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**Testimony of MJ Gray, Policy Volunteer
DC Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
Performance Oversight Hearing:
Committee on Transportation & the Environment
February 21, 2025**

Chairman Allen, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today regarding the performance of the DC Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE). My name is MJ Gray, and I am a Policy Volunteer at the DC Appleseed Center for Law and Justice (“DC Appleseed”). DC Appleseed is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization that aims to make the District a better place to live and work through litigation, teamwork, and advocacy. Throughout our history, we have taken on some of the District’s most challenging problems, developed and proposed solutions to those problems, and then worked to implement our proposed solutions.

In May 2024, I graduated with a B.A. in Environment, Sustainability & Policy from Syracuse University, and now I am working with DC Appleseed’s environmental justice and health equity teams. My work at DC Appleseed focuses on climate resiliency, particularly ensuring our city mitigates the risks of rising temperatures that disproportionately impact DC residents living on low incomes, seniors, and individuals with chronic health conditions.

Our testimony today was prompted in part by a dashboard published on the National EMS Information System website, which reflected that DC has the highest rate in the country of EMS activations on extreme heat days. That resource was maintained by the National Highway Traffic Safety

Administration, which relies on federal grant funding. Unfortunately, as a result, that dashboard has since been removed from the internet in compliance with presidential executive orders. The removal of this type of information from federal government websites underscores the need for the District to create and maintain its own public dashboards.

DOEE's "Keep Cool DC" plan is a promising start for organizing the approach to confronting these effects. The "Keep Cool DC" plan lays out broad-level strategy for how certain heat mitigation initiatives could expand in the future. However, the plan lacks key support elements, such as a timeline, concrete action items, and funding allocations.

The "Keep Cool DC" plan highlights the importance of data and research to better understand heat sensitivity and exposure throughout the District. Specifically, the plan calls for heat maps that are regularly updated, as well as heat studies. Today, we are proposing that DOEE launch a heat dashboard as a key step towards implementing the "Keep Cool DC" plan. Specifically, we ask that DOEE expand the collection of heat study data and publish this information through a comprehensive and regularly updated public-facing Heat and Health Dashboard.

A Heat and Health Dashboard would serve three critical purposes: educating the public, establishing the need for implementing future heat mitigation, and tracking the effectiveness of these initiatives.

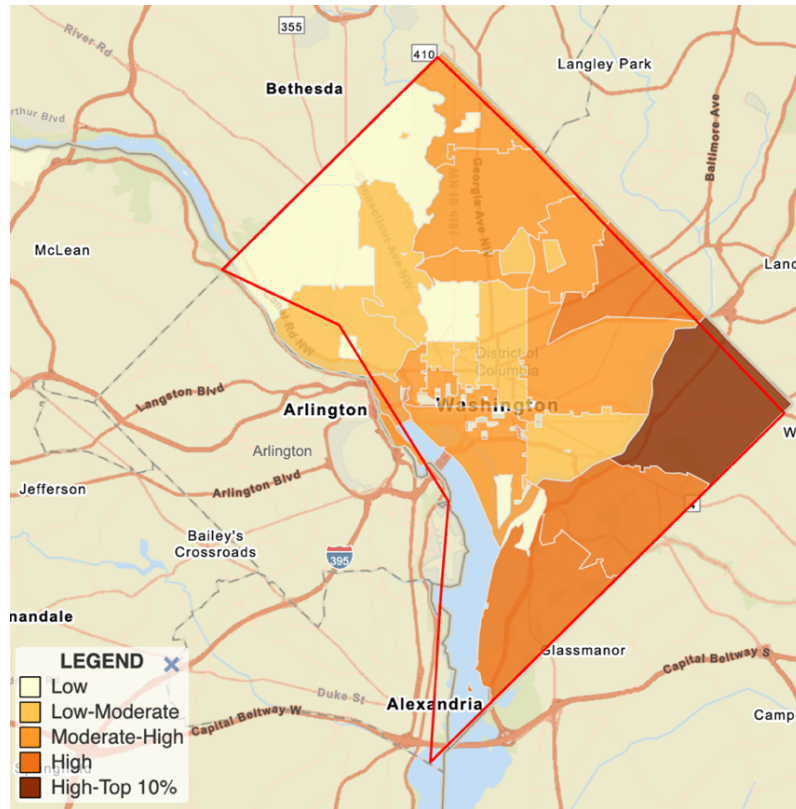
1. *Educating the Public:* The dashboard would serve as an all-encompassing, one-stop shop for public education on DC's heat risks. Displaying this data collectively in one place will improve the information's accessibility to the public and dramatically improve DOEE's outreach efforts to the community.
2. *Establishing the Need for Heat Mitigation Strategies:* By gathering data on the health, community, and economic impacts of extreme heat, segmented by ward, this information will provide the foundation needed to highlight the urgency of heat mitigation. A concrete dataset that clearly

