Greetings, Councilmember Silverman and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify concerning the Adult Career Pathways Taskforce Expansion Amendment Act of 2017. We support the legislation, and hope that greater business involvement in the Taskforce will strengthen it.

Since 2008, DC Appleseed has been advocating improvements to the District’s adult education and workforce development systems as a means to expand opportunities for low-income and low-skilled District residents to achieve economic security and for the city to achieve greater racial equity. In 2014, we released a policy brief identifying the specific challenges for the District in helping a large population of adults who lacked basic literacy skills – primarily Black and Latino – to enter and advance in careers that would lead to long term economic stability. The report identified Career Pathways as the most promising model to achieve this end, and called for the creation of a cross-agency taskforce to identify the strategies by which the District could begin to implement a career pathways approach. The Adult Career Pathways Taskforce was created by Council via Title II, Subtitle M of the Budget Support Act of 2014, and was charged with the specific purpose of developing “a city-wide strategic plan for connecting adult basic skills programs administered in the District to career pathways.”

Soon after the creation of the Taskforce, the federal government reauthorized the Workforce Investment Act as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA). WIOA instituted career pathways as the preferred model for programs supported by these federal dollars. The career pathways model requires that a career ladder or lattice in a high demand industry is scaffolded by aligned and articulated adult and higher education programs and/or occupational skills programs, as well as supportive services to address social, economic and other barriers to persistence, such that new and incumbent workers have readily navigable opportunities to increase skills, credentials, and earnings.

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2 The task force was modeled after the successful Career and Technical Education (CTE) Task Force established by DC statute in 2012 (DCL19-0199). It is clear that the CTE task force has led to important changes in how CTE is designed and administered, and has led to an expansion of CTE opportunities for DC high school students.
3 Because of the timing, the Taskforce reoriented slightly toward developing a strategic plan that could be integrated into the State Plan required by WIOA.
Based on our research, a cross-agency taskforce held the best promise for addressing the challenges inherent in aligning the District’s adult education and occupational training resources in order to serve employers in high growth industries, while making the pathways accessible to and navigable by residents, including those with limited skills. Most states have developed models that begin with adult secondary education and have focused on building bridges to community and four-year colleges. The District took on the challenge of focusing on those with skills at the 6th grade level or lower to accelerate their access to earning opportunities as well as career education and training which typically requires literacy and numeracy skills at the 8th grade level or higher.

The Task Force had a robust beginning, with strong attendance by agency policymakers and an eagerness to work and learn together. Ambitious data collection initiatives were undertaken. But rather than addressing hard system-design questions about agency roles and resources the Taskforce stayed in the much safer territory of identifying shared principles which, while important, kept the conversation at a high level of generality. This also meant that when dollars became available through the Career Pathways Innovation Fund, clear direction was lacking on the best way to use that money to support the development of a new model, and initial funds were spent instead on technical assistance for the Workforce Investment Council (WIC).

It’s not clear to me what role the Taskforce played in designing and issuing the recent RFP that supports adult education and occupational training programs in partnership with businesses, using WIOA Title II funding and WIC/Career Pathway Innovation Funds. It certainly laid the groundwork for this innovation in District practice. This grant program represents an important step in the direction of building integrated education and training (IET) capacity in the District. Unfortunately, though, it appears as if the Taskforce – to the extent it still convenes as a committee of the WIC – has been reoriented toward providing technical assistance to programs, both grantees of OSSE/WIC and non-grantees, which again, though useful to some, does not engage in the system-level work that the Task Force was established to take on. We cannot expect adult literacy programs to design and create robust career pathways in the District. The model and the leadership should be coming from industry leaders in partnership with WIOA partner agencies.

Councilmember Silverman, we appreciate your commitment to the Adult Career Pathways Task Force, and the current legislative proposal to expand it to include business representatives as well as additional Council oversight. We need businesses not only engaged in our workforce development system, but we need to give them leading roles. With this proposed expansion, I hope that members of the business community who agree to participate in the Taskforce will bring the urgency and insight necessary to help reset the course for the group, and help ensure that the business of system alignment from basic skills through post-secondary education and training gets done.

Thank you.