

**Testimony of
DC Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
Neil Richardson, Deputy Director
Council of the District of Columbia
Workforce Investment Council Oversight Committee
February 9, 2022**

INTRODUCTION

DC Appleseed is a non-profit research and advocacy organization dedicated to making the District a better place to live and work for all. For over 25 years, DC Appleseed has been an advocate for improving the lives of those who are most vulnerable, including children, the elderly, those at risk for HIV/AIDS, and those with special needs.

DC Appleseed is submitting this testimony to urge the Council to better invest in the city's seniors and disabled to the maximum extent possible. We applaud that the proposed budget maintains and increases investments school-age children, and believe it is critical that the budget do the same for our elderly many of whom have suffered through the bad times and the better here in the District. Both of these investments must be made if we are to give our city the full opportunity to maximize its potential as both fair and inclusive. Particularly at a moment when the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately harming people of color and residents are focused on ways to better invest in at-risk communities, it is critical that the budget not shortchange our most vulnerable and long-term residents.

BACKGROUND

The direct service health care sector is in CRISIS. Across the country there is a serious problem in the shortage of home health workers (and other direct support professionals) who provide hands on services to senior and people with developmental and intellectual disabilities and in the District the problem is more acute. There is a shortage of workers and the pay is so low that dog walkers, delivery drivers and Amazon warehouse workers make more. There is very little consistency in the training of these workers, some programs are free, and others require tuition. The percentage of people who pass the various and confusing array of certifications and licenses is low; there is both a problem with the number of workers and the quality of training is very uneven. To make matters even more challenging, the majority of home health workers live in Maryland due to the high cost of living in DC. We believe that this sector needs to be engaged by a variety of agencies in DC government and that progress will only be made if we convene all the related agencies and boards together. We also note that the vast majority of workers are women of color. DC Appleseed believes that more must done to support front line home health workers now, while we endure (we hope) the final stage of the pandemic, and we urge the Council to advocate for longer term support for these important workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

DC Appleseed recommends the following to better support Home Health workers:

1. Advocate to INCREASE wages to \$22 in 2022
2. CONVENE all responsible government agencies together
3. Recognize that this is an EQUITY issue

Advocate to INCREASE wages to \$22 in 2022

In the best of times, home health workers are poorly compensated and there is a severe shortage in DC and the metropolitan region for high-quality workers. As the District's population ages there will be increasing need for home health workers and in a sense, we will be competing for workers with all the neighboring jurisdictions. There is little incentive for people to become home health workers in light of the fact that getting certified requires many hours of education and the pay is the same for people who work in other jobs that require little to no training.

In 2013 the DC Living Wage at \$13.40/hour was 62% higher than the minimum wage (\$8.26/hour) in 2021, the DC Living Wage is at \$15.20/hour is the same as the DC Minimum Wage. On January 1, 2022 the DC Living Wage increased to \$15.50, meaning that home health aides and other direct support professionals will receive only 30 cents more an hour in their paychecks. Calculations by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) suggest that a real living wage in DC should be \$22 an hour.

DC Appleseed recommends that in the short term the WIC advise the Mayor, City Council and other entities that it convenes to support using the American Rescue Plan Funds to supplement and support the pay for home health aides and other direct support professionals. Over half of the states are using these funds to do this including New Jersey which is raising wages to \$23/hour. **Therefore, we urge the WIC to use its bully pulpit to advise that wages in this sector be increased to \$22 an hour.** Over the long term we must continue to support these jobs with better pay and benefits.

CONVENE all government agencies with the WIC board and include more health sector stakeholders

The WIC more than any other entity in the District plays a unique role connecting government to the private sector. The challenges in the sector are partly due to the extreme complexity of the variety of entities training, certifying, employing and reimbursing different segments of the sector. In the District, the complexity resembles a Rubik's Cube more than another else, where one movement both influences and depends on the cubes finding a way to be in sync. DC Appleseed believes that there is also insufficient representation on the WIC board with health care stakeholders considering the importance of this sector and in accordance to projected job growth. With stronger representation from the health care sector and especially the long term care sector DC Appleseed believes we can make progress on this vexing issue.

The WIC Board is comprised of representatives from the private sector, local business leaders, government officials and other organizations under the auspices and funding of District government. DC Appleseed believes there is no better entity in DC to bring all the parties together to better coordinate this sector. The District must work with employers, agencies, training

providers, health care organizations and other entities if we are find a permanent solution to this crisis. **Therefore, we urge the WIC to bring together its board with other government agencies including but not limited to Department of Employment Services, Office of the State Superintendent for Education, Department of Health, Department of Health Care Finance, Board of Nursing and education and training providers including the University of the District of Columbia.**

Recognize that this is an EQUITY issue

The vast majority of home health aides and other direct service health care workers are women and people of color including many immigrants. Systemic racism has long harmed the lives of people of color in the long term care sector from the creation of these poor quality jobs, through the decades long exclusion of home care workers from federal wage and overtime protections, to the widespread racial discrimination that people of color and immigrants continue to face regarding employment, housing, education and health care.

The WIC can become a champion in calling for all segments of the workforce system including employers, training providers, community based organizations and government to bolster support for better pay and recognition about these essential jobs. As DC and the nation look for ways to become more just and to level the playing field for people of color and women from providing a guaranteed basic income to appointing chief equity officers in government, there are few better remedies that paying people fair wages who are doing essential work serving our most vulnerable residents. **Therefore, we urge the WIC (including using the expenditure guide) to collect better race and gender data in order to identify disparities in recruitment, hiring, retention and other workforce outcomes.** With the correct data we can ensure that the right investments are being made in our workforce system and we can identify interventions in the system that could lead to better education, training and employment outcomes.

CONCLUSION

DC Appleseed stands for a just and fair inclusion of every individual in a society in which the opportunity exists for all to flourish and in which systems are structured such that all can participate, prosper, and achieve their full potential without regard to race, age, gender or disability. There can be few priorities more important than ensuring that our seniors and disabled neighbors receive the best support possible.