

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Wednesday, September 2, 2020

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NATION'S TOP CHILD ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION, THE CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND, ANNOUNCES HISTORIC LEADERSHIP CHANGE

After nearly 50 years leading CDF, Marian Wright Edelman welcomes nationally recognized children's rights and racial equity champion Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson to carry forward her legacy and lead CDF into a new Civil Rights Movement.

National leaders offer reflections on historic moment for the children's advocacy organization.

WASHINGTON, DC – As America finds itself immersed in a new movement to end racial and economic injustice, the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) today announced the appointment of Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson to be the next President and CEO of the nation's leading child advocacy organization.

Dr. Wilson is a national thought leader in racial justice, community organizing, and movement building. He is a champion for children's rights and has a longstanding relationship with the Children's Defense Fund, having led the effort to bring the CDF Freedom Schools literacy and empowerment program to serve children and families in the St. Louis area and serving as a leader of the annual CDF Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry. In the wake of the 2014 shooting of teenager Michael Brown, Dr. Wilson co-chaired the Ferguson Commission, which released the 'Forward Through Ferguson: A Path Toward Racial Equity' report calling for sweeping changes in policing, the criminal justice system, child well-being and economic mobility.

"I'm honored to extend the legacy of Marian Wright Edelman and serve young people through the Children's Defense Fund at this critical time," said **Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson**. "As we

wrestle with the politics of the pandemic, protests, and a presidential election, it's a little too easy to forget about crafting policy for children who don't get to vote, don't have lobbyists and can't make campaign contributions."

This is the first change in leadership for the Children's Defense Fund following 47 years of service from founder and civil rights leader Marian Wright Edelman. As the new head of the Children's Defense Fund, Dr. Wilson has vowed to continue Wright Edelman's legacy and use his own experiences to help guarantee the rights of all children through servant leadership.

"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. Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson is the right leader at the right time for the Children's Defense Fund," said **Founder and President Emerita Marian Wright Edelman**. "I've gotten to know him over the years and I have only grown more impressed. We've worked closely together on CDF Freedom Schools and he has a longstanding relationship with the CDF Proctor Institute. Dr. Wilson shares our sense of servant leadership and is committed to training the next generation of servant leaders. This is the right step forward for CDF at exactly the right moment."

In 1973, Wright Edelman founded the Children's Defense Fund to serve as a strong and independent voice for all children facing challenges in America by advocating for solutions to improve their lives. From its inception, the Children's Defense Fund has challenged the United States to make children a national priority.

"Marian Wright Edelman is a legend--and one of my heroes. Under her leadership, the Children's Defense Fund has touched many lives--including mine. Working alongside Marian decades ago changed the way I saw the world, and I am proud to add my voice to the chorus thanking her for her contributions on behalf of America's youngest citizens," said **Hillary Rodham Clinton**. "I am excited to cheer on her successor, Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson, as he leads this vital organization through a moment of reckoning with racial and economic injustice, and puts his experience and dedication to work by fighting on behalf of America's children."

Since its founding, the organization has led efforts to enact meaningful policy changes, working with numerous organizations and policymakers on both sides of the aisle. Those policy changes have helped millions of children fulfill their potential and escape poverty by ensuring that they receive the health care, child care, familial support, proper nutrition, and quality education that all children need to thrive. Through its national headquarters in Washington, D.C. and six state offices, CDF continues to fight at every level and on behalf of every child in America to give them the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

“As the Children’s Defense Fund enters this new chapter, the CDF Board is confident that Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson is the right leader for this moment and for the future. Just as Marian Wright Edelman created the nation’s premier child advocacy organization on the foundation of the Civil Rights movement, Dr. Wilson’s leadership carries CDF on to the foundation being laid by the Black Lives Matter movement,” said **Board Chair Angela Glover Blackwell**. “I look forward to working with Dr. Wilson and continuing this critical work under such an inspiring leader.”

