



Date: March 13, 2024

To: Committee on Health, Council of DC

From: Makeda Vanderpuije, Executive Director, LeadingAge DC

Re: Direct Care Worker Amendment Act of 2023 (B25-0565)

Good afternoon, Chairperson Henderson and members of the Committee on Health, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Makeda Vanderpuije and I am the Executive Director of [LeadingAge DC](https://www.leadingagedc.org), an association representing mission-driven organizations serving older adults across the District, including nursing homes, assisted living, affordable housing, Senior Villages, home and community-based services, and Life Plan Communities (CCRCs). We are part of a national network of more than 5,000 non-profit organizations serving older adults across the United States. I am also a District resident and an active member of the District of Columbia Coalition on Long Term Care's Workforce Development Committee.

I am testifying to express LeadingAge DC's support for the Direct Care Worker Amendment Act of 2023

I commend Chairperson Henderson and the seven co-sponsors of this groundbreaking bill addressing the direct care workforce crisis, and thank you for your leadership. The LeadingAge DC provider members who have collectively served many thousands of older adults in our community across hundreds of years, applaud this effort to support and rebuild this essential healthcare workforce and remain committed to providing high quality care to some of our most vulnerable residents. If enacted, this Act has the potential to enrich the lives not only of direct care workers, but also of our elders and the community at large.



The necessity of this legislation is highlighted by the rapidly growing population of older adults in the District – the Office of the Budget Director estimates that over the next five years approximately 44,200 residents will turn 65 years old and increasingly, residents will require support with tasks of daily living at home or in a facility setting. It is especially troubling then, that the professional caregivers who make it possible for family members to work in a fulfilling profession, and for elders to be cared for and age with dignity, are leaving the field for jobs that are less difficult, require less training and pay more money.

Though LeadingAge DC members employ creative strategies in efforts to recruit and retain professional caregivers, they remain at a disadvantage, unable to afford to compete with wages paid by hospital systems, staffing agencies, and even entry-level positions at companies like Target and Starbucks. The fifth annual [Direct Care Workforce survey](#), released by the DC Coalition of Long Term Care Providers, reports a continuation of the alarming upward trend of persistently high turnover rates and difficulty hiring new workers, experienced by providers who are unable to pay competitive wages due to inadequate reimbursement rates.

The wage increase proposed in the Act, guaranteeing direct care workers a minimum wage of no less than 120% of the District's general minimum wage, is a positive step towards providing a living wage. You've heard from other witnesses that the bill as currently written does not go far enough to recognize the value of this critical workforce. *I encourage the Committee to include language to ensure that providers are fully reimbursed for their labor costs, so that workers can see their earning power grow with experience.* Fair compensation for this workforce, which is overwhelmingly represented by



women of color and immigrants, is in alignment with the Mayor's priority to provide a Fair Shot to District residents faced with rising costs of living, stagnant wages, and structural inequity.

Combining the training curriculum and certification for these two credentials as well as expanding reciprocity of this certification, as proposed in the Act, will improve the flexibility of direct care workers to work across settings and borders, meet provider needs, and reduce financial and administrative burden. Likewise, the reduction in age for direct care worker certification to 16 is a welcome change, *however, the language in the bill at Section 102(b)2) must be amended to ensure that all students actively pursuing a high school diploma or its equivalency are eligible to train and secure a paid job before graduation.*

The current shortage of direct care professionals trained and certified to work in DC, including home health aides and certified nursing assistants, is a pressing crisis to our healthcare system with dire impacts for community institutions, older adults, people with disabilities and their families across our city. This crisis is driving up costs, compromising the quality of care, and leaving vulnerable seniors without the care they need. Given the urgency of our current and forecasted circumstances, *I urge the Committee to call for timely and swift identification and elimination of barriers to the development and support of on-the-job training programs and registered apprenticeship programs.*

While we recognize that finding or creating revenue to fund needed pay increases and workforce training is challenging, this is an investment in the health of our residents that we cannot afford to overlook. Direct care workers deserve a living wage that supports their families without needing to rely on overtime and public benefits to make ends meet. Older adults need access to timely, quality care to



support good health and manage health challenges before they become more costly. Mission-driven providers ought to be able serve those in the community who need care, while keeping their employees paid well and their facilities safe and open. Young people and those looking for a career change should see professional caregiving as a fulfilling career with potential for wage growth and professional advancement.

Our elders have so much to contribute to our communities, sharing hard-earned wisdoms, providing childcare and mentorship, volunteering and so much more. LeadingAge DC members, largely not-for-profit organizations, and the direct care workers that they employ, are committed to providing high-quality care, services, and supports that empower aging residents to live with meaning, purpose and dignity.

To do so, they need your continued support and *a coordinated all-of-government approach to finding long-term solutions for this workforce crisis, as well as reimbursement at a level that allows them to cover costs and pay a fair, living wage to direct care workers and other licensed professionals.*

LeadingAge DC is ready and willing to support the Committee and partners in realizing a future where all District residents can age well and thrive. Thank you for your thoughtful consideration in proposing this Act as a major step towards addressing this crisis.

I welcome any questions that you may have.