
6 continue to help those individuals.
7 So I just thank you.

8 I remember meeting you
9 previously. I think we were on the
10 panel with one of the national
11 groups together who came to learn
12 more about the work that we're
13 doing here in Philadelphia on this
14 issue. So we thank you very much
15 and to the entire team at Pew. And
16 at some point, we would love an
17 updated report so that we can
18 continue to report out the work
19 that's happening across the city on
20 this issue. So thank you all so
21 much.

22 Do we have any questions
23 for this panel?

24 (No response.)

1 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

2 RICHARDSON: All right. Well,
3 seeing none, we thank you very much
4 for joining us and we appreciate
5 your patience. Thank you very,
6 very much.

7 Will the Clerk please
8 call the panel -- prior to doing
9 that, are there any further
10 witnesses who would like to testify
11 on Resolution No. 260029?

12 Please approach the
13 witness table. State your name for
14 the record.

15 (Witnesses approached
16 witness table.)

17 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

18 RICHARDSON: Thank you very much
19 for being here. Please state your
20 name for the record and proceed
21 with an abbreviated version of your
22 testimony. Thank you.

23 MS. BERKMAN: Thank you,
24 Councilmember. I'm Judy Berkman.

1 We have a long history,
2 Councilmember. I'm of counsel at
3 Regional Housing Legal Services. I
4 came to observe today, but I wanted
5 to add a little history because you
6 asked about the original funding of
7 the Tangled Title Fund. In 1997
8 when the city was going to sell tax
9 liens, I observed at the Community
10 Legal Services office somebody
11 saying -- that was when people --
12 there was a time when people could
13 come in and pay their real estate
14 taxes and interest and penalty
15 would be exempt or excluded. And
16 people were anxious to do that.

17 They had old real estate
18 tax liens, but I observed at a CLS
19 office somebody who was not a
20 tenant and it wasn't a mortgage
21 foreclosure and they were sent
22 away. And I had been at Community
23 Legal Services in South Philly in
24 the 1970s and I had resolved a lot

1 of what has become known as tangled
2 titles, so I knew that in
3 Pennsylvania title passes at death.
4 So people own their homes, but they
5 don't have their deeds in their
6 names.

7 So as a result of the
8 city tax lien program, I created
9 the Tangled Title Program. I named
10 it and I was aware of the original
11 funding of it. And since no one
12 has really defined it, I would like
13 to briefly define tangled title, as
14 I created the program back in the
15 day. So there are three kinds.

16 One kind is the most
17 typical kind, and it's that you
18 have the right -- you have title,
19 but your name is not on the deed.
20 And that's the typical situation
21 where a family member has died.
22 The second kind is unfortunately,
23 very hard to resolve. Some people
24 meaning to do estate planning

1 through deed changes, they add
2 somebody's name to the deed and
3 then the relationship sours for
4 some reason or they change their
5 mind. And so, the second kind is
6 someone else's name is on the deed,
7 but you want to get that person's
8 name off the deed and it's very
9 difficult and challenging.

10 When I used to do a lot
11 of research at senior centers,
12 there were a lot of people who had
13 done this. And then the family
14 member's situation changed and they
15 were really upset. It interfered
16 with them getting all the benefits
17 they could get if they owned it
18 solely in their name, and they were
19 really upset that someone else's
20 name was on the deed.

21 And then the third kind
22 is pretty easy to resolve, but it
23 sometimes complicates the problem.
24 And I call it, there may be garbage

1 on the deed. It may be an old
2 consumer discount company debt and
3 they went out of business or they
4 changed their name or someone sold
5 it to you, sold the house to you
6 and the original seller took the
7 purchase money mortgage back and
8 it's never been paid off and they
9 never satisfied it. So those are
10 the three kinds of tangled title
11 that I defined.

12 And then just very
13 briefly, because I know you're in a
14 hurry to move on with your
15 afternoon, about the funding of the
16 Tangled Title Program. So I named
17 the program and created it. HUD
18 had a program called Partners in
19 Homeownership. And I'm not sure
20 where the funding came, but in
21 2001, and it happened right after
22 911, we had a Home SMART Program,
23 and the SMART was Start Managing
24 Assets, Repairs and Title. And we

1 were doing Train the Trainers, and
2 then we were hoping to reach out
3 through the city to do training.
4 And then really the only legacy of
5 that, that was all preventive or
6 forward-looking, but the title part
7 was in a way retroactive that
8 people would -- we would try to
9 resolve tangled title problems.

10 And so, the only legacy
11 of that prevention program was the
12 Tangled Title Program. So I sort
13 of operated it informally through
14 Regional Housing Legal Services.
15 And the first five tangled titles
16 we resolved I think was in 2001 or
17 2002. We had a grant through the
18 Philadelphia Corporation for the
19 Aging from the Dolfinger-McMahon
20 Foundation. And it was \$5,000, and
21 we resolved five people's tangled
22 title for \$1000 each, and it was
23 for seniors.

24 But really, I did a

1 survey and people at the time felt
2 this was a problem that only
3 seniors had, but really it's a
4 legacy program. If a senior
5 doesn't have a will, then it really
6 is for everyone, not just seniors.
7 So we sort of proved through having
8 a survey that it was a wider
9 problem.

10 And then the first year
11 the city funded the program I think
12 was in 2002. It might have been
13 2003. And it was a total of
14 \$35,000. And \$25,000 was from
15 federal money, and that was to
16 administer and operate the program.
17 And 10,000 was from city general
18 funds for the Tangled Title Fund
19 itself, which helped individuals.
20 And that was because at the time,
21 and still to this day, if federal
22 money comes in to help an
23 individual, you would have to do
24 lead-based paint assessments or

1 remediation if found, and they
2 didn't want the federal money to be
3 used to help the individuals. So
4 that's why the funds come from two
5 city sources.

6 But I don't want to take
7 more time today, but for the first
8 several years of the Tangled Title
9 Program all the information about
10 how many people were helped and
11 what the funding was from the city,
12 so I can provide that if you give
13 me a deadline and I'm happy to do
14 that.

15 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

16 RICHARDSON: Well, we thank you
17 very much for your impromptu
18 testimony, but also for you being
19 here today. If you could please
20 provide those documents to me. As
21 the Chair of the Committee, I will
22 disseminate that to the entire Law
23 and Government Committee.

24 And if you don't mind, I

1 have to say this. The reason why I
2 was in tears when I realized -- I
3 heard the name Judy Berkman. I
4 know the name, but I didn't see.
5 You can't really see very well in
6 the gallery. I need glasses. But
7 this is a full circle moment for
8 me. I came to this work because my
9 parents passed away and left us
10 with tangled titles. But Judy
11 Berkman, Judy Berkman is the
12 attorney -- she was my adoption
13 attorney.

14 Judy Berkman was my
15 adoption attorney. I was adopted
16 from birth and she was the attorney
17 who worked with my parents to adopt
18 me from birth. And when my parents
19 passed away, I found all their
20 legal paperwork and the attorney
21 they worked with and I researched
22 those individuals, and I recently
23 found Judy Berkman to say thank
24 you. And we met on the side of the

1 road on Broad Street and I gave her
2 flowers to say thank you. So thank
3 you for being here today.

4 (Applause.)

5 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

6 RICHARDSON: Thank you, Judy
7 Berkman, for working with my
8 parents. It was because of you
9 that I had the best life. It's
10 because of you that I sit here,
11 because my parents weren't wealthy.
12 They didn't have much. I found
13 even notes where my mom was on
14 payment plans to pay you and you
15 worked with them.

16 MS. BERKMAN: I did.

17 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

18 RICHARDSON: I thank God for this
19 opportunity to say thank you.

20 MS. BERKMAN: Thank you.
21 Thank you so much.

22 (Applause.)

23 MS. BERKMAN: I'd like
24 to add that it was an honor to know

1 your parents. I think it was
2 Lorraine and James, and we had a
3 mutual acquaintance and I was very
4 happy to help with your adoption,
5 but also your sister's, if I may
6 add. So, yeah, it's an honor.

7 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

8 RICHARDSON: Thank you so much.
9 And she still remembers that 42
10 years later. So thank you. Thank
11 you so much.

12 All right. So we'll now
13 move forward. Thank you very, very
14 much. But I'm so thankful to God
15 that I had the opportunity to do
16 that. Thank you. So now, we'll
17 proceed with our next bill and
18 resolution.

19 Will the Clerk please
20 call the panel -- before we
21 recognize the first panel, I'll
22 recognize my colleague
23 Councilmember Gauthier, who's the
24 sponsor of the next bill that we'll

1 hear, Bill No. 251098 and
2 Resolution No. 251108.

3 COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

4 Thank you so much, Majority Leader.
5 And that was such a beautiful
6 moment, and maybe fitting because
7 this next bill is about making sure
8 that every child has the type of
9 love and support you are able to
10 find.

11 Thank you so much,
12 Majority Leader Gilmore Richardson
13 and the rest of the members of the
14 Law and Government Committee, for
15 considering the Charter change to
16 make the Office of the Youth
17 Ombudsperson permanent. The
18 mission of the Office of the Youth
19 Ombudsperson is to promote the
20 health, welfare, education, safety,
21 well-being and reentry of
22 Philadelphia youth placed in
23 juvenile justice, child welfare or
24 behavioral health residential care

1 facilities.

2 One question you might
3 be asking is, if there is already a
4 process set up by the Pennsylvania
5 Department of Human Services where
6 the state inspects and licenses
7 facilities, why would we need a
8 watchdog on the local level? My
9 answer is that no one is going to
10 care about our kids as much as we
11 care about our kids.

12 A Children's Rights and
13 Education Law Center study found
14 that between May 2010 and May 2018,
15 children in Pennsylvania
16 residential facilities were
17 physically maltreated, 156 times,
18 114 times by staff, exposed to
19 inappropriate sexual contact 73
20 times, 39 times by staff, and
21 suffered at least 43 incidents of
22 verbal maltreatment by staff.

23 The report revealed that
24 44% of the facilities reviewed had

1 repeated violations of physical or
2 sexual maltreatment of children.
3 It is not surprising that abuse
4 persists, when in many cases
5 juvenile justice placements require
6 young people to report abuse to the
7 same staff at the same placement
8 facility which has been abusing
9 them. How can young people
10 possibly trust that process.

