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First Steps Kent appoints interim president as organization plans leadership transition

Search firm begins process to find next leader for organization

Grand Rapids – First Steps Kent has appointed **Cati Cortes** as interim president. Cortes will officially begin as interim president on May 6 following the planned departure of former president, **Annemarie Valdez**.

Cortes first joined First Steps Kent in 2019 as a financial accountant. In this position, she worked with the budgets, processes and partners for the Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage, Shared Services Pilot Project and Early Childhood Systems work.

“I’m excited to serve in this role as interim president and help guide the organization during the transition to new leadership,” said Cortes. “Over the past two years, I have gained a deep understanding of Kent County’s early childhood system, funding partners and community partnerships. I’m joined by an incredible staff that will help ensure we maintain the quality and communication people have come to expect from First Steps Kent.”

“Cati brings a level of experience and continuity during this time of transition for our organization committed to Kent County’s youngest residents,” said **Kate Pew Wolters**, co-chair of the First Steps Kent Board of Commissioners. “We have an amazing team of highly qualified staff and a highly engaged board ready to assist and help ensure her success.”

Following the announcement last month that Annemarie Valdez would be stepping down as president, the First Steps Kent Board of Commissioners convened a search committee to guide the process of selecting new leadership. The search committee, led by Chair **Dr. Juan Olivarez**, has selected the search firm Kittleman & Associates to coordinate the search for a new, permanent president.

“Over the coming months, Kittleman will be conducting a thorough search across West Michigan and beyond for First Steps Kent’s next leader,” said Olivarez. “This presents an amazing opportunity to connect with the Commission, staff, early childhood partners and our community to hear what they are looking for in a new president who can build on Kent County’s reputation as a national leader in early childhood.”

An official job posting is expected to be released by YXX.

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