In recent years, CDF has pursued a bold policy agenda to end child poverty in America, fought aggressively to meet the needs of children and families in the child welfare system, spoken out for children killed by the national gun violence epidemic, and worked to protect health care coverage for millions of children. CDF focuses especially on the needs of poor children, children of color, and those with disabilities.

“According to the U.S. Census Bureau estimates, 2020 is the first year in American history where the majority of children in this country are children of color,” said **Dr. Wilson**. “Child well-being and racial justice are intimately and forever intertwined. This makes the civil rights legacy and child advocacy vision the Children’s Defense Fund has woven together for nearly fifty years even more vital.”

Dr. Wilson is currently the President and CEO of the Deaconess Foundation, a faith-based grant-making organization supporting a movement for child well-being in St. Louis through philanthropy, advocacy and organizing for racial equity and public policy. Deaconess, which Dr. Wilson has led since 2011, has invested nearly \$90 million toward improving the lives of children. In response to the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism, Deaconess launched collaborative funds investing in Black-led recovery efforts and racial healing totaling more than \$4 million earlier this year. Dr. Wilson also serves as board chair for the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP), and vice-chair of the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE).

From 2008 through 2018, Dr. Wilson also pastored Saint John’s Church (The Beloved Community), an inter-racial, inner-city congregation related to the United Church of Christ. There he led activism on a myriad of issues while more than quadrupling worship attendance and annual giving. He also established The Beloved Community Conference resourcing social justice ministries and Sojourner’s Truth: Celebration of Preaching Women. After the police killing of Michael Brown, Jr., with Wilson’s leadership, the church hosted the #BlackLivesMatter Freedom Ride to Ferguson and served as the welcome center for the #FergusonOctober.

Dr. Wilson will begin his tenure as President and CEO of the Children’s Defense Fund in December 2020.

Supporters of the Children’s Defense Fund, civil rights activists, thought leaders, and celebrities from across the country offered reflections on the historic announcement:

“As a child I attended Head Start in Texas. No way I could have known then that the program where I began my love of learning was part of Marian Wright Edelman’s vision to improve the lives of America’s poorest children. For nearly 50 years, under her leadership, the Children’s Defense Fund has demanded that the nation keep its promises to our children, all of them. I am thrilled to see that commitment and tradition pass to Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson,” said **Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation**. “His stewardship through the turbulence in Ferguson, Mo. and his fight for justice and inclusion make him the right choice to lead the Children’s Defense Fund at this crucial moment in the nation’s development. The fate of the nation is dependent on what happens to our children. Rev. Starsky Wilson is the strong moral, courageous leader that the nation needs now.”

“It is with great excitement that I share my enthusiasm that Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson has been selected after an exhaustive national search, to become the new President of the Children’s Defense Fund,” said **Geoffrey Canada, Founder of the Harlem Children’s Zone**. “As the former Chair of the Board of Trustees of CDF, I knew how impossibly hard it would be to replace Marian Wright Edelman, the foremost children’s advocate in America. Her leadership as a fighter to save poor children is world renown. If I was worried that we wouldn’t be able to find someone to fill her impossibly large shoes, that worry ended with the selection of Dr. Wilson. If you are looking for a leader who can tackle the seemingly insurmountable challenges our children face during this historic set of crises, that seem to get worse every week, Dr. Wilson is that person. He not only has the moral authority that is needed today, he has the leadership skills that are needed now more than ever. Our children need someone who is willing to fight powerful institutions, inspire when others have given up and present a clear vision when others try to confuse and obfuscate. CDF has found that leader in Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson and I am thrilled that he was chosen to take the helm of CDF.”

“For almost 50 years, Marian Wright Edelman and the Children’s Defense Fund have spoken truth to power on behalf of our nation’s most vulnerable children,” said **Katie McGrath, former CDF board member, and J.J. Abrams**. “We have been proud to support CDF’s critical work over the last 20 years and are thrilled that Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson has been selected to continue in Marian’s incomparable footsteps.”