11 At the same time when
12 complaints are filed, they are
13 rarely believed. An Inquirer
14 review of the lawsuits filed
15 against placements in the last 15
16 years found that state inspectors
17 logged 7000 allegations of abuse
18 made with the state in the last
19 decade, most of which were not
20 believed. The inspectors only
21 substantiated 4% of those claims.

22 Contrast that with the
23 thoughtful approach of the Office
24 of the Youth Ombudsperson. They

1 develop materials and educate young
2 people about their rights so young
3 people know what they deserve.

4 They build trusting relationships
5 with young people and act as an
6 independent entity to receive
7 complaints. At the same time, they
8 review facility policies and data
9 to ensure that systems and policies
10 set up staff and young people for
11 success. And of course, they
12 contact appropriate authorities to
13 address urgent safety concerns.

14 However, juvenile
15 justice is only one of the systems
16 that the Office of the Youth
17 Ombudsperson monitors. They also
18 work in group foster homes and
19 inpatient psychiatric facilities
20 that house young people. To share
21 some anecdotes that I heard in my
22 time developing legislation about
23 young people in these systems, I
24 heard reports that Muslim youth are

1 not able to wear religiously-
2 appropriate garb and are
3 occasionally served haram
4 ingredients such as pork.

5 I heard stories of young
6 people who do not speak English,
7 having to rely on Google Translate
8 to communicate their needs,
9 including highly-sensitive issues
10 related to health care because the
11 facility is not complying with the
12 requirement to provide translation
13 services. And the witnesses we
14 will hear from today will share
15 more about the way that the Office
16 of the Youth Ombudsperson has been
17 working across all three systems.

18 The data and the stories
19 add up to one conclusion: We need
20 an office dedicated to moderate
21 monitoring the conditions in all
22 youth congregate care facilities.
23 We need the Office of the Youth
24 Ombudsperson and we need it

1 permanently. Finally, I want to
2 spend a few minutes just laying out
3 what this legislation is going to
4 do.

5 The Office of the Youth
6 Ombudsperson was created by
7 Executive Order No. 522 under the
8 Kenney administration. The Office
9 of the Youth Ombudsperson has been
10 operating since April 2023 and has
11 already accomplished much,
12 including surveying and training
13 hundreds of youth and parents on
14 their rights, making over 50 visits
15 to facilities all over
16 Pennsylvania, including inspecting
17 several foster group homes as well
18 as publishing several policy
19 recommendations and findings.

20 The legislation we are
21 considering today takes the
22 language of the Executive Order and
23 translates it to the City Charter.
24 Because this office has already

1 been operating for three years, the
2 legislation does not change their
3 duties, powers or responsibilities.
4 It simply creates predictability.
5 It makes it easier for an existing,
6 effective city office to keep doing
7 the great work that they have been
8 doing.

9 The young people in
10 congregate care facilities are
11 Philadelphia's most vulnerable
12 children. We owe them a thorough,
13 effective process for evaluating
14 the quality of care we are
15 providing. And the Youth
16 Ombudsperson's Office is a critical
17 part of meeting that obligation.

18 Thank you to Majority
19 Leader Katherine Gilmore Richardson
20 and members of the Law and
21 Government committee for your
22 consideration.

23 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

24 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you

1 so much, Councilmember Gauthier.

2 Thank you for Resolution No. 251108
3 and Bill No. 251098.

4 Will the Clerk please
5 call the first panel we have to
6 testify.

7 THE CLERK: Michelle
8 Lucarelli Beltran of Los Angeles
9 County; Donna Cooper, Children's
10 First; and Keisha Hudson of
11 Defender Association of
12 Philadelphia.

13 (Witnesses approached
14 witness table.)

15 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE
16 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
17 very, very much. First, I'd like
18 to offer my sincere gratitude and
19 appreciation to Michelle and to her
20 team for joining us here in
21 Philadelphia. We're both the city
22 and the county, but we appreciate
23 you being here. We certainly
24 appreciate your patience. We know

1 that you have lots of work to do in
2 Los Angeles, California, but we
3 appreciate you being here. So you
4 can please state your name for the
5 record and proceed with your
6 testimony.

7 MS. LUCARELLI-BELTRAN:

8 Absolutely. Good morning,
9 everyone, and thank you for having
10 me today. My name is Michelle
11 Lucarelli-Beltran. Do you need me
12 to spell it for the record or you
13 see it on the screen?

14 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

15 RICHARDSON: We have it here as
16 part of our agenda and on the
17 witness list. Thank you very, very
18 much.

19 MS. LUCARELLI-BELTRAN:

20 Okay. Great. So I'm the Los
21 Angeles County Ombudsperson for
22 Youth and Congregate Care Settings.
23 Our office was originally
24 established by our Los Angeles

1 County Board of Supervisors in 1998
2 after a grand jury report made
3 findings and recommendations about
4 the experiences of youth in foster
5 care placed in group homes.

6 Since inception, our
7 office has been housed in the
8 Auditor Controller, an order to
9 operate independently from the
10 Department of Children and Family
11 Services. In addition, our office
12 was recently expanded by our Board
13 to also have oversight over youth
14 in transitional housing settings,
15 and we are actively working to
16 expand and serve that population of
17 youth in foster care as well.

18 In addition to serving
19 as the Ombudsperson, I also sit on
20 the Board of Directors for the
21 United States Ombudsman Association
22 or USOA. As such, I find it
23 pertinent to share with you all the
24 pillars of our ombuds profession of

1 independence, confidentiality, a
2 credible review process and
3 impartiality. While there are many
4 general ombuds offices, most, if
5 not all of our child welfare ombuds
6 offices, are also charged with
7 being advocates. The work of being
8 an ombudsperson and advocate for
9 youth in foster care, especially
10 those placed in facilities, is
11 crucial, as many are often not
12 believed when they share their
13 experiences with others.

14 Our office and Tracy's
15 take the position of believing
16 youth and following up on their
17 concerns to improve their
18 experiences in care. Recently
19 during an interview, I was asked
20 what offices across the country we
21 and other child welfare ombuds look
22 to as strong examples of excellent
23 ombuds practice. I shared about a
24 couple of our longstanding offices

1 and then shifted to share that
2 there were a couple of newer ones
3 who had only been around two to
4 three years, but that I greatly
5 admire and look to in this work.
6 Tracy and her staff are one of
7 those offices. They have burst
8 into the ombuds world as fierce
9 advocates for youth.

10 I am always excited to
11 partner and collaborate with her,
12 as we are the only offices
13 specifically serving youth at the
14 local level and placed in
15 facilities. We are uniquely
16 situated as local government ombuds
17 with jurisdiction over youth
18 governed by state law. However,
19 this unique position is critical in
20 a boots-on-the-ground approach to
21 serving the youth. Both of our
22 offices are acutely aware of the
23 issues impacting youth in our
24 jurisdictions because we are

1 regularly in person with them at
2 their placements and other events
3 as well as in meetings with our
4 local partners.

5 She and I are also
6 active participants in a subgroup
7 of ombuds who visit with youth in
8 person, who come together to
9 discuss strategies and barriers for
10 conducting such outreach. While in
11 Philadelphia and Los Angeles, it
12 may seem like regular practice that
13 the ombuds and their staff are
14 visiting placement sites in person,
15 but our offices are actually in the
16 minority, as very few other offices
17 across the country conduct such
18 visits. It is vital to meet youth
19 where they're at, and
20 Philadelphia's office does just
21 that.

22 In fact, I admire
23 Tracy's work so much that when I
24 learned of a vacancy on our USOA

1 Board recently, I informed her that
2 I would like to nominate her to the
3 position. I also want to share
4 that in California we have a state
5 ombuds in addition to many local
6 jurisdiction ombuds. And while our
7 state ombuds serves all youth in
8 care and our offices collaborate
9 regularly, we have the local level
10 knowledge and partnerships to serve
11 youth in Los Angeles County that is
12 vital to resolving the issues
13 impacting them.

14 This is true of
15 Philadelphia's youth ombudsperson
16 as well. And no matter if
17 Pennsylvania ever establishes a
18 statewide child welfare
19 ombudsperson, the value of
20 Philadelphia's local-level youth
21 ombudsperson is irreplaceable.
22 This work is vital and also often
23 underfunded and resourced.

24 While I know budgets

1 across the country are tight, I
2 urge you to appropriately fund and
3 staff your Philadelphia office so
4 that it can fully operationalize
5 its purpose and service to youth.
6 Our office only has three full-time
7 permanent staff to do this work
8 without the current expansion I
9 mentioned above.

10 Our office's current
11 budget of approximately 1.3 million
12 is almost entirely staffing costs,
13 and our costs would be even higher
14 if we did not utilize the foster
15 youth Bill of Rights materials
16 printed by our state ombuds office
17 who is charged to do so by state
18 law. It is for these reasons that
19 I urge you all to memorialize the
20 permanency of Philadelphia's youth
21 ombuds office. They are a vital
22 resource to youth and care and to
23 ensuring improved experiences for
24 them.

1 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

2 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
3 very, very much for your testimony.
4 I want to pause there for a moment
5 and recognize any colleagues for
6 questions for Michelle?

7 (No response.)

8 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

9 RICHARDSON: Okay. Any questions
10 for this witness?

11 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

12 Hi. I just want to say thank you
13 for your work. Just want to say I
14 appreciate you and what you're
15 doing in Los Angeles. And just one
16 quick question, Chair. Thank you.
17 I wanted to ask -- and that was my
18 fault. I shouldn't have waited.

19 But I wanted to ask you
20 is there a way -- when you offer
21 solutions to Los Angeles County,
22 are they listening? Are things
23 changing, because otherwise you're
24 just going to be advocating? So

1 are they listening? Are things
2 changing where you're offering
3 solutions?

4 MS. LUCARELLI-BELTRAN:

5 Yes. Actually, we work really
6 closely with our Board of
7 Supervisors. And I'll just say for
8 context, LA County's child welfare
9 system is the largest in the
10 country so change takes time. And
11 so, there are some things that
12 we're able to get changed very
13 quickly. For instance, policy
14 updates, the things in writing,
15 requirements and whatnot and then
16 the practice change and
17 accountability mechanisms are what
18 follow, and we have seen movement
19 in that as well.

