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The Children's Defense Fund-New York (CDF-NY) appoints Kercena A. Dozier as Executive Director

State and local leaders offer reflections on CDF-NY's new Executive Director

September 22, 2021; Washington, D.C. -- Today, Kercena A. Dozier will join the Children's Defense Fund as CDF-NY's Executive Director.

"I am honored, humbled and absolutely ecstatic to have been chosen and charged to lead the Children's Defense Fund's New York state office as its Executive Director," said Dozier. "CDF's vision of a nation where marginalized children flourish, leaders prioritize their well-being, and communities wield the power to ensure they thrive is one that I am eager to advance and manifest on a state level in New York. I look forward to working with those most impacted as well as local and state leaders to create another New York where our most vulnerable and marginalized children are free to be children and have a real opportunity to meet their full potential."

Kercena's professional career has been focused on fighting poverty and she arrives at CDF-NY with a wide array of substantive experience in fighting poverty in city and state government, on a grassroots level, in partnership with unions, and as a staffer for a CDFI's community development corporation. Prior to joining CDF-NY, Kercena served as the chief of staff for a New York State Senator whose district covered Harlem, East Harlem and the Upper West Side. As chief of staff, Kercena managed a Harlem in-district office and an Albany legislative office focused on voting reform, education justice, Minority/Women-owned Business Enterprise support, criminal justice reform, millennial civic engagement, senior support, affordable housing, economic justice, gun violence prevention, and equitable COVID-19 response.

Previously, Kercena worked for the nation's largest social services agency, the New York City Department of Social Services (DSS), as the Director of Community Affairs for the NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS). At DHS, Kercena was intentional about framing homelessness as a racial equity issue rooted in systemic poverty disproportionately impacting women and children of color. Through an initiative she created titled "I Am My Sister, My Sister is Me," Kercena brought leaders in the faith, government, legislative, and nonprofit sectors together to discuss the drivers of poverty and to inspire compassion and collaborative action to address citywide poverty and homelessness.

Kercena also served as the NYC Faith Organizer for the Fast Food Forward, Airport Worker Economic Dignity, and #RaiseUpNY campaigns. In each of these campaigns, the coalition that she was a part of achieved success at raising the wages of low-income workers in the fast food and airport industries as well as throughout the entire state through authentically engaging and organizing impacted individuals and communities. Additionally, in a volunteer capacity, Kercena helped to start her church's social justice ministry.

Kercena received her Juris Doctor and Masters of Business Administration degrees from American University in Washington, D.C. and holds a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Loyola University in New Orleans, where she double majored in International Business and Economics.

"Children's Defense Fund's New York office has helped to set the progressive standard for advancing child well-being within our national organization and the broader children's movement," said Rev. Dr.

Starsky Wilson, President & CEO, Children's Defense Fund. "We are excited that its future will be guided by a leader as strong, committed and prepared as Kercena Dozier. I look forward to working with her and our extraordinary team members on the ground to make sure all children and youth in the Empire State thrive."

A recognized authority in the endeavor to protect New York children and strengthen their families, the Children's Defense Fund-New York serves as a resource and partner for children, families and organizations throughout New York. Through its leadership in statewide child poverty reduction efforts, CDF-NY helped pass the [Child Poverty Reduction Act](#) – a commitment to cut New York's child poverty rate in half by 2030 – through the legislature this year. The legislation currently awaits the Governor's signature and, if signed, would represent the most significant child poverty reduction goal codified into law of any state nationwide. CDF-NY also works to improve family income supports and engages in extensive outreach to ensure all eligible New York families are receiving the expanded Child Tax Credit. As a key focus of its Child Health portfolio, CDF-NY co-leads the statewide Lead Free Kids New York coalition, which advanced several of its priority bills this session striving to reduce childhood lead exposure and poisoning in the State, with a particular focus on ensuring healthy housing.

