Good morning Chairperson Bonds and members of the Committee on Housing & Executive Administration. I am Winnie Huston and I represent DC Greens, a non-profit that works to advance health equity by building a just and resilient food system. I come before you puzzled and disappointed by this Committee’s introduction of the Senior Nutrition and Well-Being Equity Amendment Act of 2022. I ask why are we spending taxpayer funds on moving a piece of legislation that tasks the Department of Aging & Community Living (DACL) with doing the work it should be doing anyway - improving its operating processes, implementing strategies to regularly communicate with seniors, getting input from seniors on how to improve services, and reporting on these efforts to the Mayor and the Council.

We must tackle senior food insecurity head on. It is a persistent and growing problem that is negatively impacting the health, quality of life, and independence of DC seniors. The latest data on The State of Senior Hunger in America shows that DC continues to have the highest senior food insecurity rate among US states at 13.1%, an increase from 9.6% in 2016. This means that approximately 15,000 seniors lack consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Although we don’t have a complete picture of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on senior food insecurity, we do know that seniors are using nutrition services at a higher rate than before the pandemic. Research shows that the number of seniors facing food insecurity will grow in the coming decade, as the senior population is expected to increase by over 20,000 by 2030.

The time has passed for piecemeal approaches to addressing senior hunger. We must stop making excuses for failing to take necessary steps to address this crisis facing some of our most vulnerable residents. This Committee should shelve this toothless Senior Nutrition bill and focus on getting seniors the help they need by moving the No Senior Hungry Omnibus Amendment Act of 2021 (No Senior Hungry). The No Senior Hungry legislation was informed by six months of research by a working group of
representatives from Council offices, District agencies providing nutrition services, community-based organizations serving District seniors, and seniors themselves. At the public hearing on the No Senior Hungry legislation, 33 seniors and community groups testified before this Committee on the importance of passing the bill which takes a comprehensive approach to addressing senior food insecurity. Government agencies must be identified and specifically tasked with actions to make it easier for seniors to access nutritious food and nutrition services.

The major provisions of the No Senior Hungry bill require:

- The Department of Aging & Community Living (DACL), Department of Human Services (DHS), Department of Healthcare Finance (DHCF), DC Health, Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), and the Food Policy Council to work with community organizations that serve seniors and impacted seniors to develop a plan to improve the City’s response to senior food insecurity.
- DHS to increase senior SNAP participation by, among other things, implementing the Elderly Senior Application Project (ESAP), create a standard medical deduction to simplify the collection of medical expense information, allow community-based organizations to access the SNAP enrollment system on behalf of clients, and implement senior-targeted outreach for online SNAP.
- OSSE to increase adult day care participation in a federal program that provides reimbursements to service centers that offer nutritious meals and snacks to eligible participants.
- DHCF to expand covered services under the Medicaid program designed to provide seniors and persons with physical disabilities with home-based healthcare services, home-delivered meals, nutrition supplements, and medical nutrition therapy.

We must work together in a coordinated effort - government agencies, the private sector, and community members to build effective systems to address the needs of hungry seniors. A bill that asks one government agency to do a better job of providing core functions is not the answer.

Doing what’s right is often complicated and requires elected officials who hold the sacred power conveyed by voters to have the political will and the strength of character to do what’s difficult. Frederick Douglass said “... If there is no struggle there is no progress... Power concedes nothing without a demand...”
You have the power to task DHS, DHCF, OSSE, and DACL to simplify processes and to take advantage of federal resources in order to provide more robust services for seniors in need. I call on you Madame Chair to lead this Committee, the full DC Council, and the Executive to stand up for hungry seniors. Pass the No Senior Hungry Omnibus Amendment Act of 2021.