20 So for instance, our
21 office conducted a survey with
22 youth. They weren't even receiving
23 their foster youth Bill of Rights,
24 which is required by law in

1 California, but DTFS's policy was
2 outdated, not even directing their
3 staff to comply with the law. So
4 we got their policy updated and
5 then we also got them to virtually
6 do an intro training for all their
7 staff that hadn't even been
8 required to train on the rights.
9 And now, we'll be implementing with
10 a youth co-trainer an inperson
11 all-day training on how to have
12 these developmentally appropriate
13 conversations with youth about
14 their rights.

15 So that's just one
16 example of how we were able to
17 point out an issue that we came
18 across, make recommendations and
19 then have movement. Sometimes DTFS
20 takes action on their own when we
21 point things out, and other times
22 we've had to lean on partners or
23 our Board of Supervisors to help
24 move that needle forward. But

1 there's that and other examples
2 that I can share, but I know we're
3 already behind on time in how we're
4 able to move things forward.

5 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

6 Thank you, Chairman -- Chairwoman.

7 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

8 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
9 very much, Councilmember Phillips.

10 Seeing no additional
11 questions for this witness,
12 Michelle, we thank you very much
13 for joining us all the way from
14 Los Angeles County. We thank you
15 for the work that you're doing with
16 your youth in your city and in your
17 county. Thank you so much.

18 MS. LUCARELLI-BELTRAN:

19 Yes. Thank you all so much.

20 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

21 RICHARDSON: Excellent. Thank you
22 so much. We will now hear from the
23 next witnesses who have already
24 approached the witness table and

1 Donna Cooper, Executive Director of
2 Children First, who Councilman
3 Phillips just honored with a
4 resolution relative to your
5 upcoming retirement. Thank you
6 very much, Councilmember Landau.
7 Kudos and congratulations to you.
8 And also, Keisha Hudson, Chief
9 Defender from the Defenders
10 Association of Philadelphia.

11 State your names for the
12 record and proceed with your
13 testimony.

14 MS. COOPER: Thank you.
15 I'm Donna Cooper. I'm the
16 Executive Director of Children
17 First. And first of all, I want to
18 say the tangled title hearing was
19 spectacular and the work is
20 amazing, and then the full circle
21 moment just makes everything so
22 real and it makes this town a small
23 town where we can work together to
24 get things done. So that was very

1 indicative. I was very educated by
2 it.

3 And also, I just want to
4 say to Councilwoman Gauthier, I'm
5 so sorry, I can see your hand is
6 killing you and that you're still
7 here to fight to make sure we
8 protect our children is important.
9 You know, we're having this hearing
10 today in the Law and Government
11 Committee at a time where America
12 is really questioning about whether
13 we actually believe victims.

14 The Epstein files really
15 bring to light a breakdown in our
16 systems where left alone in normal
17 circumstances, agencies and law
18 enforcement without additional
19 layers of protection seem to be
20 having a difficult time doing their
21 job. And I think that the
22 Councilwoman's opening laid out the
23 case for this.

24 In your prior discussion

1 on tangled title, there was a
2 discussion about the role of the
3 state and whether state laws could
4 be passed to help you, and there's
5 great movement to get something out
6 of the House. I will tell you that
7 if we in Philadelphia wait for the
8 Pennsylvania legislature to act on
9 an ombudsperson for children, we
10 will be waiting until our
11 grandchildren grow up.

12 For 30 years, people
13 have been trying to get the state
14 to enact an ombudsperson for
15 children and we can't look to
16 Pennsylvania as their protection.
17 And in the last administration as
18 you know, as the Councilwoman
19 pointed out, an executive order
20 created the Ombuds Office. And I
21 know that you've received lots of
22 information about why that
23 happened. And now, it's time to
24 make that permanent, especially

1 since we know we can't rely on the
2 state to do that.

3 I want to tell you a
4 couple other facts in addition to
5 what the Councilwoman laid out,
6 which I thought, you know, need we
7 say more. Since 2024, 60 lawsuits
8 have been filed on behalf of over
9 67 children who were in residential
10 facilities in PA alleging physical
11 and sexual abuse. We know that one
12 Inquirer story exposed an incident
13 at which a teen was tackled and
14 head-butted by the staff of the
15 agency. And last November, another
16 agency was cited for a report of
17 abuse after a staff member shoved a
18 child's face in a table.

19 In this room in the
20 first hearings on this, children
21 from Delaware County came and
22 talked about when they were
23 thirsty, they were told by the
24 staff, go ahead and drink from the

1 toilet. So -- yeah. This stuff is
2 real and we depend on a dispersed
3 system of state agencies to protect
4 these children and they can't do a
5 good job, because they have limited
6 resources and because the system is
7 not independent. Who the children
8 report abuse to are the people in
9 the agencies that are abusing them.

10 If they get to the state
11 and report it, the state agency
12 staff are going to investigate the
13 same people they've been working
14 with for the last 20 years. And
15 so, when we think about Watch Tower
16 or the new Watch Tower, which was
17 Glen Mills, what was exposed was
18 that the state staff who were
19 responding to the incidents of
20 abuse of children in Philadelphia
21 were going down and talking with
22 people that they had collegial
23 relationships for years. We got
24 into this work because being

1 institutionalized affects Black and
2 Hispanic children more than other
3 kids.

4 84% of the kids from
5 Philly in child welfare congregate
6 care agencies and 95% of the kids
7 sent to jails or prisons for
8 juvenile justice offenses are Black
9 or Hispanic. This is happening to
10 our children of color, and we're so
11 proud that Philadelphia has the
12 Office of Youth Ombudsperson, and
13 what great work we're doing as
14 described.

15 And to the question that
16 you asked, Councilman, about do
17 things change, in fact -- and
18 certainly Tracy can speak to this
19 directly -- our office works in
20 partnership with the City
21 Department of Human Services, the
22 Office of Youth Ombudsperson. And
23 what they found after evaluating
24 complaints from kids at the

1 juvenile detention center, the
2 PJJSC were about seclusion, and you
3 remember the articles about
4 seclusion.

5 And the Department of
6 Ombudsperson wrote a report for the
7 department. The department
8 reviewed that and put an action
9 plan together. That's possible
10 because we're all local and we have
11 internal accountability here. And
12 if people don't respond to each
13 other, just as was explained in
14 Los Angeles, we're small enough
15 that we can make the machinations
16 work.

17 And so, we really do
18 need and look to you at City
19 Council to support the bill, to
20 make an Office of Youth
21 Ombudsperson permanent in the
22 Charter so that it's independent
23 from political changes like one
24 mayor to another, it's trusted and

1 accessible and continuously
2 available to youth and families.
3 It's an early identification system
4 of systemic problems before they
5 escalate three complaints in a
6 facility. Hey, we got a problem,
7 bring it right up to the attention
8 of CBH, Department of Behavioral
9 Health and Intellectual
10 Disabilities or Philadelphia DHS
11 and greater accountability for
12 publicly-funded placements.

13 We're very pleased that
14 the Department of Human Services
15 sees the benefit of this office.
16 We're grateful for your time today
17 and we will do all we can to help
18 you put this on the Charter and
19 have it passed with a very strong
20 vote of the citizens. Thank you.

21 CHIEF DEFENDER HUDSON:
22 Good afternoon. My name is Keisha
23 Hudson, Chief Defender at the
24 Defender Association of

1 Philadelphia. I would like to
2 thank Councilmember Gauthier, Madam
3 Chair Gilmore Richardson, and
4 members of the Committee on Law and
5 Government for inviting me to speak
6 today on Resolution 251108,
7 providing for an amendment to the
8 Philadelphia Home Rule Charter to
9 create an Office of the Youth
10 Ombudsperson.

11 As you know, our office
12 represents kids in delinquency and
13 dependency proceedings as well as
14 young people who are facing civil
15 commitment under the Mental Health
16 Procedures Act. Last year, what
17 this looked like in numbers was
18 that we represented 3567 individual
19 children in hearings. 88% of our
20 dependency clients and 95% of our
21 youth in delinquency are children
22 of color. And while we strive to
23 keep our youth safely in their
24 homes and with their families or

1 with kin, in their schools and
2 communities, it's our kids that are
3 filling placement beds that you
4 hear about.

5 And some of the children
6 are placed in facilities that are
7 far from home, out of state, as far
8 as Texas, and these places look
9 very, very different from the city
10 of Philadelphia. And more
11 importantly, they're staffed by
12 people who look very, very
13 different from the citizens of
14 Philadelphia.

15 It is from this
16 experience that I voice my strong
17 support for enshrining an Office of
18 the Youth Ombudspeople in the City
19 Charter. We work every day with
20 children who are navigating very
21 complex and opaque systems of care,
22 supervision and confinement. To be
23 clear, our representation in
24 dependency or delinquency does not

1 end when the child is placed
2 outside of the home.

3 Our representation
4 includes staying with the youth for
5 the entire case through review
6 hearings where judges assess the
7 necessity of their continued
8 placement and if their needs are
9 being met. Children frequently
10 impacted by profound and
11 distressing life events, often with
12 very complex needs, and their
13 families struggle to have their
14 concerns heard, access clear
15 information and ensure
16 accountability for child service
17 providers.

18 The experiences and
19 concerns of these young people and
20 their families are unique and
21 diverse and range from programming,
22 access to meals, to reports of
23 physical and sexual abuse. To be
24 clear, that is not a situation that

1 is unique to Philadelphia. It is
2 widespread systemic issues. There
3 have been state and federal
4 lawsuits that are continued to be
5 filed across the Commonwealth by
6 dozens of people alleging physical
7 and sexual abuse threats and
8 neglect across multiple youth
9 detention and residential
10 facilities.

11 The unfortunate reality
12 is that placing vulnerable youth in
13 residential facilities, often far
14 from their home, presents inherent
15 risks. Amending the Charter will
16 not be able to prevent every
17 incident. No system can. But what
18 it can do is reduce how often the
19 harm occurs, how long it goes
20 unnoticed and how many young people
21 are affected.

22 The independent Office
23 of the Youth Ombudspeople will
24 provide critical oversight and

1 advocacy for children and families
2 and assist in the ongoing
3 evaluation of the service delivery
4 system with an eye toward improving
5 outcomes for the children we serve.
6 By establishing clear authority for
7 investigation, oversight, access to
8 information and community
9 education, the resolution creates
10 an Office of the Youth Ombudspeople
11 that is equipped to surface
12 systemic problems and advocate
13 effectively for youth and families.

