



UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL: Wednesday, November 14, 2018

Marian Wright Edelman Transitions from President of the Children's Defense Fund to new role of President Emerita in the Office of the Founder

Wright Edelman will continue critical work to end child poverty and inequality

Washington, D.C. – Marian Wright Edelman, a lifelong advocate for children, the poor and civil rights, will transition from President of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) into the new role of President Emerita in the Office of the Founder, CDF Board of Directors Co-Chairs Angela Glover Blackwell and Lan Bentsen announced today. In this new role she will focus her energies towards building a lasting movement for children to end child poverty and inequality through servant leadership development at key spiritual retreats and convenings at CDF's Haley Farm.

"Our mission to Leave No Child Behind® and ensure that every child has a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage into adulthood has never been more important than it is today during these perilous times for children and for our nation. I will shift away from the day-to-day responsibilities of running a leading, national organization, and in my new role, I will focus all my energies towards building a movement to end child poverty and inequality," said **Wright Edelman**. "I am proud of CDF's groundbreaking work over the past 45 years and the significant progress we have made for children and families—but there is still so much work to be done. I look forward to supporting the Board's search for a new President to lead CDF into its next chapter; someone who is committed to taking on the challenges children face today and those that will emerge in the future."

Wright Edelman will continue to guide CDF, the organization she founded 45 years ago. CDF will continue to provide a strong, effective and independent voice for all the children of America who cannot vote, lobby or speak for themselves, paying particular attention to the needs of poor children, children of color and those with disabilities. CDF evolved from the Washington Research Project, which Wright Edelman began in 1968, to prepare for and coordinate the policy positions of the Poor People's Campaign.

"This organization would simply not be, were it not for Marian Wright Edelman, and it would not have created the framework of federal and state laws that now protect children and families had she not led us every day for the last 45 years," said **Angela Glover Blackwell**, Co-Chair of the CDF Board of Directors. "All we are and all we do starts with her, and that is a tremendous legacy, but she is not done yet and we, thankfully, are not yet done receiving the benefit of her wisdom and leadership."

Wright Edelman, a graduate of Spelman College and Yale Law School, began her mission in the mid-60s when, as the first Black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar, she directed the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund office in Jackson, Mississippi. In 1968, she moved to Washington, D.C., as counsel for the Poor People's Campaign that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. began organizing before his death.

"I first heard of Marian back in 1960, when she was a student. And people would say, 'Ask Marian. Get in touch with Marian,'" said civil rights icon and **Congressman John Lewis** (D-GA). "She emerged as a leader. Brave, courageous, just smart. She wanted to do something not just about civil rights but about children—all children. I don't know what our country would be like without the Children's Defense Fund. If Martin Luther King, Jr., could come back and see what Marian Wright Edelman is doing, he'd be very proud."

In 1968, Wright Edelman founded the Washington Research Project, a public interest law firm and the parent body of CDF. For two years she served as the Director of the Center for Law and Education at Harvard University. In 1973, she founded CDF to advance the mission to Leave No Child Behind®. Under her leadership, CDF became the nation's strongest independent voice for children and families, constantly challenging the United States to invest in policies and programs to improve the odds for all children and training many of the country's most effective servant leaders for children.

"I have been inspired by Marian Wright Edelman since I first met her in 1969," said **Hillary Rodham Clinton**, former Secretary of State, first lady, attorney for CDF and CDF Board Chair. "She has spent her life as a crusading legal activist devoted to children, service and social justice. Watching and working with her is one of the greatest gifts anyone has ever given me. The mission of the Children's Defense Fund is more important today than ever, and as she transitions to this new role and continues her mission to end childhood poverty in America, I look forward to watching her guide CDF with the same grace, determination and grit that she's embodied her entire life."

Powered by Wright Edelman's vision and dedication, over the past four and a half decades CDF has conducted research and budget analysis and worked with policymakers and numerous organizations to build bipartisan support to enact and implement laws and policies that have helped millions of children escape poverty and access health care, food security, Head Start, child care, education, protections in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, protection from gun violence and family support services.

"Over the last half-century, no one has done more to help the most vulnerable children in America than Marian Wright Edelman," said **Bryan Stevenson**, Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative and CDF Board Member. "After meeting starving children in the Mississippi Delta in the 1960s, she became the most passionate, strategic and effective advocate for helping poor children and their families in the nation. Her leadership and tenure at the Children's

Defense Fund has created rights and services that have aided millions of families. We owe her an enormous debt.”

Over the years, CDF has worked with federal, state and local lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to pass landmark legislation for children and families, including authorization and expansion of the Children’s Health Insurance Program, Head Start and Early Head Start, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

“Marian’s work on behalf of our nation’s children will be remembered for decades to come,” said **Senator Orrin Hatch** (R-UT). “She has always been a tireless advocate for kids and her determination and persistence helped Congress enact numerous landmark laws to better children’s lives. I am forever grateful for her partnership as we worked together to improve children’s health, protect kids from abuse and increase adoptions. I know Marian’s efforts will continue even as she transitions into a new role.”

Under Wright Edelman’s leadership, CDF expanded over the past 45 years to include a national headquarters in Washington, D.C. and state offices in California, Minnesota, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, South Carolina and Texas, as well as the CDF Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee. As of 2018, a majority of CDF staff are in state offices. The CDF Freedom Schools® program serves nearly 12,000 students across the nation each year and the CDF Beat the Odds® program has provided scholarships to more than 900 exceptional high school students. All of CDF’s programs, initiatives and offices are rooted in Wright Edelman’s longstanding mission to Leave No Child Behind®.

“Since the moment I read *The Measure of Our Success* on my way to college, Marian Wright Edelman has been a guiding light in my life. Her words are powerful but her actions are even more so,” said **Reese Witherspoon**, actress and former CDF board member. “I feel extremely honored to have been part of her tireless work on behalf of our nation’s children at the Children’s Defense Fund. Her passion for children’s rights will always burn bright in my heart.”

CDF’s Board of Directors will engage in a thoughtful and informed selection process for a new President, with a positive light looking to the future and doing everything possible to ensure a smooth and effective transition of leadership.

Beginning December 31, 2018, CDF’s Chief of Staff, Max Lesko, will become CDF’s National Executive Director, overseeing day-to-day operations and reporting to the Board of Directors. Lesko joined CDF in early 2017 after serving in the Obama Administration as Chief of Staff for the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, Assistant Counsel in the Office of White House Counsel and Domestic Director in the Presidential Personnel Office.

Throughout this transition, CDF will continue to be a strong, independent and unwavering voice for children and work relentlessly to ensure a level playing field for all children.

“When the history of the past half-century is written, in the section focused on the rights of children, Marian Wright Edelman and the Children’s Defense Fund will be front and center,” said **Geoffrey Canada**, President of the Harlem Children’s Zone and Former CDF Board Chair. “Marian and the Children’s Defense Fund inspired me and thousands of others across the country and around the world to dedicate our lives to child advocacy and in this new role, she will continue to inspire and to lead the children’s movement.”

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The Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit child advocacy organization that has worked relentlessly for more than 40 years to ensure a level playing field for all children.

CDF’s Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

CDF provides a strong, effective and independent voice for all the children of America who cannot vote, lobby or speak for themselves. We pay particular attention to the needs of poor children, children of color and those with disabilities. CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventive investments before they get sick, drop out of school, get into trouble or suffer family breakdown.

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