Rebecca Mercatoris Named First Director of Children Initiatives Department

PITTSBURGH – County Executive Rich Fitzgerald today announced that Rebecca (Becky) C. Mercatoris has been named the first director of the new Department of Children Initiatives (DCI). Mercatoris begins her new role on June 7, 2021.

“This focus on early childhood and education has been a priority of mine for a number of years, even before the referendum. Great things are happening in our economy, but we need to prepare our kids for those opportunities, so they are not left behind,” said Fitzgerald. “Director Mercatoris’ priority, first and foremost, will be to focus each day on helping our children succeed. With her leadership, the department will partner with other stakeholders to provide a childcare system and infrastructure for our children and families. This investment in our future is one of the most important investments we can make.”

An early childhood and education (ECE) professional, Mercatoris has over 20 years of experience in the field. She began her career in a childcare center and continues to support children, families, and ECE and Out of School Time (OST) providers through advocacy and public policy efforts. She has provided local, state, and national leadership around critical ECE issues, including the prevention of suspension and expulsion of young children, public policy supporting infants and toddlers and the ECE and OST workforce, and the adoption of shared services across the ECE sector. Mercatoris has extensive knowledge of the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and implementation of Pennsylvania’s Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), as well as Pennsylvania’s policy, programmatic, and funding landscapes serving children birth to 12 years old.

“Becky’s hiring is just the first step forward in what will certainly be a large undertaking. The challenge of identifying and prioritizing the resources that are most important to families and children is an important part of the work in ‘year zero,’” said McKain. “Under her leadership, the department of Children Initiatives can move us toward a goal where all of our children have access to the same resources and opportunities, regardless of their geography or economic situation.”

In March 2019, County Executive Rich Fitzgerald convened a 26-member working group to look at the creation of a potential children’s fund to provide resources to early childhood learning and out-of-school time programs across Allegheny County. It was co-chaired by Trish Gadson, Ph.D. of Macedonia FACE, and Michelle Figlar of the Heinz Endowments.

“Intentional and equitable efforts in filling the existing gap for early learning and out-of-school time services are vital for our region. I am pleased that the County Executive is establishing this department that will work in collaboration with existing resources,” said Gadson. “While the need for this focus was significant prior to the onset of the pandemic, the current necessity is dire. Congratulations to Ms. Mercatoris. I am confident that her leadership will have a positive impact on our community.”

In October 2019, the Children’s Fund Working Group formally presented a report to the County Executive for his review and consideration. It proposed a mission and vision for a children’s fund, but also set forth core principles for the endeavor including equity, access, quality and accountability.

“I would like to thank County Executive Rich Fitzgerald for establishing the department recommended by the working group that engaged the families and community stakeholders of Allegheny County. I am
grateful to the community for their participation, their voice and their recommendations,” said Figlar. “I have had the privilege of observing first-hand Ms. Mercatoris’ deep commitment to and knowledge of children, families and community at the local, state and federal level. I am confident of the leadership and authentic partnership she will bring to this role. With the Heinz Endowment’s deepened commitment to family and child well-being, my colleagues and I look forward to working in partnership with the Department of Children Initiatives.”

As a result of the report and efforts by the working group, a new county department dedicated to children was proposed in October 2020 and created in 2021.

“As a long-time Allegheny County resident, working mother, early childhood educator, advocate, and policy maker I am immensely proud that Allegheny County has created the Department of Children Initiatives,” said Mercatoris. “All of Allegheny County’s children and families deserve comprehensive, equitable, and high-quality early learning and Out-of-School time services if we are to continue to build our county’s reputation as a great place to live, work, and raise children. I welcome this new opportunity to serve our county’s children, families, child care and out of school time providers as we move forward to a child care and out of school time system that really works for everyone in our county.”

A resident of Ben Avon, Mercatoris was a technical assistance consultant for the Child Care State Capacity Building Center (SCBC) supporting the federal Administration for Children and Families’ Office of Child Care (OCC). She previously worked for Pennsylvania’s Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) as the Bureau Director of the Bureau of Early Learning Policy and Professional Development. Prior experience also includes positions in ECE with the Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children (PAEYC), the Southwest Regional Key, and Tender Care Learning Centers.

Mercatoris holds a Master of Public Policy and Management from the University of Pittsburgh’s Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA) and earned her bachelor’s degree from The College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio.

The Department of Children Initiatives was formed in 2021. Its year “zero” budget totals $443,476. This year will be focused on hiring of essential staff and establishing partnerships with providers, advocates and community leaders.

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