14 These duties go beyond
15 simple administrative functions,
16 rather they provide an independent,
17 accessible and accountable office
18 for children and families who will
19 feel powerless in systems that
20 impact their lives. Creating this
21 office means the city will have
22 enshrined an office that exists
23 only for the children we serve, one
24 that has independence to shine

1 light on systemic problems and has
2 access to decision-makers to
3 advocate for meaningful change.

4 Ultimately, a chartered
5 city agency like this strengthens
6 transparency, improves outcomes and
7 builds trust in public systems.

8 For these reasons, my office
9 strongly supports the creation of
10 an Office of the Youth Ombudspeople
11 in the City Charter. And I ask you
12 to support this resolution and I
13 thank you for taking this important
14 step in submitting this question to
15 the voters. Thank you again for
16 including the perspective of the
17 Defender Association of
18 Philadelphia.

19 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

20 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
21 both for your testimony and also
22 for your patience today, and that
23 goes for each of the panels that
24 we'll hear from on the next two

1 panels.

2 Are there any questions
3 for these witnesses?

4 (No response.)

5 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

6 RICHARDSON: Seeing none from the
7 committee, the Chair recognizes
8 Councilmember Gauthier.

9 COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

10 Thank you, Madam Chair.

11 This question is for
12 both of you. But first, thank you
13 for your testimony and your work.
14 You touched on this, but can you
15 expound in a little more detail on
16 how the quality of care and
17 services in congregate psychiatric
18 care settings and group foster
19 homes would benefit from or have
20 benefited from the Youth
21 Ombudsperson's Office?

22 CHIEF DEFENDER HUDSON:

23 I'm happy to answer that question.
24 I think I am often before you in

1 individual meetings and during
2 budget season to talk about
3 staffing and resources. So our
4 kids are placed all over, as I said
5 before, all over the Commonwealth,
6 and we simply do not have the
7 capacity of staffing to see them as
8 often as would be ideal to make
9 sure that we are finding out
10 exactly how their placement is
11 going.

12 We do see them very
13 often in preparation for the review
14 hearings that we have to do. Our
15 kids will express issues or
16 concerns again from everything
17 related to their care, how they're
18 being disciplined, their education
19 or lack thereof, programming or
20 lack thereof, to physical and
21 sexual abuse. We don't have the
22 capacity to investigate and elevate
23 those issues. And a lot of times,
24 those are issues that need to be

1 elevated in a civil context, and we
2 do not do civil impact litigation
3 in that vein.

4 So having the Office of
5 the Youth Ombudspeople is important
6 for not just our clients and our
7 youth, but also their families to
8 be able to elevate concerns.
9 Frequently our children may tell
10 their parents or a trusted kin who
11 visits them something that they may
12 not share with their lawyer, their
13 public defender or the social
14 worker.

15 And so, again having
16 families be educated and have
17 access to this independent agency
18 will ensure that every issue that's
19 been elevated, whether it's through
20 us, the Defenders, or through the
21 kids themselves or through
22 families, that there is an entity
23 that is able to actually take on
24 independent investigations. And we

1 look forward to continuing to work
2 with Tracy.

3 I wanted to just note
4 for the record again that the
5 process does need to be
6 confidential to protect our
7 clients, juvenile cases, as it
8 winds its way through the system.
9 But we really want to ensure that
10 Tracy and her team can hear the
11 concerns, protect the
12 confidentiality of the concerns,
13 but also see the issues
14 systemically to be able to do the
15 full investigation that they need
16 to do and do it more quickly, and
17 ensure again that justice and
18 accountability is brought forth.

19 MS. COOPER: Let me add
20 two specifics on that. So the
21 first thing is that when the state
22 is investigating a case of abuse in
23 a facility, to the extent that it's
24 gotten all the way up there, they

1 investigate your case and then they
2 investigate your case and your
3 case, and it could all be at the
4 same facility, but there are three
5 different people looking into
6 things and nobody's going, oh my,
7 what's happening at Glen Mills,
8 because there's nobody looking for
9 patterns.

10 And so, one of the
11 things that the office when it was
12 created and always talked about is
13 we need somebody looking at data
14 and understanding where
15 investigations are going on. So if
16 there are providers that the
17 Commonwealth or the city for its
18 sake, because it's paying these
19 providers, needs to know has a
20 pattern going on of complaints,
21 somebody's connecting the dots.
22 That's the first thing.

23 The second is that --
24 you're not going to believe this.

1 This is so crazy, but only
2 government could be this crazy,
3 right. So if I was placed in Glen
4 Mills and I was from Montgomery
5 County and I was abused, and maybe
6 somebody was placed from Bucks
7 County at Glen Mills and was
8 abused, Philadelphia County would
9 not know about that because a
10 Philadelphia County kid isn't in
11 the complaint chain and we could
12 still be sending children there.

13 And so, one of the
14 things that the Ombudsperson Office
15 can do, at least as it relates to
16 hearing about things from kids
17 because kids can call them
18 independently, they can say, I'm
19 scared, three people have been
20 raped here and the Ombuds Office
21 can call Philly DHS and say, hey,
22 I'm getting these calls. They
23 won't have gotten that information
24 from the state. Now that should be

1 changed. And of course, we're
2 trying to change that.

3 But the process by which
4 Philly DHS gets enough information
5 to know if there's a pattern and/or
6 to know if there's an emerging
7 problem is augmented by having the
8 office. I'll just add that to
9 possible. But I also think the
10 other thing is that the city pays
11 behavioral health providers, the
12 city pays congregate care
13 providers. It is not the city's
14 responsibility to license them and
15 ensure they're in compliance with
16 the law.

17 So in many ways -- I
18 mean, while Philadelphia DHS is
19 doing everything it can to make
20 sure children are being taken care
21 of, they are at the will of the
22 state. So this isn't, in my mind,
23 an added piece of protection for
24 the taxpayers and the citizens

1 because it's a second set of eyes
2 and ears that has different
3 analysis of the data, not in an
4 itemized case level.

5 COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

6 Thank you so much for your
7 testimony today and thanks to you
8 both for your partnership on this.

9 MS. COOPER: Thank you.

10 CHIEF DEFENDER HUDSON:

11 Thank you.

12 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

13 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
14 very, very much. We appreciate
15 both of you. Thank you so much.

16 Will the Clerk please
17 call the next panel to testify.

18 THE CLERK: Will Geneva
19 Williams, Jasmine Banks and Bree
20 Hood, please approach.

21 (Witnesses approached
22 witness table.)

23 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

24 RICHARDSON: Thank you for your

1 patience. Thank you for being
2 here. We appreciate you. Please
3 state your name for the record and
4 proceed with an abbreviated version
5 of your testimony.

6 MS. WILLIAMS: Good
7 afternoon.

8 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

9 RICHARDSON: Please speak right
10 into the mic for the stenographer.
11 Thank you so much.

12 MS. WILLIAMS: Okay.
13 Good afternoon. My name is Geneva
14 Williams. I am a parent advocate
15 and I'm glad to be here. Thank you
16 for the invitation. This seat is
17 not for short people.

18 MS. BANKS: Just
19 introducing yourself?

20 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

21 RICHARDSON: Pardon me. Yes, you
22 can state your name for the record
23 and proceed with your testimony.
24 You have testimony, correct,

1 Ms. Geneva?

2 MS. WILLIAMS: Yes.

3 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

4 RICHARDSON: That's what I thought.

5 Okay.

6 MS. WILLIAMS: I'm here
7 to say why I believe that the
8 Office of Ombudsman needs to be a
9 permanent fixture for the city of
10 Philadelphia --

11 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

12 RICHARDSON: Just state your name.

13 MS. WILLIAMS: Geneva
14 Williams.

15 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

16 RICHARDSON: Yeah. Thank you.

17 MS. WILLIAMS: The
18 reason why I'm here is to testify
19 because I'm a parent of a youth
20 that was placed in residential
21 care. She was placed in over 20
22 placements as far as Philadelphia
23 County and as far as Texas.
24 Because she has been placed in so

1 many different residential
2 treatments, I learned the language,
3 I learned the behaviors of going to
4 the JJC. I went there so many
5 times I could get call ahead and
6 get her a bed for where her
7 placement was going to be, so she
8 could be closer to me and I could
9 visit and take part in her care.

10 On one occasion while
11 she was in residential care, I got
12 a call from her saying that a staff
13 member called her out for a fight
14 and said, it's on right now. This
15 staff member attacked my child, had
16 a fight. I found out about it
17 three days later because they
18 revoked her phone privileges so she
19 could not contact me or anyone
20 else.

21 At that time I asked her
22 when she did call and tell me about
23 the fight, I said, well, did you
24 receive medical care? She said,

1 no. So I said, was it a report?
2 She said, no. So I further
3 contacted CBH and asked for her
4 medical records. And after a long
5 period of time, I received them to
6 find out that they redacted over
7 100 or more pages that was just
8 black lines, so it was no record of
9 the assault with anyone.

10 So that is the reason
11 why it's so important for this
12 office to exist, for the parents,
13 for the children and for it to
14 become permanent. Unfortunately,
15 my daughter went into the
16 residential care with attention
17 deficit high hyperactive disorder.
18 But when she was released, she had
19 another diagnosis, PTSD, and other
20 things that went on for the time
21 that she was in residential care.
22 She was in residential care
23 throughout the counties of
24 Philadelphia and as far away as

1 Texas. In being referred to
2 services, you never find out always
3 what the provider does for their
4 specialty.

5 When she got to Texas,
6 she found out that she was in a
7 facility for children who were
8 sexual predators. That was not her
9 diagnosis. So not only did she go
10 to placements that didn't cover her
11 diagnosis and didn't do her correct
12 care, I was always promised that my
13 daughter would be protected and she
14 would get the services that she
15 badly needed and that was a
16 failure. Thank you so much for
17 listening to my testimony today.

18 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

19 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
20 very much, Ms. Geneva. We were
21 locating the written version of
22 your testimony so that we can
23 continue to review that as a part
24 of this process.

