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Testimony of Liliana Polo-McKenna
Interim CEO – Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow (OBT)
Testimony before – Youth Services Committee – 5/30/17

Thank you Hon. Chairperson Eugene and fellow members of the Council. I am pleased to be here today to provide testimony regarding youth workforce bill – Intro 709-A

OBT is currently NYC's largest provider of workforce development and education services for the "Opportunity Youth" population – young adults ages 17-24 not currently working nor in school. OBT has four Workforce Investment & Opportunity Act (WIOA) Out-of-School Youth (OSY) contracts under the administration of DYCD. These four contracts combined, along with an equal amount of funding from private foundations, including the Robin Hood and Tiger Foundations, enables OBT to serve 420 youth through its full-time, 20-week, nationally recognized business skills job training with integrated High School Equivalency (HSE) model. This model provides the most comprehensive academic and vocational support needed to move these youth to self-sufficiency. In addition, OBT administers four Young Adult Internship Program (YAIP) contracts that enables us to serve an additional 360 youth in the targeted neighborhoods of Bed-Stuy & Bushwick, Brooklyn, Jamaica, Queens, and a special citywide program for foster care youth. In total, including our adult literacy portfolio for people 18-years and older, OBT serves approximately 1,300 disconnected youth annually. Throughout our 34-year history, we have continually exceeded our contractual goals, and we have been cited by NYC as one of the most successful providers of youth services programs, focusing on opportunity youth.

On November 22, 2016, my predecessor, Randolph Peers, testified before this committee, expressing support for Intro 708, which proposed the creation of a *Disconnected Youth Task Force*. This strategy was one that reflected the need for increased coherence and efficiency between government and youth development providers. At that time, Intro 709 was also being discussed. This bill proposed increased authority of youth workforce programming be given to SBS. For a variety of reasons, including the distinct nature of youth workforce programming and the unique needs of opportunity youth, OBT, like many other youth workforce providers, believed that oversight should remain with DYCD. Following this hearing, it was our understanding that SBS would be collecting data on disconnected youth who came through their offices. However, upon review of 709-A, it is a renewed proposal to amend the City Charter, effectively calling for a shift in oversight of youth workforce programming to SBS. It is unclear why this is being re-introduced and what the intention such a shift is.

Beyond proposing that SBS directly administer youth workforce programming, Intro 709-A lifts language directly from DYCD's Request for Proposals (RFP) for

OSY contracts. In fact, the responsibilities outlined in this legislation reflect the very nature of the work that DYCD carries out in support of “disconnected youth” in partnership with youth development and workforce providers across the city. In particular, there are key roles we would like to highlight, which OBT believes are well-situated and should remain with DYCD:

1. “Identify obstacles impacting disconnected youth who seek the department’s youth workforce development services, including but not limited to, issues related to transportation, child care, housing, health care and substance abuse, criminal justice, and language and cultural barriers...ensure that disconnected youth are connected with city agencies or community based organizations that will enable them to address those obstacles” – There are distinct needs present in this population that require careful coordination of services and resources, as well as a strong youth development approach. DYCD recognizes the need to build a network of support for “disconnected youth”; it also understands that no single agency can provide the level of service required for youth with multiple barriers. As such, DYCD brings program staff together to build capacity across the system, leverage expertise across providers, and build the necessary bridges with city agencies that are best suited to provide support.
2. “Develop and implement or connected disconnected youth with education programs that will encourage disconnected youth to explore opportunities to pursue a college degree or a technical or vocational career education” – DYCD has developed partnerships with CUNY in order to ensure that young people in workforce programs can access advanced training opportunities across CUNY campuses. These advanced training options reflect labor market research and trends across NYC. Additionally, in partnership with other city agencies, DYCD provides support to college access program staff to ensure best practices are being shared and utilized across providers.
3. “Connect disconnected youth with on-going follow-up services, such as adult mentoring, work-related peer support groups, additional education or career pathway development training...” – Perhaps one of the most powerful features of the DYCD portfolio of programs is that youth have an opportunity to access a continuum of services that best meets their needs, whether it is the Young Adult Literacy Program, SYEP, or OSY. This type of continuum are ultimately most effective for creating long-term pathways into the city’s workforce.

In closing, we believe that the implications of Intro 709-A are far-reaching, and negatively affect our city’s ability to effectively coordinate services and resources for youth who have already fallen through the cracks in our systems. We do not support this legislation and we hope you consider its various consequences.

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