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Testimony submitted on behalf of Beyond Literacy.

Public Hearing on the importance of adult education as part of Pennsylvania's workforce development system

Before the: Pennsylvania Senate Labor and Industry Committee

Presented by:

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About Beyond Literacy

In spring 2021, the merger between Center for Literacy (CFL) and Community Learning Center (CLC) brought together 87 total years of adult education experience that has created measured impact for the communities we serve. In 1968, Center for Literacy was established as a volunteer tutoring program in West Philadelphia. Over the years, CFL became the largest adult literacy provider in both the city and state. Two decades later, Community Learning Center was founded with the goal of educating adults who had not finished high school, soon after earning the distinction of being the best in the city and among the top performers statewide. Following our merger in June of 2021, the two agencies now comprise what is known as Beyond Literacy, the largest provider of adult education and workforce readiness in Philadelphia.

Prior to becoming Beyond Literacy, CFL and CLC independently demonstrated our effectiveness in preparing adults to pass standardized assessments required to earn the high school equivalency diploma (GED). The strength of our programs in this area was especially evident at the end of 2020, the last year for which official state data have been released, and a year that was cut short in the 4th quarter because of the COVID shut-down. Even under those circumstances, CFL and CLC met or nearly met the state standard for GED graduation (90%), with test pass rates of 80% and 90%, respectively.



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Greetings to the Pennsylvania Senate Labor and Industry Committee:

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to provide you with testimony that emphasizes the importance of adult education and our effort to prepare often marginalized adult learners for family-sustaining careers. My name is Marcus Hall and I am the Director of Workforce Development for Beyond Literacy, the second largest Title II adult literacy provider in the Commonwealth. At Beyond Literacy, we are working to expand the idea of adult education to not only include preparation for the GED or HiSET assessment, but development of academic, technical and non-technical skills.

We serve more than 2,000 students per year and our students represented a very diverse community composed of:

- Approximately 30% justice-involved learners
- 40% English language learners
- 70% considered low-income using federal guidelines
- More than 60% are job seekers

My colleagues with the Pennsylvania Association for Adult and Continuing Education will be able to share vital statistics and testimonies that will address the urgent need for support, but the perspective that Philadelphia brings to the conversation is heart-wrenching but still optimistic.

It is no secret Philadelphia's status as the most impoverished major city in the United States. Philadelphia's poverty rate is double the national average and the highest among the ten largest cities in the U.S. Research clearly shows the link between low literacy... poverty, poor health and the likelihood of incarceration.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) recently released an interactive mapping tool comparing State and County Indicators of Adult Literacy and Numeracy based on 5 years of data -- indirect estimates of 1,170,200 Philadelphians, ages 16-74. The indicators reveal:

- 32% of Philadelphian adults lack basic literacy; another 37% are only nearly proficient in reading, adding up to more than 800,000 Philadelphia adults who struggle to read.
- The math stats are even worse: 49% of adult Philadelphians lack basic math skills; another 29% are not quite proficient in math. That's nearly 1 million Philadelphia adults who struggle to perform tasks requiring anything higher than basic level math.

These staggering numbers add up to the fact that most Philadelphia adults lack literacy and numeracy skills necessary to thrive and contribute to our city's workforce under normal circumstances, let alone post-COVID-19. For our immigrant population who lack proficient English language skills, they too are struggling to contribute to our city's recovery. This can seem insurmountable if not for the proven effectiveness of adult education. In the face of such extraordinary data, it is imperative that we connect Philadelphia adults to much needed adult education services and work strategically to empower and elevate our city's most marginalized residents.



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Research also shows that an investment in adult education is an investment in the health, safety, welfare and wealth of ALL Philadelphians -- an investment in changes that matter.

- Changes like the increase of \$10,000 per year that GED graduates earn once they get their diploma.
- Changes like the \$225 billion gained in tax revenue and reduced expenses for every 400,000 adults nationally who earn a high school diploma.
- Changes like the \$232 billion annually saved in reduced costs for public support programs for adults with low skills and low literacy levels.

I'd like to introduce you to three adult job seekers that have enrolled in our program and the level of complexity need to traverse system inequality.

Martha was already a community leader prior to enrolling in adult education classes. She was a vocal community outreach individual that knew the importance of education and workforce development in her community. Despite living in a part of Philadelphia with one of the highest rates of gun violence, it wouldn't be surprising to see Martha speaking to young men and women all across her community. COVID-19 pushed this issue front and center for Martha. Both her teenage boys, high school age, dropped out of school due to a stressful transition to the remote instructional environment. The combination of the remote environment, lack of digital literacy and without the consistent instructional support discouraged her sons and now put them at greater risk of becoming a victim of the gun violence she advocates against.

In 2021, Dr. Ruth Abaya with the City of Philadelphia Department of Health mentioned that zip codes with higher rates of chronic unemployment also have more shooting victims. The connection, according to Dr. Abaya, is more pronounced for men and boys ages 16 to 64, particularly Black and Hispanic men and boys. Over 80% of zip codes in the City of Philadelphia have high rates of chronic unemployment and gunshot victims. Despite the reports lack of specific recommendations, Dr. Abaya underscored the need for the city to invest in "targeted and sustainable" employment initiatives that include training and mentorship

Martha returned to adult education classes during COVID to not only increase her chance of earning a more lucrative position but also to show her sons that will is the most important determinant for success. If she can return to the classroom after decades of hiatus, her sons have no excuse.

According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, 75% of state incarcerated individuals have not completed high school and/or are classified as functionally low literate – this was the case for our second student Roberta. Roberta returned home from incarceration in 2018 and her first goal was to receive her high school equivalency so she can compete for a family-sustaining wage. Unfortunately, her length of incarceration and limited access to technology made her completely unprepared for the digital environment she was entering. Roberta developed a fear of working with computers and throughout her studies tried as much as possible to avoid them.

When COVID-19 forced instruction to transition to remote, Roberta was not optimistic about her ability to transition. Our Digital Navigator program allowed her to get her own computer with a hotspot to establish a WIFI connection. Unaccustomed to virtual meeting spaces such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, Roberta eventually



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reached a point where she could easily host a session, establish breakout rooms and communicate consistently with her instructor via email and chat. Despite COVID and the remote transition, Roberta completed two of her subject test and is now halfway to reach her goal of earning an HSE.

Matthew dropped out of high school when his mother passed away. Without much family support nor stable housing, he decided to pursue work and try to manage on his own. One day while working at a local convenience store, the manager approached Matthew and asked him to take a shovel and scrap off some dead cats from the back of a dumpster behind the store. He decided enough is enough and enrolled in our high school equivalency program. Since he was not too far removed from his high school experience, he re-acclimated to the classroom setting relatively well and passed his GED subject tests to receive his high school equivalency.

Matthew also enrolled in our Keystone Energy Employment Pipeline Pre-Apprenticeship program that provided him with entry level contextualized energy industry instruction, industry recognized credentials, and received advanced standing when applying for the Weatherization Installer Technician Apprenticeship program with a local employer.

This week is the National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week, a time to highlight the important role adult education plays in our long-term success as a nation. For every 400,000 adults who earn a high school diploma, we gain \$2.5 billion back in tax revenue and reduced expenses. That's \$6,250 per person.

State association and state agency leaders from across the country are meeting with their governors and members of congress this week to share the value of Adult Education. We speak with one voice as we call for increased funding of \$1 billion to deal with the impact of COVID-19 on our local programs, many of which were under funded to begin with. State leaders should act now to make the investments we need for economic recovery and long-term success of our country.