1 Please state your name
2 for the record and proceed with
3 your testimony.

4 MS. BANKS: Yes. Good
5 afternoon, City Council. Well, my
6 name is Jasmine Banks. Good
7 afternoon, City Councilmembers,
8 fellow parents, youth and family
9 advocates. Thank you for this
10 opportunity to testify today and
11 special thanks to you,
12 Councilmember Gauthier, for
13 convening this hearing and to your
14 amazing staff and the staff of
15 Children's First for extending
16 their support behind the scenes.

17 Again, my name is
18 Jasmine Banks and I am a resident
19 of Philadelphia, 7th Council
20 District and the constituent of
21 Councilmember Quetcy Lozada. I'm
22 here to speak on the importance of
23 the Office of the Youth
24 Ombudsperson becoming permanent in

1 the Philadelphia City Charter. I
2 am a person who has raised 15
3 children, yes, 1-5, and I have
4 adopted five older sons, four the
5 first time and one the second time.

6 I have raised children
7 who live with many diagnoses,
8 including autism, intellectual
9 disability, bipolar, schizophrenia,
10 substance use disorder, conduct
11 disorder, pyromania or as they say,
12 fire-setting disorder, seizure
13 disorder, cerebral palsy, end stage
14 COPD and more. Although I am not a
15 birth parent and have never given
16 birth to a child, I have been in
17 nearly every youth-serving
18 institution, from child welfare,
19 juvenile detention centers, crisis
20 hospitals, group homes, psychiatric
21 residential treatment facilities,
22 youth shelters and even family
23 court.

24 My five adopted

1 children, not including the 10
2 other children I helped co-raise,
3 have lived in over 50, that's 5-0,
4 of birth family placements, placed
5 in facilities in Utah, Tennessee,
6 Virginia, the Carolinas, Upstate
7 Pennsylvania and in several nearby
8 counties and a few facilities that
9 have since closed down due to the
10 many atrocities that were going on
11 inside those facilities. So I know
12 all too well about the phenomenon
13 school to foster care, to prison,
14 to psychiatric hospitalization, to
15 youth shelters and even to
16 premature death, as two of my
17 adopted sons died prematurely and
18 unnecessarily to me.

19 Marginalized,
20 stigmatized and isolated families
21 like mine live in the shadows. We
22 are invisible to the masses.
23 However, we are in the multi-
24 thousands in Philadelphia County

1 alone. We are hiding in plain
2 sight and desperately need
3 oversight of the organizations we
4 are forced to endure.

5 During our limited time
6 here today, I'd like to share a
7 brief horror story, if I may. It
8 is in the record. It is about just
9 receiving an abrupt SOS-demanding
10 call that I pick my son up from his
11 behavior RTF, residential treatment
12 facility, as soon as possible
13 because the CBH, which is Community
14 Behavior Health insurance, was
15 ending. There was no mention
16 whether his symptoms had improved,
17 and certainly there was no
18 transition plan. But since the
19 insurance ran out, he had to go
20 somewhere.

21 So poor, naive mom
22 jumped up and ran to the front line
23 without any knowledge of what I was
24 doing, without any outside support

1 other than from loving, also
2 clueless, family. The encounter
3 was short like the ending of a
4 financial transaction. I was given
5 a few papers with no clear
6 instructions about next steps,
7 kissed and picked up my son,
8 retrieved his clothes, most of
9 which were missing, given a few
10 prescriptions, one of which was for
11 a psychotropic medication. I never
12 had any medication dispensing
13 training, but at least I knew that
14 this medication was very important.
15 It had to be filled right away.

16 However, I soon learned
17 in horror that my son's insurance
18 was cut off since he had left the
19 out-of-county RTF. And thus, the
20 30-day prescription could not be
21 filled nor could he receive his
22 much needed wraparound services
23 that he was receiving before going
24 to the RTF. That included

1 therapeutic staff support, mobile
2 therapy and behavior specialist,
3 although he was easily reinstated
4 back into his neighborhood school
5 but unfortunately without services.

6 So the long length of
7 time it took to get the insurance
8 reinstated simply would have been
9 just to call the Department of
10 Welfare and put it back on. No one
11 was able to do that.

12 Unfortunately, my son had returned
13 to an RTF, to another RTF. At that
14 time, at that RTF there was some
15 bullying that went unaddressed at
16 the facility and my son ended up
17 defending himself, but was referred
18 to the police, while nothing was
19 done to the person who continued to
20 harass and bully him.

21 He was subsequently
22 charged with assault and sent to
23 juvenile detention facility in a
24 nearby county. So therefore he

1 went from a psychiatric facility
2 into juvenile detention. He has
3 never recuperated or recovered from
4 that last RTF placement. He was
5 severely traumatized by many foster
6 care placements before meeting me
7 and then multiple mental health
8 placements after meeting me.
9 Unfortunately, the services were
10 never sufficient or on time to meet
11 his needs.

12 When my teenage son
13 endured this terrifying experience
14 in placement, there was no Office
15 of the Youth Ombudsman person for
16 me to turn to for support,
17 oversight or investigation into the
18 residential treatment facilities he
19 was supposed to be receiving
20 support from. My son needed
21 someone to ensure his treatment
22 goals were being followed. His
23 transition plan was followed. When
24 he was told he could no longer stay

1 there, he needed a safe environment
2 for rehabilitation, free of
3 bullying, intimidation and
4 harassment, to avoid retaliation
5 and potential arrest.

6 We needed someone who
7 strive to prevent youth recidivism
8 and unnecessary family grief and
9 trauma. We needed someone who saw
10 my son's time in RTF as meaningful
11 and him and his family as valued
12 members of the City of Philadelphia
13 who needed the best care and
14 compassion of services available.

15 I have hundreds of
16 horror stories about failed
17 interventions, poor services,
18 treatment and outcomes. But of
19 course, this is not the time to
20 share all of those. But as a front
21 line boots-on-the-ground and self-
22 proclaimed parent survivor, I have
23 gained extensive firsthand
24 knowledge and developed subject

1 matter expertise, although by
2 trauma, grief and fire.

3 I am one of the very
4 lucky, resilient parent survivors
5 of multi-system failures, whose
6 living proof of Nietzsche's famous
7 quote, What doesn't kill you makes
8 you stronger. However, no family
9 should have to endure what I have.
10 That's why I'm here today to speak
11 on behalf of OYO, to ask that you
12 make the OYO office permanent
13 through a Charter change by
14 supporting Bills 215098 and
15 2151108.

16 Marginalized,
17 stigmatized and invisible families
18 like mine need a consistent
19 organization we can trust and turn
20 to hopefully before a crisis, that
21 will listen to us, work with us and
22 help us to save our children and
23 families, especially when they are
24 in these peculiar institutions,

1 where oversight and accountability
2 are desperately needed, when our
3 youth are young and more likely to
4 have success and positive outcomes.

5 I plan to work with OYO
6 in the future and continue my work
7 with Children's First to ensure
8 birth families and foster and
9 adoptive families don't have to
10 endure the needless suffering,
11 trauma and grief that families like
12 mine have endured. I want us to
13 work together to prevent recidivism
14 and negative statistics of our most
15 vulnerable youth.

16 An OYO combined with
17 Children's First and families may
18 be able to make that meaningful
19 difference. I urge this City
20 Council to move this legislation
21 forward and establish a permanent
22 Office of Youth Ombudsperson in the
23 City of Philadelphia. All children
24 deserve a chance to thrive, not

1 just those who are privileged and
2 healthy.

3 I'd like to end by
4 sharing a quote by the great
5 philosopher who was forced into
6 American slavery, Frederick
7 Douglass, who said, It is easier to
8 build strong children than to
9 prepare broken men. Thank you for
10 your time and consideration.

11 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

12 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
13 very much for your testimony and
14 for your commitment, dedicated
15 commitment to your children and to
16 all the adoptees that you've cared
17 for. We appreciate your testimony.

18 Please state your name
19 for the record. Proceed with an
20 abbreviated version of your
21 testimony. We have your testimony
22 here in writing. Thank you very
23 much.

24 MS. HOOD: Good

1 afternoon, everybody. My name is
2 Bree Hood. I'm a youth advocate
3 alumni with Juvenile Law Center. I
4 am here because I've done a lot of
5 work around the Office of the Youth
6 Ombudsperson, and I believe that
7 the office should stay in
8 Philadelphia and that I support in
9 making this office permanent.

10 The Office of Youth
11 Ombudsperson is useful in
12 Philadelphia because it is a way
13 for kids that are in the system to
14 have somebody outside of DHS and
15 the facility staff that kids can
16 trust and talk to about ongoing
17 issues they are having with being
18 in the system. Looking back at my
19 experience in the system and
20 experience and all the trauma I
21 faced, I wish I had this office
22 sooner.

23 From being abused,
24 bullied by both staff and other

1 youth, separated from my family,
2 not receiving good education and
3 going through many different mental
4 health problems, this office could
5 have helped me. I couldn't talk to
6 or trust facility staff and
7 management. Maybe if I had this
8 office when I was in care, this
9 office could have solved a lot of
10 problems and maybe I would have
11 less trauma and PTSD.

12 This is why this office
13 is important. Many kids experience
14 mental health problems and don't
15 have nobody to talk to or listen to
16 and this is why they don't speak
17 up. Back in 2018, I worked with
18 other youth advocates at Juvenile
19 Law Center to develop a publication
20 called Broken Bridges, which told
21 the stories of me and peers and our
22 experiences within the juvenile
23 justice system.

24 This publication

1 included topics we experienced such
2 as physical abuse, physical
3 restraint, strip searches, solitary
4 confinement and much more.

5 Philadelphia established a citywide
6 task force to investigate these
7 issues. Me and my colleagues then
8 worked on advocacy to introduce
9 money into the city budget for a
10 local Office of the Youth
11 Ombudsperson. This is an
12 independent office not funded by
13 DHS or any government-related
14 agency to ensure the well-being of
15 the children within the system.

16 I think it is important
17 because we need somebody who looks
18 out for the well-being of the youth
19 within the system. Youth
20 experience all sorts of things such
21 as abuse, racism, discrimination,
22 being bullied, mental health issues
23 and many more issues. Sometimes
24 the facility staff do not care what

1 is happening to these young people,
2 and that's why they feel alone and
3 have nobody to talk to.