"I applaud the Children Defense Fund's decision to name Kercena Dozier as the new Executive Director of its New York state office," said Rev. Michael A Walrond, Jr., Senior Pastor, FCBC. "Kercena has a long history as a grassroots organizer and advocate, with a particular passion to eradicate poverty and its menacing tentacles. Her abiding commitment to honoring the best of our shared humanity has enabled her to passionately fight against the polarizing and dehumanizing practices that have been normalized in our culture. She is a true warrior for justice- fighting against the social, political and cultural structures that maintain oppression and inequality."

"CDF-NY will benefit greatly from Kercena's servant leadership. She is a proven leader with a heart for the most vulnerable among us," said Brian A Benjamin, Lieutenant Governor of New York. "From fighting to keep a public school in Harlem open to fighting for tens of thousands of children experiencing homelessness in New York City to fighting for unaccompanied and separated migrant children who were brought to New York State, in Kercena, the children of our city and state have a respected and transformational leader and advocate who will work tirelessly to ensure that their needs are prioritized and met."

Earlier this year, CDF-NY worked with youth, defenders and service providers to pass legislation [ending the arrest and prosecution of elementary-age children under 12](#) and [expanding record sealing for young people prosecuted in adult criminal court as teenagers](#), both of which await the Governor's signature. CDF-NY also successfully advocated to [restore state budget cuts to supportive services for families](#) and continues working to reduce institutional settings for children in foster care. CDF-NY actively supports education justice reforms in New York City through [Dignity In Schools-New York](#) and statewide via [Solutions Not Suspensions](#) to replace the school-to-prison pipeline with an education system that supports restorative justice and creates alternatives to punishment and criminalization, achieving recent budget wins of \$12 million for school restorative justice and \$70 million for 500 social workers.

"I am thrilled that Kercena has been chosen to lead CDF-NY at such a critical time in the lives of children across New York State," said Jennifer Jones-Austin, CEO & Executive Director of FPWA. "She has long been a dedicated and exemplary advocate in the New York movement to end poverty. I am confident that with her vast organizing and legislative experience, and her core belief in the value and worth of all children and families, she will play a lead role in transforming our state into a place where children whose families are economically challenged are able to live freely, grow and flourish."

"Kercena Dozier is a proven and fierce advocate for children, and I am ecstatic about her leadership as the next Executive Director of CDF-NY," said Rev. Emma Jordan-Simpson, Executive Pastor, The Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, NY. "She has been authentically grounded in the community for years. She also brings critically important policy, budget advocacy and legislative advocacy experience to this role as New York now faces such uncertainty about child well-being post-

pandemic. Her record demonstrates creative and values-based leadership, and her appointment is good news for New York's children and for all who are working to create a world where children thrive."

This past summer, CDF-NY welcomed a brand new cohort of nine powerful New York City high school students to its [Beat the Odds® New York Scholarship Program](#). Over the next two years, these scholars will work alongside policy and program staff to gain experience in youth leadership development and policy advocacy while also working towards college matriculation. The *Beat the Odds*® scholarship has been awarded to nearly 1,000 students nationwide since 1990, with program alumni graduating from some of our nation's premier universities and serving in a diverse range of occupations.

"I extend my congratulations to Kercena on being chosen as CDF-NY's next Executive Director," said Dr. Hazel N. Dukes, President of the NAACP New York. "Because of my collaboration with her over the years, I know that she will be a perfect partner as we work together to advance child well-being in the state of New York."

"It is difficult to imagine someone better suited for leadership at the Children's Defense Fund in New York than Kercena Dozier," said Dr. Rev. Chloe Breyer, Executive Director, Interfaith Center of New York. "Her deep commitment to racial and social justice expressed both in her local government work and through faith-based communities where she has served, will stand her in good stead to take the helm of one of New York City's most respected community-based organizations. Dozier's understanding of how law and economics impact New York City's most vulnerable families makes her very well-qualified for her new position at the Children's Defense Fund. Her appointment as Executive Director at CDF-NY is good news for all of New York State."

"Kercena has a true passion for our community, and I am excited by her recent appointment to lead the Children's Defense Fund in New York," said Sheena Wright, President & COE, United Way of New York City. "She devoted her life and career for policy change and social justice for our communities. She will serve as a visionary leader, dedicated to fulfilling their mission to bring change to the lives of New York's children. This is a great moment for our children and families that will be impacted by her leadership."

