

Q JEVs in the news...

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By Sean Collins Walsh

[Cynthia Figueroa](#), Philadelphia's deputy mayor for children and families, is leaving city government early next year to become CEO and president of JEVs Human Services, a \$100 million nonprofit that provides social services to 30,000 people across the Delaware Valley.

Figueroa said she wasn't looking for a new job when JEVs came knocking, but couldn't pass up the opportunity to lead a large social justice-oriented nonprofit without having to leave Philadelphia.

"I did a lot of thinking over the course of the last year: What is my future going to look like?" Figueroa said in an interview. "At the end of the day, I really want to be here in Philly."

Over the last two years, as the pandemic, racial justice protests, and gun violence crisis put pressure on City Hall, several top administration officials have left the city abruptly and under intense scrutiny. Figueroa's departure, however, follows the traditional pattern of top-level officials leaving government for big jobs elsewhere during the second term of a mayoral administration.

Figueroa, 48, has spent much of her adult life going back and forth between the nonprofit sector and city government. She previously served as the executive director of Women Against Abuse, CEO of the nonprofit Congreso de Latinos Unidos, and deputy human services commissioner when Michael Nutter was mayor.

When she took the top job at the Department of Human Services in the beginning of Mayor Jim Kenney's tenure, her primary goal was to revamp the system for caring for children who are removed from troubled family situations, a [policy area where officials face hard choices](#) between

removing kids from dangerous environments and finding placements where they can thrive and be safe.

At the time, Philly had one of the highest rates of children who were removed from their families in the nation, and the department's license had been downgraded to provisional by the state. Since then, the number of children in placements dropped from more than 6,100 in 2016 to about 4,200 this year, according to the Office of Children and Families, and [the city has regained a full license](#).

"The department was in a very difficult place," Figueroa said. "We set out a vision to rightsize the system, and today we have just around 4,000 kids that are in care, which is a huge decrease."

Shortly after the start of Kenney's second term — and shortly before the coronavirus pandemic reached Philadelphia — [Kenney named Figueroa to a newly created](#) deputy mayor position, consolidating a variety of programs and agencies that serve children and families into her portfolio.

Figueroa said the change reflected that the signature achievements of the mayor's tenure were focused on children and families, from returning the School District to local control to passing the sugary-beverage tax that funds community schools and prekindergarten programs.

Kenney applauded Figueroa's "optimism, tenacity, and energy."

"Under her leadership, family involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems decreased, prevention services increased, PHLpreK expanded to 4,000 annual seats, and more family supports are available at community schools," Kenney said in a statement. "In response to the pandemic, Cynthia successfully led programs that provided food access and created safe spaces for young students while they transitioned to virtual learning."

Figueroa makes \$206,000, and her last day with the city will be Jan. 10. A spokesperson for Kenney said a succession plan will be announced in the coming weeks. She will make \$315,000 in her new role, starting Feb. 7.

JEVS was founded in 1941 as the Jewish Employment and Vocational Service to help refugees arriving from Europe. It has since transformed into a broad social services agency employing 1,000 people that gets a majority of its funding from government, including about \$16 million from the city.

Its programs include WorkReady, which helps underserved youth prepare for the job market; behavioral health and addiction recovery services; and in-home support for adults with intellectual disabilities.

Because Figueroa is leaving city government for an organization that receives city funding, she will be subject to city and state ethics rules restricting the activities of former government officials. The state Ethics Act, for instance, may prohibit Figueroa from representing JEVs in meetings or calls with city agencies that she oversaw for a one-year "cooling-off period" after she leaves the city.

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Figueroa will replace outgoing JEVS president and CEO Jay Spector, who oversaw a significant expansion of the organization during 26 years as its leader.

JEVS board chair Lisa Washington said Figueroa wowed the selection committee in interviews.

“She is just an incredible candidate [with] so much talent experience that is pertinent to what we do, and she also has a broader vision,” Washington said.

Figueroa’s planned exit is the latest in a string of departures that could accelerate as Kenney goes deeper into his second term, although the mayor’s office said no other resignations are planned at the moment.

Managing Director [Brian Abernathy stepped down](#) in September 2020 after becoming the face of the city’s widely criticized response to the civil unrest following the Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd.

Public Health Commissioner Thomas Farley resigned in May after disclosing that he had directed staff to dispose of the remains of victims of the 1985 MOVE bombing that were being housed in the Medical Examiner’s Office. (Days later, the city learned that the remains were not destroyed after all, despite Farley’s orders.)

And most recently, [Commerce Director Michael Rashid](#) on Sunday announced he was stepping down following reports that he had made antisemitic comments and that staff was leaving the agency due to his allegedly abusive managerial style.

Despite the turmoil that beset the administration since 2020, Figueroa said she is proud of the city’s work through the pandemic.

“In true Philly fashion, we don’t always celebrate the successes in the ways that we should,” she said. “When there are difficult situations, they tend to rise to the surface, so I think we didn’t do enough cheerleading for ourselves.”

Kenney is known for a hands-off leadership style, giving wide latitude to top appointees. In some cases, that approach has led the mayor in the wrong direction. Kenney, for instance, has said he regrets following some of his deputies’ recommendation that he authorize the use of tear gas during the George Floyd protests.

But for Figueroa, Kenney’s delegation and his frankness were a winning formula.

“One of the reasons I’ve loved working with him is he’s been nothing but absolutely genuine with me, as difficult and as exciting and fun as those conversations have been,” Figueroa said.