4 It is important to have
5 this office because children can
6 report anything that is being done
7 to them, an office can properly
8 investigate without the children's
9 information being disclosed to the
10 facility and staff. The office has
11 done all sorts of things, like
12 visiting these facilities, meeting
13 and talking with youth one-on-one,
14 given surveys to make sure their
15 needs are properly met, giving them
16 basic Know Your Rights training and
17 much more.

18 The OYO has been very
19 helpful in keeping youth partners
20 in the loop of what's been
21 happening and hopefully more
22 positive outcomes will happen in
23 the future. We have continued
24 working with them by giving them

1 feedback on their surveys and
2 presentation.

3 Also, last year our
4 office created a video with
5 information on why the OYO office
6 is important, which they use during
7 their presentations to youth. I
8 believe that this office needs to
9 be permanent because without this
10 office, who is really going to care
11 and look out for our youth.

12 Somebody has to make sure they are
13 safe if our own system isn't doing
14 the job.

15 The office is
16 independent, which makes it easier
17 for the youth to be candid and talk
18 to the OYO staff. These facilities
19 continue to do more harm than good,
20 but this office can talk to the
21 youth, investigate and make sure
22 these youth are having their needs
23 met, that they are not being harmed
24 and are getting proper education.

1 I hope you all can
2 support in making this office
3 permanent to help support our youth
4 within these systems. And I also
5 just want to shout out Tracy and
6 the office for all the hard work
7 they've done, because obviously our
8 own system is failing the youth,
9 but they're not. Thank you.

10 (Applause.)

11 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

12 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
13 for being here. Thank you for your
14 work with Juvenile Law Center.
15 Thank you for sharing your story.
16 We wish you certainly very well in
17 your career where we know you'll
18 continue to advocate on behalf of
19 other youth who are in similar
20 circumstances. So kudos to you for
21 turning your pain and your lived
22 experience into your life's work.
23 We appreciate you.

24 Any questions for these

1 witnesses?

2 Chair now -- no
3 questions from the committee?

4 (No response.)

5 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

6 RICHARDSON: Okay. Chair now
7 recognizes Councilmember Gauthier.

8 COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

9 I don't have a question. I just
10 wanted to thank all of you for
11 being here and sharing pretty
12 heavy, tough experiences that are
13 very personal, but sharing it will
14 help other people. So thank you
15 for your passion and your
16 commitment.

17 Also, I wanted to give a
18 thank you to Bree for joining us in
19 Harrisburg in the spring to
20 advocate for more diversion
21 programs in our state and to
22 advocate for Representative
23 Krajewski's bill around diversion,
24 which actually passed the State

1 House the other day. And so, it's
2 just proof --

3 (Applause.)

4 COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

5 It's just proof that your advocacy
6 and sharing your stories really,
7 really work and is making a
8 difference. Thank you so much.

9 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

10 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
11 very much for your testimony and
12 thank you for being here.

13 Will the Clerk please
14 call the final panel that we will
15 hear from today.

16 THE CLERK: Will
17 Kimberly Ali and Tracy Johnson
18 please approach. Written testimony
19 was also submitted by the Community
20 Behavioral Health.

21 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

22 RICHARDSON: Okay. Thank you to
23 Community Behavioral Health for
24 submitting written testimony, which

1 we will include as an addendum to
2 this hearing transcript.

3 Thank you, Commissioner
4 Kimberly Ali. Thank you, Tracy
5 Johnson, our Youth Ombudsperson for
6 the Department of Behavioral Health
7 and Intellectual Disability
8 Services. I'm old school in
9 council, so typically I always do
10 the administrative panels first. I
11 have to say this for the record.
12 But we had to accommodate the other
13 witnesses that were joining us from
14 Los Angeles and from other places.

15 And so, I apologize
16 because I know your time is very
17 valuable. I don't take that for
18 granted. I respect the work that
19 you all do each and every day. It
20 is very hard work. It's not easy.
21 I know stepping away for all of
22 these hours is very difficult. So
23 I want to say thank you personally
24 to you for your willingness to

1 allow us to accommodate those other
2 witnesses first. So thank you,
3 thank you, thank you.

4 So state your name for
5 the record and proceed with your
6 testimony.

7 COMMISSIONER ALI: So
8 good afternoon. My name is
9 Kimberly Ali. Good afternoon,
10 Chairperson Katherine Gilmore,
11 Richardson, Vice-Chairperson Kendra
12 Brooks, Councilmember Jamie
13 Gauthier and members of the
14 Committee on Law and Government.
15 My name is Kimberly Ali and I have
16 the honor of serving as
17 Commissioner for the Phillips
18 Department of Human Services, DHS.

19 Joining me today is
20 Brittan Hallar, Chief of
21 Performance Management and
22 Technology, PMT, and
23 Dr. Gary D. Williams, Deputy
24 Commissioner for Juvenile Justice

1 Services as well as other members
2 of my team. Today we are here to
3 provide testimony on Bill No.
4 251098 and Resolution No. 251108, a
5 measure that proposes an amendment
6 to the Philadelphia Home Rule
7 Charter making the Office of the
8 Youth Ombudsperson a permanent
9 office.

10 The Philadelphia
11 Department of Human Services is the
12 county's child welfare and juvenile
13 justice agency. Our mission is to
14 serve Philadelphia's children,
15 youth and families and communities
16 by building on their strengths and
17 advancing safe and supportive
18 environments. DHS's four main
19 goals are to have more children and
20 youth remain safely in their own
21 homes and communities, more
22 children and youth reunified timely
23 or achieve other permanency, a
24 decrease in the number of youth in

1 residential care and improve
2 children youth and family
3 well-being.

4 Since 2017, DHS has
5 worked has worked diligently to
6 improve the outcomes for children,
7 youth and families, which is
8 evidenced by the 5651 families that
9 were referred to diversionary
10 services in FY25, which provided
11 the families with supportive
12 services to prevent their
13 involvement with child welfare and
14 juvenile justice services, the 1569
15 children who are currently
16 receiving inhome services in their
17 own communities to prevent them
18 from being separated from their
19 parents. A 63% reduction in the
20 number of children and youth in
21 child welfare placement, from 6194
22 children in 2017 to 2298 children
23 in child welfare placement today.

24 A 77% reduction in youth

1 placed in child welfare residential
2 placement from 752 youth in 2017 to
3 168 youth today. And a
4 Philadelphia Juvenile Justice
5 Services Center that has been at or
6 below our licensed capacity of 184
7 youth since June of 2024. I am
8 happy to report that the PJJSC has
9 103 young people held there today.

10 DHS has a robust
11 monitoring infrastructure for all
12 providers that is managed by a
13 performance management and
14 technology division. Our service
15 concern unit conducts assessments
16 that address contract, program
17 and/or service delivery quality
18 issues. Assessments require
19 analysts to interview youth and
20 staff, gather data, visit
21 facilities and review files.
22 Depending on the findings of an
23 assessment, providers are required
24 to implement a corrective action

1 plan. We recognize that it is
2 essential that youth and their
3 families have a clear path to
4 express their concerns and for
5 their voices to be heard.

6 Given this, DHS
7 Commissioner's Action Response
8 Office, or CARO, plays a critical
9 role in assisting youth families
10 and the community with questions,
11 concerns or complaints about
12 services provided by DHS and its
13 contractor providers. The work
14 that DHS does to elevate the voices
15 of children, youth and families is
16 aligned with the purpose of the
17 Office of Youth Ombudsperson.

18 The OYO was established
19 by Executive Order 522 under former
20 Mayor James Kenney on November 30,
21 2022. For the past three years,
22 DHS has worked in partnership with
23 the OYO to develop a memorandum of
24 understanding that allows for the

1 sharing of data and the development
2 of a protocol with clearly-defined
3 roles and responsibilities between
4 DHS and the OYO.

5 The protocol established
6 new processes, such as building a
7 secure internal SharePoint site to
8 streamline collaboration, upload
9 investigation materials, schedule
10 visits to residential providers and
11 to review active inquiry reports
12 and debrief cases. Since January
13 of 2024, PMT has investigated and
14 reviewed a total of 26 OYO
15 inquiries.

16 In closing, DHS will
17 continue to work collaboratively
18 with the Office of Youth
19 Ombudsperson to ensure the safety
20 and well-being of all youth and
21 residential placement. I want to
22 thank you for allowing me to
23 testify. My team and I are here
24 and available to answer any

1 questions. Thank you.

2 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

3 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
4 very much, Commissioner Ali.

5 We will now take your
6 testimony and then we'll have
7 questions from the panel.

8 MS. JOHNSON: Good
9 afternoon, Chairperson Gilmore
10 Richardson and Vice-Chairperson
11 Kendra Brooks as well as
12 Councilmember Landau, Councilmember
13 Phillips and Councilmember Gauthier
14 and members of the Committee on Law
15 and Government. My name is Tracy
16 Johnson, and I am the Youth
17 Ombudsperson for the Office of the
18 Youth Ombudsperson or OYO for
19 short.

20 We are here today to
21 discuss the importance of making
22 the OYO permanent because
23 Philadelphia has learned rather
24 painfully what happens when youth

1 residential placement facilities go
2 unchecked, and we only need to look
3 to Glen Mills, Devereaux and
4 Wordsworth to understand the
5 devastating impact of inadequate
6 oversight.

7 In each case, there was
8 sexual abuse, emotional abuse and
9 physical abuse that ensued for
10 years before finally leading to
11 facility closures, investigative
12 reporting, lawsuits, arrests and
13 ultimately, the creation of the
14 Office of the Youth Ombudsperson
15 via an Executive Order on November
16 30, 2022.

17 As background, in April
18 2021 youth with lived experience
19 and placement testified before this
20 very Council asking for our office
21 to be created so that current youth
22 in placement would be protected
23 before harm escalates into tragedy.
24 Bree is one of the young people who

1 are a part of that group of young
2 people who testified back then.
3 And since then, the Youth
4 Residential Placement Task Force
5 has disbanded and the momentum
6 around oversight has waned.

7 So today, Bree has come
8 back before you all to ask that you
9 make our office permanent so that
10 our work endures in perpetuity.
11 They are asking -- Bree and also
12 the parents are asking for you to
13 make this office permanent, to
14 ensure that oversight is not
15 reactive, temporary or crisis-
16 driven, but rather visible,
17 preventive and consistent.