"The Children's Defense Fund of New York is a venerable institution with a long track record of advocating for the needs of children in our state. The New York State Council of Churches is thrilled that Kercena Dozier will become its new Executive Director," said Rev. Peter Cook, Executive Director, New York State Council of Churches. "In light of the separation of children at the border, we were pleased to work with Kercena in her previous capacity as Chief of Staff for Senator Brian Benjamin to pass a bill signed by the Governor to ensure more transparency about the number of separated children under the care of state funded organizations in New York. Her work on criminal justice reform to keep families together and advocate for youth and children who are justice involved was commendable. We are excited to work with Kercena and the Children's Defense Fund of New York to make our state a more just and humane place for children and their families."

"Kercena has been a leader in the pursuit of justice and equity for our communities, never backing down from the most challenging concerns of our time," said Rose Pierre-Louis, COO, The McSilver Institute for Poverty, Policy & Research. "Whether the issue is gun violence prevention, the lack of mental healthcare in poor communities of color or other inequities, she has been focused on addressing systemic, root causes in order to bring immediate support and long-term preventive care to vulnerable communities. She will bring that same focus to CDF-NY as its next Executive Director, helping to lead New York in providing meaningful, lasting solutions to end child poverty in the state."

"I am delighted to learn that Kercena Dozier has been chosen to lead Children's Defense Fund's NY State office as Executive Director. Ms. Dozier has been an effective advocate for justice in every capacity she's served since I've known her in Harlem on the Upper West Side of New York City," said Rev. Michael Livingston, Interim Senior Minister, The Riverside Church in the City of New York. "Her varied work in the public sector has been exemplary and I know that she will bring the same dedication, experience, and expertise in support of the essential work of the CDF. Riverside Church is home to the Freedom School and we look forward to continuing and deepening our relationship to CDF through

partnership with Kercena and the NY State CDF office. Congratulations and a warm welcome to Kercena as she begins her work.”

“Throughout her career Kercena Dozier has shown an exceptional commitment to the betterment of life for underprivileged children and families,” said Antonio Rodriguez, Director of Special Events, NYC Department of Social Services. “She has a tremendous ability to bring together people of diverse backgrounds to achieve common goals. In her work with government and in the community her innovative vision has been transformational in benefitting underserved communities. I have seen firsthand how Kercena Dozier’s experience, creative thinking and dedication in bringing the three elements of public, private and nonprofit together will make her an outstanding leader for CDF and for children’s advocacy in the state of New York.”

“Congratulations to Kercena on her new role as Executive Director of Children’s Defense Fund New York,” says Kwame Owusu-Kesse, CEO, Harlem Children’s Zone. “CDF-NY has long been an outspoken advocate for the children and families of New York, and we look forward to its continued growth and impact under Kercena’s leadership.”

“Kercena Dozier is deeply committed to bringing about equity and justice by defeating poverty,” said Colvin W. Grannum, President & CEO, Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corp. “She is creative, solution-oriented, compassionate, and energetic. I am confident that CDF and the children of New York will greatly benefit from her leadership.”

“Children’s Defense Fund NY could not have found a more able, committed, leader than Kercena A. Dozier,” said Dr. Danielle R. Moss, CEO, Oliver Scholars. “Her understanding of the systemic and institutional barriers facing historically excluded children in New York and nationally will add depth and impact to the work.”

“Kercena is a fighter, true public servant, champion of the children, and now the Executive Director of CDF-NY!” said Jordan Stockdale, Executive Director, The Young Men’s Initiative. “For years, Kercena has served our communities through fighting to eradicate poverty, transforming the criminal justice system and educating the public on the power of organizing and voting. I cannot think of anyone more deserving to lead the Children’s Defense Fund’s NY state office than Kercena A. Dozier.”

“I am filled with hope to see that Kercena Dozier is leading the charge at CDF-NY for a safer and more inclusive New York City and State,” said Nicole Russell, Executive Director, Precious Dreams Foundation. “Her unmatched leadership skills have continuously enhanced the way we approach community care and her efforts consistently produce innovative and long-term improvements for our children.”