“Marian Wright Edelman is a Five Star General in her fight as an advocate for the civil rights and protection of our children, especially those who have been marginalized. Filling her shoes is no easy task, but choosing Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson is in perfect step with the goals which she has established,” said **LaTanya and Samuel L. Jackson, longtime CDF supporters**. “We look forward to continuing our relationship with CDF under Dr. Wilson’s comprehensive guidance.”

“Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson is the leader that the Children’s Defense Fund deserves at this pivotal time in our nation,” said **Jurnee Smollett, actress and CDF board member**. “I have no doubt that he will ensure that the most vulnerable amongst us, poor Black and brown children, have a

steadfast and just leader who will bring the critical issues they face to the forefront. As my dear friend and mentor, the great Marian Wright Edelman, has always told us ‘If we don’t stand up for children, then we don’t stand for much.’ Millions of children have been impacted by the work of Marian Wright Edelman and I have no doubt that Dr. Wilson will do the same. He will stand up for children and amplify their voices as he takes the helm of this critical organization.”

“Rev. Starsky Wilson and I have stood together in protest, policy, and many places in between, and through it all, I have seen him put people first,” said **Brittany Packnett Cunningham, Activist, Founder & Principal, Love & Power Works.** “Whether during our time working together on educational equity, in the Ferguson uprising, or on the Ferguson commission, his values have never wavered, he has always functioned as a true servant-leader, and his determination to protect and uplift the dignity of the most marginalized is unyielding. He is a leader for this time, a leader for this work, and a leader from whom we will all continue to learn a great deal about how to embody justice as we build a more just world. I couldn’t be more thrilled to see him succeed Marian Wright Edelman’s legendary leadership, and look forward to the lasting change that will come for our children and communities under his guidance.”

“There is no better person to take over the helm of this historic organization than Rev. Dr. Wilson. His experience as a community leader will be essential in continuing the tireless work of CDF and taking its work to new heights in its next chapter,” said **Cristina Jiménez, co-founder of United We Dream and United We Dream Action.** “Their work will be more important than ever as we face a global pandemic, disproportionately impacting black and brown communities, systematic racism, attacks on immigrants, and divestment in social programs necessary for children and their families to thrive. With Rev. Dr. Wilson as President, I know that the experiences and voices of children and families impacted by inequity and injustice will be at the forefront of CDF’s work.”

“Starsky Wilson has been a real leader in St. Louis. He clearly has a heart for children and a dedication to service that have had a significant impact in the community. I have benefitted from his friendship and advice. He will be an asset to the Children’s Defense Fund and I look forward to working with him in his new role,” said **U.S. Senator Roy Blunt of Missouri.**

“Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson is an extraordinary bridge-builder who has spent his ministry being a ‘repairer of the breach.’ He has organically created meaningful relationships with young Black Lives Matter activists and civil rights icons. This is not happenstance, but a skill nurtured by a deep commitment to community building and his belief in the power of developing organizational efficiency with courageous compassion,” said **Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III, Senior Pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.** “This is the moment in history where leaders of Rev. Wilson’s caliber are needed to build bridges, speak prophetically, love fiercely, and organize carefully to create a new world for our children yet to be born. When I received the news CDF will appoint Rev. Wilson as President of this incredible institution I was elated!

Forgive me for using scripture to express my emotions, but the only phrase that is appropriate comes from the epistle penned by Paul to the church at Corinth; “Eyes have not seen, ears have not yet heard...” what tomorrow holds for the CDF as it marches into the future under the stellar leadership of a grounded and gifted young servant named Starsky Wilson.”

“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.”

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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. The Children’s Defense Fund 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. We champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty; protect them from abuse and neglect; and ensure their access to health care, quality education and a moral and spiritual foundation. CDF advocates nationwide on behalf of children to ensure children are always a priority.