18 Since April 2023, I have
19 led this critical agency and our
20 small and mighty team, right here
21 in the front row, to ensure and
22 promote the safety and well-being
23 of young people in placement. I'm
24 honored to testify before you today

1 on the importance of our office and
2 why you should vote in favor of
3 Bill No. 251098 and Resolution No.
4 251108.

5 First, permanence for
6 OYO means stronger oversight,
7 stronger protection of youth
8 rights, earlier identification of
9 youth safety and well-being
10 concerns and an enhanced oversight
11 of how city agencies assess
12 complaints and hold contracted
13 providers accountable. Second,
14 permanence means protecting the
15 city's investment by preventing
16 facility failures, litigation and
17 emergency interventions that cost
18 far more than the proactive
19 oversight that we are offering.

20 Third, permanence means
21 preserving the city's institutional
22 knowledge of oversight by capturing
23 patterns of harm, recurring rights
24 violations and youth-reported

1 experiences across providers as
2 youth exit placement and staff
3 change and facility change. That's
4 a lot of what Donna talked about,
5 right. Facilities will go away and
6 come back by a different name, and
7 someone needs to track this
8 history.

9 In just under three
10 years, the OYO team has proven our
11 value. With only a team of five,
12 we have educated over 200 young
13 people in placement on their
14 rights, we have surveyed over 150
15 young people on their experiences,
16 and we have educated over 200
17 parents, including the parents who
18 testified today. We've put on two
19 stakeholder presentations for
20 parents working with Child First as
21 well as direct service
22 professionals. So there's juvenile
23 probation officers, CUA workers and
24 children's lawyers all talking

1 about youth rights and how the
2 trusted adults can file complaints
3 on young people's behalf with our
4 office.

5 And by centering youth
6 voice and applying relevant laws
7 such as the 3800 regulations that
8 govern the care and treatment of
9 youth in placement, we have
10 identified systemic issues that
11 directly impact the quality of
12 youth care. As many of you know,
13 and as Donna mentioned earlier, we
14 discovered that the Philadelphia
15 Juvenile Justice Services Center
16 wasn't properly and overly
17 employing the use of seclusion,
18 which is the practice of holding
19 youth in a locker room by
20 themselves often for hours, right.
21 This is a restrictive procedure.

22 This practice was in
23 direct violation of the 3000
24 regulations, and our team worked

1 closely with PJJSC leadership, who
2 we recognize who are here today, as
3 well as Philadelphia DHS and their
4 PMT team to bring the facility into
5 compliance. And I just want to
6 note that I've met with young
7 people who were formerly at the
8 JJSC and are currently in other
9 placements, and they've talked
10 about the times when seclusion was
11 rampant, and then one day the
12 policies change and it stopped
13 happening as often. And so, it was
14 really helpful to hear in realtime
15 from young people that they
16 benefited from this policy change.

17 We are currently working
18 to address inadequate language
19 access for non-English speaking
20 youth across providers and we are
21 awaiting to see what corrective
22 action will come against the
23 providers who are failing to
24 provide that support. We're also

1 working on ongoing barriers to
2 educational stability and group
3 homes and the improper use of
4 restraints as a restrictive
5 procedure in a certain juvenile
6 facility.

7 The OYO has introduced
8 richer, more in-depth standards for
9 how the city addresses youth
10 rights, ensuring youth voice and
11 experiences are considered, that
12 provider policies are reviewed and
13 site visits occur in every case
14 regardless of distance. Youth
15 deserve more than quality assurance
16 checklists and compliance
17 guidelines. They deserve
18 investigative oversight that shows
19 up, digs in, holds the line and
20 asks the tough questions. That is
21 the unique and essential difference
22 that OYO brings to the oversight
23 space.

24 Unfortunately, under the

1 executive order OYO lacks
2 independent investigative
3 authority. That means we must rely
4 on city agencies to provide access
5 to information needed to carry out
6 our oversight role. This limits
7 access, challenges authorities and
8 causes confusion around roles.

9 Permanence, through the Home Rule
10 Charter, would clarify authority,
11 formalize access and ensure that
12 oversight responsibilities are
13 clearly defined and consistently
14 applied.

15 I hope that this
16 legislation will affirm
17 Philadelphia's commitment to
18 protecting youth in care, not only
19 in response to past tragedies, but
20 as a lasting safeguard to prevent
21 future harm. Thank you,
22 Councilmember Gauthier, for
23 introducing this legislation and
24 Councilmembers Phillips, Thomas,

1 Landau, Lozada, Brooks, O'Rourke
2 and Ahmad for co-sponsoring this
3 important legislation. Thank you,
4 City Council, for inviting me to
5 speak before you today.

6 And lastly, I urge City
7 Council to vote in favor of Bill
8 No. 251098 and Resolution 251108 to
9 ensure that the protection this
10 office provides cannot and will not
11 be undone. Thank you again for
12 your time.

13 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE
14 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
15 very much for your testimony and
16 the work of your office since 2023.
17 I apologize for having to take the
18 call, trying to do school pickup
19 and my daughter didn't get to
20 Reading camp yet. So thank you
21 very, very much for your testimony
22 and for your work.

23 And to Commissioner Ali,
24 to you and to your wonderful team

1 and the department and your office
2 that sort of works to ensure that
3 any complaints that are coming in
4 that you all are facilitating those
5 complaints throughout your office
6 and working in collaboration with
7 our Youth Ombudsperson but also our
8 youth-facing organizations in the
9 city. We certainly appreciate your
10 work.

11 Are there any questions
12 for this panel from members of the
13 committee?

14 Chair -- you have a
15 question too? Okay. Chair
16 recognizes Councilmember Landau and
17 then Councilmember Phillips.

18 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:
19 Thank you. Thanks so much for
20 being here. First, to Tracy
21 Johnson, my fellow CLS alum, you're
22 doing something right when you're
23 getting accolades across the
24 country. So congratulations and

1 thank you for the great work that
2 you've done. Your commitment is so
3 clear and I really appreciate the
4 working relationship that you have
5 with DHS and that you both have
6 found a way to move this forward.
7 And it's almost a second set of
8 eyes that you have here. So that
9 is fantastic.

10 I wanted to know what
11 will create -- making the office
12 permanent -- what will additional
13 work look like for you if we make
14 it permanent? And also, what kind
15 of resources will you need to make
16 that happen?

17 MS. JOHNSON: Yeah. So
18 making the office permanent, of
19 course it ensures that we cannot be
20 wiped out by any future
21 administrations. And so, I think
22 that the permanence also speaks to
23 what Michelle testified about as
24 she's a Board member of the USOA,

1 so ensuring that there is
2 independence, a credible review
3 process, confidentiality and the
4 impartiality as well. But it's the
5 independence that makes it strong.

6 To ensure that we are
7 able to exist without any undue
8 influence or pressure. As I stated
9 before in the testimony, our
10 executive order does have limits as
11 to our role and our authority. And
12 I know that the Charter -- the
13 ordinance has been -- there's an
14 enabling legislation that will be
15 written that will have more clarity
16 around what our authority and
17 jurisdiction will be, and that will
18 provide greater and stronger
19 support than what's currently
20 written in the executive order.

21 The Commissioner is
22 correct, that we have an existing
23 MOU and an interagency protocol.
24 The interagency protocol we are

1 currently revisiting because we've
2 learned a lot over the past three
3 years about, hey, it didn't
4 necessarily predict this issue or
5 that issue. So we're currently
6 working to return to that. But
7 most importantly, permanence gives
8 us that greater independence to be
9 able to do our work without fear.

10 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

11 RICHARDSON: Excellent. Thank you,
12 Councilmember Landau.

13 The Chair now recognizes
14 Councilmember Phillips and then
15 Councilmember Gauthier.

16 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

17 I'm going to be really quick. In
18 the legislation it mentions that --
19 thank you so much, Chairwoman.
20 You're supposed to prepare an
21 annual report on your activities,
22 goals and accomplishments. I'm not
23 sure if I missed it, but I haven't
24 received a copy in our office if it

1 has. Is that something you
2 normally do?

3 MS. JOHNSON: Yeah, it's
4 always by the end of April. And
5 so, we have a year review for our
6 first year in 2023. We have an
7 annual report available online from
8 2024. And then the annual report
9 for 2025 will be available this
10 April.

11 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: Is
12 this something that you can publish
13 in print and bring to Council
14 offices at some point?

15 MS. JOHNSON: Oh, yeah.
16 It's published online and I believe
17 that we made it available to you
18 all when we came to testify before
19 City Council a couple of months
20 back.

21 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
22 Okay. Thank you so much. And I'll
23 put on the record I'm very curious
24 to learn more about outreach

1 strategies to make sure this
2 information is there and so forth.
3 And then I also would love to hear
4 more -- I heard testimony of people
5 who could have used the Ombuds
6 Office. But I would love to hear
7 from testimony from people who
8 benefit from your advocacy as well.

9 MS. JOHNSON: Just want
10 to note for the record, a lot of
11 our young people are still actively
12 in care. And so, that is sometimes
13 hard to get young people who are
14 actively still in systems to be
15 able to talk about their
16 experiences. But that is something
17 to note in terms of wanting to work
18 with parent groups and youth
19 advisory groups to think about when
20 will young people be comfortable
21 speaking up about those
22 experiences.

23 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
24 Can you say their names -- like,

1 not their names. So say Person X,
2 Person Z without telling their
3 story? Is that confidentiality or
4 just -- you can't say Person X and
5 Z?

6 MS. JOHNSON: You want
7 to know examples of cases that
8 we're working on?

9 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
10 Later on, not right now. But in
11 the future, for confidentiality
12 without saying their names or where
13 they're from, their stories, can
14 you share that with us at all?

15 MS. JOHNSON: Our law
16 department is here. Maybe --

17 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
18 It's okay. I'll follow up with you
19 later about it. I just want to see
20 the impact. I do want to know more
21 about that. I know there's impact,
22 but I just want to tell people
23 about it.

24 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

1 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
2 so much to our Chair of our
3 Children and Youth Committee,
4 Councilman Phillips.

5 The Chair will recognize
6 Councilmember Gauthier very briefly
7 to get a question on the record
8 because we do have to go into the
9 public meeting now.