illustrates these risks will be instrumental in securing funding for the implementation of future heat mitigation programs outlined in the “Keep Cool DC” Plan.

3. *Tracking the Effectiveness of Implemented Strategies*: Monitoring these datasets now will establish a baseline on which to assess the effectiveness of the future heat mitigation programs.

A Heat and Health Dashboard is essential to monitoring and raising awareness of the disproportionate effects of heat on particular populations or neighborhoods. Factors such as age, race, disability, and pre-existing conditions (i.e., asthma and other respiratory illnesses) increase an individual’s susceptibility to health issues from high heat and poor air quality, while broader community factors – including poverty rates, access to transportation, and housing – affect a neighborhood’s resilience. The majority of these factors are captured in the CDC’s Heat and Health Tracker using their Social Vulnerability Index, which identifies DC neighborhoods located east of the Anacostia River as particularly vulnerable to extreme heat (as shown below in Figure 1).

Figure 1:



Source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024.

However, the CDC's data, which is based on 5-year estimates from the American Community Survey (ACS), may not fully reflect the current vulnerability of DC's populations. The ACS has a national focus, resulting in a very small sample size for DC. In 2023, only 3,825 households were surveyed, which is less than 1.3% of the more than 300,000 households in the city.¹ DOEE can and should develop a more precise and timely Heat and Health Dashboard that includes community-level data to accurately reflect DC's socio-economic landscape. To effectively improve the District's heat mitigation efforts, it is imperative that DOEE collects and shares data that builds a historical record and supports future analytics.

1. US Census Bureau. (2024, September 12). *Sample size*. American Community Survey (ACS).

We recommend that DOEE track the following metrics for **each of DC's wards**:

- **Temperatures and air quality by ward**
 - **Temperature:** Track temperature variations between wards during the summer months, highlighting how the built environment and urban heat island effect impact different areas.
 - **Days exceeding heat threshold:** Record the number of days exceeding DOEE's high heat threshold of 95°
 - **Heat index:** A “feels like” temperature factoring in humidity
 - **Air quality index:** Overall index of major pollutants
 - **Pollutants:** Display levels of each major pollutant that could exacerbate preexisting health conditions
- **Energy usage and costs:** Document how energy usage changes during extreme heat events and the subsequent energy costs during summer months.
- **Industrial land usage and green space availability:** Record figures on the amount of land per ward that contributes and combats the urban heat island effect (impervious surfaces vs. green spaces).
- **Public transit utilization:** Monitor the rate of public transit use during summer months to assess how extreme heat affects ridership. People who rely on public transit, particularly waiting outside for the bus, have an increased vulnerability to heat-related health risks.
- **Air conditioning access**
 - **Percent of residential homes without reliable air conditioning:** Assess AC access including public and subsidized housing.
 - **Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) funds used for AC:** Track the portion of LIHEAP funding for cooling assistance and summer crisis assistance (currently 13% and 5%, respectively).
 - **Utility affordability index:** Determine percent of household income spent on utilities in summer months.
- **Heat mitigation effort participation:** Record utilization of cooling centers and other government heat mitigation programs as they are implemented (E.g., utility assistance, heat ambassador programs, mobile AC unit distribution).

Portions of this dataset may already exist and need only to be organized by ward. With the option to display data by ward, residents can more clearly see how their community is impacted and which communities are most impacted by high temperatures.