10 COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

11 Thank you.

12 So first, thanks to both
13 of you. Thank you so much,
14 Commissioner Ali. You have a tough
15 job but an important job. We
16 appreciate you. And you've been an
17 incredible partner and we're lucky
18 to have your partnership on this.

19 (Applause.)

20 COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

21 And, Tracy, you're a rock star. I
22 don't know what else to say. Thank
23 you for standing up this office and
24 for all this work, especially

1 around PJJSC, which is in my
2 district, and I feel a level of
3 responsibility for. And thanks to
4 our IG DeSantis as well.

5 Very quickly, I wanted
6 to know if you could quickly,
7 quickly answer the part of
8 Councilmember Landau's question
9 that you missed. What resources do
10 you need? It's very important that
11 we get that on record.

12 MS. JOHNSON: Yeah. I
13 was so happy to hear Michelle
14 testify that they have three staff
15 members and have a budget of \$1.3
16 million to do that work. And a lot
17 of the budget that she testified
18 about is covered by the state. And
19 as far as printing materials, like
20 the materials that we have on that
21 Board, that comes from our budget,
22 right.

23 When we have to travel
24 to facilities, we actually travel

1 with PMT's team to a facility four
2 hours away and we had to stay
3 overnight. So that's hotel cost,
4 that's gas, that's cars. We have
5 over 430 young people in care. We
6 have over 70-plus locations to
7 visit, right. We have visited
8 multiple far-away facilities
9 multiple times. And so, I would
10 love to see the budget allocation
11 that was originally written for
12 \$1 million. I think that that
13 would be a healthy starting point
14 for us to do our work.

15 Because also as Michelle
16 said, we have jurisdiction over
17 child welfare group homes,
18 psychiatric residential treatment
19 facilities and juvenile placement,
20 and we're doing that with a team of
21 five.

22 COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

23 And what's your budget now?

24 MS. JOHNSON: Our budget

1 right now, it was \$500,000 due to
2 your advocacy. It increased to
3 \$600,000.

4 COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

5 Thank you so much.

6 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

7 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
8 very much, Councilmember Gauthier.
9 Thank you again for sponsoring this
10 legislation. And thank you both
11 for your testimony. We appreciate
12 you being here.

13 So we are now going to
14 conclude the public hearing
15 temporarily so that we can vote on
16 the legislation. I will go back
17 into the public hearing after we go
18 into the public meeting to
19 accommodate our Councilmembers'
20 schedules, as we have been here
21 almost four hours. Okay. So thank
22 you very much for that
23 accommodation.

24 We will now begin the

1 public meeting on the previously
2 mentioned bill and resolution.
3 Clerk, will you please call the
4 roll to take attendance. And
5 members that are in attendance will
6 indicate that they are present when
7 their name is called.

8 THE CLERK:
9 Councilmember Bass.

10 (No response.)

11 THE CLERK:
12 Councilmember O'Neill.

13 (No response.)

14 THE CLERK:
15 Councilmember Squilla.

16 (No response.)

17 THE CLERK:
18 Councilmember Phillips.

19 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
20 Present.

21 THE CLERK:
22 Councilmember Landau.

23 COUNCILWOMAN LANDAU:
24 Present.

1 THE CLERK: Vice-Chair

2 Brooks.

3 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

4 Present.

5 THE CLERK: Chair

6 Gilmore Richardson.

7 COUNCILWOMAN GAUTHIER:

8 Present. A quorum of the committee
9 is present.

10 The Chair recognizes
11 Councilmember Brooks for a motion
12 on the amendment to Resolution No.
13 251108.

14 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS: I
15 offer an amendment to Resolution
16 524 -- I'm sorry, 251108. A copy
17 of the amendment has been
18 circulated to all members of the
19 committee. I move that the
20 amendment to Resolution 251108 be
21 approved.

22 (Duly seconded.)

23 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

24 RICHARDSON: It has been moved and

1 properly seconded that the
2 amendment to Resolution No. 251108
3 be approved.

4 All those in favor of
5 this amendment to Resolution No.
6 251108, say aye.

7 (Aye.)

8 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

9 RICHARDSON: Those opposed?

10 (No response.)

11 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

12 RICHARDSON: The ayes have it and
13 the motion carries.

14 The Chair now recognizes
15 Councilmember Brooks for a motion
16 on Resolution No. 251108 as
17 amended.

18 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

19 Thank you, Chair.

20 I move for Resolution
21 251108 as amended be reported from
22 this committee with a favorable
23 recommendation.

24 (Duly seconded.)

1 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

2 RICHARDSON: It has been moved and
3 properly seconded that the
4 amendment to Resolution No. 251108
5 as amended be approved.

6 All those in favor of
7 the motion will indicate by stating
8 aye.

9 (Aye.)

10 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

11 RICHARDSON: Those opposed?

12 (No response.)

13 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

14 RICHARDSON: The ayes have it and
15 the motion to the amendment on
16 Resolution No. 251108 is approved.

17 The Chair now recognizes
18 Councilmember Brooks for a motion
19 on Bill No. 251098.

20 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

21 Thank you, Chair.

22 I move that Bill No.
23 251098 be reported from this
24 committee with a favorable

1 recommendation and further move
2 that the rules of Council be
3 suspended to permit first reading
4 of this bill at the next session of
5 Council.

6 (Duly seconded.)

7 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

8 RICHARDSON: It has been moved and
9 properly seconded that Bill No.
10 251098 be reported from this
11 committee with a favorable
12 recommendation and further move
13 that the rules of Council be
14 suspended as to permit first
15 reading of this bill at the next
16 session of Council.

17 All those in favor of
18 the motion will indicate by stating
19 aye.

20 (Aye.)

21 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

22 RICHARDSON: All those opposed?

23 (No response.)

24 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

1 RICHARDSON: The ayes have it and
2 the motion carries. Bill No.
3 251098 will be reported from this
4 committee with a favorable
5 recommendation.

6 We will now proceed to
7 go back into the public meeting and
8 the public hearing to hear any
9 witnesses to give public comment.

10 THE CLERK: Robert
11 Drowery, please approach.

12 (Witness approached
13 witness table.)

14 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

15 RICHARDSON: Please approach the
16 witness table. State your name for
17 the record. Proceed with your
18 testimony.

19 Is there anyone else
20 here to testify on Bill No. 251098
21 or Resolution No. 251108? Any
22 additional witnesses for public
23 comment?

24 (No response.)

1 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

2 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Please
3 state your name for the record and
4 proceed with your testimony.

5 MR. GRAY: Good
6 afternoon, Council. My name is
7 Robert Gray and I'm here to testify
8 just to give a little bit of public
9 testimony in reference to 251098.

10 I think that it is incredibly
11 imperative that we listen to the
12 streets and the streets are talking
13 right now. We see people out there
14 every day struggling. I work at a
15 restaurant downtown. I've seen
16 youth in there and they need
17 support.

18 I think this office can
19 greatly have an impact on our
20 community. Just the other day
21 there was a young woman who was
22 downtown and she seemed to have a
23 mental disability, and her clothes
24 were tattered and she seemed to

1 have really been going through it,
2 is the best way I can put it. I
3 called the Youth Ombuds Office
4 actually to see if there was
5 someone there. But it was a
6 weekend. So that just shows that
7 we have a need that's greater than
8 just Monday through Friday and we
9 need people in place that are going
10 to actually use these resources and
11 actually care for the citizens of
12 Philadelphia.

13 So in reference to
14 251098, I just wanted to be a voice
15 of the people and say that we are
16 in support of this, and citizens do
17 want to see the quality of life for
18 the youth improve, especially in
19 youth, any public service or DHS or
20 perhaps they just have a rough home
21 life, let's say. We need to work
22 with the schools and the City
23 Council to get this done. Thank
24 you. That's all I have on this

1 bill.

2 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

3 RICHARDSON: Thank you. Thank you
4 very much for providing your public
5 comment. Thank you for being here
6 and thank you also for your
7 patience. We appreciate you being
8 here.

9 Seeing no further
10 witnesses this afternoon, we
11 appreciate each and every one of
12 you. We will now move to conclude
13 the business of this hearing.

14 As there are no further
15 bills or resolutions on the agenda,
16 we'll conclude the business before
17 the Committee on Law and Government
18 today. We thank you all for your
19 attendance and also for your
20 participation.

21 MR. GRAY: (Inaudible).

22 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

23 RICHARDSON: One moment before we
24 officially conclude. Sir, if you

1 have a question, you have to come
2 to the table. You have to come to
3 the table, restate your name for
4 the record and then proceed with
5 the comment that you'd like to
6 make.

7 MR. GRAY: Pardon me.
8 I'm new to this. So my name is
9 Robert Gray once again and I did
10 have testimony to offer in
11 reference to 260029, the resolution
12 authorizing the Committee on Law
13 and Government to hold the hearing
14 on the process to resolve tangled
15 title in the City of Philadelphia.

16 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE
17 RICHARDSON: Okay. That'll be
18 great. We are not hearing that
19 matter currently. That matter was
20 heard first and not second. I will
21 ask since you have a written copy
22 of the testimony, that you provide
23 that to the Clerk of this committee
24 so that we can include it as an

1 addendum to the transcript of this
2 committee hearing.

3 MR. GRAY: Understood.
4 Thank you very much.

5 COUNCILWOMAN GILMORE

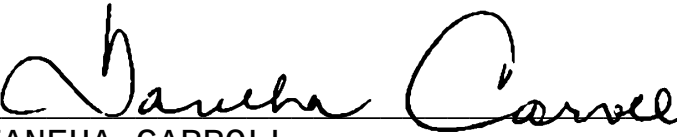
6 RICHARDSON: I thank you very much
7 for your understanding. Appreciate
8 you being here on both matters.

9 As there are no further
10 witnesses to testify, no further
11 bills or resolutions on the agenda
12 today, this now concludes the
13 business before the Committee on
14 Law and Government. We thank you
15 all for being here. Have a good
16 day.

17 (Committee on Law and
18 Government concluded at 4:50 p.m.)
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C E R T I F I C A T I O N

I, hereby certify that the proceedings
and evidence noted are contained fully and
accurately in the stenographic notes taken
by me in the foregoing matter, and that
this is a correct transcript of the same.


TANEHA CARROLL
Court Reporter - Notary Public

(The foregoing certification of
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