Expanding data collection and sharing at DOEE will also lay the foundation for future cross-agency collaboration, including analysis on the impacts of human health, and the economic costs of extreme heat – ranging from healthcare expenses to work and job impairment. In 2024, DC Health launched a dashboard displaying rates of emergency calls from heat-related illness. Through cross-agency collaboration, DC agencies could build a unified and comprehensive Heat and Health Dashboard for the District, serving as a



model for other cities nationally. In the appendix to this testimony is a list of datapoints which DC Appleseed recommends be collected from multiple DC agencies for inclusion in a comprehensive Heat and Health dashboard. While cross-agency collaboration can take time to achieve, the first step toward this goal is for each agency to collect the data within their purview. DOEE can begin the process by creating a public-facing dashboard that includes the data discussed earlier in this testimony.

Educating the community on the risks of extreme heat events is essential for improving public health responses and connecting residents to government support and emergency resources. As climate change accelerates and sculpts our landscape, it is critical for DC to build the infrastructure needed for future mitigation efforts. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. We appreciate the opportunity to partner with the DC Council Committee on Transportation and the Environment and the Department of Energy and the Environment to address this pressing threat to DC residents.

Appendix 1:

**DC Appleseed's Proposed Data Points for
District-Wide Heat and Health Tracker**

- **Social vulnerability index:** Combining these factors (including age, impoverishment, disability, job industry, crime, AC access, etc.) to display an accurate DC heat vulnerability tracker by ward.
- **Temperatures and air quality by ward**
 - **Temperature:** Track temperature variations between wards during the summer months, highlighting how the built environment and urban heat island effect affect different areas.
 - **Number of days exceeding heat threshold.**
 - **Heat index:** A “feels like” temperature factoring in humidity.
 - **Pollutants:** Display levels of each major pollutant that could exacerbate preexisting health conditions.
 - **Air quality index:** Overall index of major pollutants and temperatures (Note: DC Health’s Environmental Health Administration is looking to implement PurpleAir Monitors throughout the city that would be capable of providing this dataset from multiple location points per ward).
- **Energy usage and costs:** Record how energy usage changes during extreme heat events and the subsequent energy costs during summer months.
- **Industrial land usage and green space availability:** Develop figures on the amount of land per ward that contributes and combats the urban heat island effect (impervious surfaces vs. green spaces).
- **Air conditioning access**
 - **Percent of residential homes without reliable air conditioning:** Assess AC access including public and subsidized housing.
 - **Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) funds used for AC:** Track the portion of LIHEAP funding for cooling assistance and summer crisis assistance (currently 13% and 5%, respectively).
 - **Utility affordability index:** Determine percent of household income spent on utilities in summer months.
- **Heat mitigation effort participation:** Record utilization of cooling centers and other heat mitigation programs as they are implemented (E.g., utility assistance, heat ambassador programs, mobile AC unit distribution).
- **Public transit utilization:** Monitor the rate of public transit use during summer months to assess how each transit method is affected by extreme heat events.
- **Healthcare utilization from high heat and poor air quality**
 - **Emergency Medical Services (EMS) calls/visits:** Tracking EMS calls for heat exhaustion/stroke and dehydration.
 - **Heat-related and respiratory illness deaths,** if applicable.
 - **Respiratory illness crisis:** Monitoring serious asthma-related events and acute bronchitis.
 - **Mental health crisis episodes/hospitalizations.**
- **Healthcare capacity**
 - Number of available beds in local hospitals during heat spikes by ward.
 - Number of available cooling centers and their capacity by ward.
- **Healthcare plans for heat and storm events**
 - Populations vulnerable to climate events receiving critical medications during environmental crises.



- Participation rates in those programs.
- Pharmacy survey on transportation and medication pickup during climate events.
- **Participation in job industries affected by heat:** Record percentage of residents from each ward who work in outdoor job industries (e.g., construction, agriculture).
- **Insurance claims relating to heat:** Document insurance claims caused or exacerbated by heat (such as roof damage/cracking, asphalt cracking, fire, AC failure, electrical failure, pipe bursts, water tank failure, tire damage, commercial product spoiling, etc.).
- **Heat-related worker's injury compensation:** Track heat-related illness or injuries in outdoor job industries.
- **Rates of theft and other crimes** during extreme heat events.
- **Unemployment rates** during summer months.