

**Antonio Cardona's Testimony, Vice President of Career Readiness at Project for Pride in Living  
HF 2070 and SF 1998 – Direct Appropriation**

Thank you Chair Xiong and thank you Committee Members.

I appreciate the opportunity to address the committee and share with you information about Project for Pride in Living. At PPL, we live every day at the intersection of housing and jobs. We provide 1,600 units of affordable and deeply affordable housing and a suite of integrated workforce and education solutions. Housing and jobs are the two pre-requisites to lift and keep people out of poverty and provide a foundation for self-determination. We cannot afford to ignore the training needs and talents of the people in our community who will be keys to our future.

We are here before you today requesting a second direct appropriation to complete and sustain our programs we designed with the first appropriation, where we have been able to advance additional career pathways and launch two programs that would not have fit into existing DEED grant categories. The ability to innovate and be as responsive to community as possible is critical during this time.

Before diving into the impact these programs have had, I'd like to share a bit about why our programs are so important to our community and our state. Minnesota has the third largest wealth gap in the nation. This metric is a result of many factors including the homeownership gap, unemployment and under-employment, and educational attainment. These are all factors that were created by policies and disinvestment. And reinvestment and policies and practices that are proven to work can help to mitigate these challenges. We know that available jobs are rapidly outpacing those that are unemployed. That means that it is imperative to ensure that no one is left on the sidelines. We also know that alongside a decrease in population growth and an aging workforce, most of the workforce growth is going to come from communities of color.

With that imperative in mind, we set out to pilot new programs to help address these challenges. Just one example is our Diploma Connect program which is intentionally designed to meet our participants where they are and allows them to earn a standard adult diploma, issued by the State of Minnesota. You will hear more about this from one of our students.

We also used our first appropriation to create a new and innovative approach to apprenticeship pathways and quick job matches where employer partners are co-developers of talent and fully fund their own training and sourcing. This allows us both to be responsive to real time needs in the market and provides a sustainable model to deploy highly responsive career readiness programs as well as high quality, diverse talent that employers are desperately seeking.

In addition to these important new programs, we have also been able to increase enrollment in our job readiness and job search program that we intend to continue as the labor market continues to tighten. As these pilot programs are fully built out, we expect they will increasingly be able to sustain themselves through private funding and other existing sources.

As a trusted, and core provider of workforce services, PPL prides itself on outcomes and metrics.

- 70% of people enrolling in our programs make \$20,000 or less a year. Upon successful completion and hire, they double that wage with an average of \$40,000 a year.
- Approximately 80% of the people we serve are people of color.
- 85% of our graduates have a 12-month retention rate with their new employer.

- In a Benefit-Cost Analysis conducted by Constellation Fund, every dollar invested through PPL's Career pathways results in \$9 of personal economic value, as well as decreased costs to public services in the future.

In short, we have a long track record of being a trusted partner that delivers results for our participants and our community. I appreciate your time and ask that you support this important work and invest in the communities of Project for Pride in Living.

**Antonio Carnell's Testimony, Student in Project for Pride in Living's Diploma Connect HF 2070 and SF 1998 – Direct Appropriation**

Good afternoon, Chairman Xiong and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Antonio Carnell, and I am a student at Project for Pride in Living's Diploma Connect adult high school diploma program.

While my path to this diploma has been a long one, I know my experience is not unique. I am here today to tell you about the circumstances that led me to this program with the hope that others in my situation will be able to benefit as I have.

As a freshman at South High School in Minneapolis, I was juggling academics with the demands of outside affiliations I had become involved with. Unfortunately, the outside demands won out, and I found myself disengaged from school and failing my classes. I dropped out of South with only 3 completed credits. I later enrolled in Waseca High School's Alternative Learning Center, where I attended school sporadically until I turned 21, and then aged out of k-12 schools. At the time, after seven years of high school, I was 6.25 credits short of the graduation requirements.

A couple years later, I tried a classroom-based GED program in Minneapolis. While I appreciated the opportunity to complete my education in this way, I was frustrated by the slow pace of the program -- it was for turtles, and I wanted to move like a hare. There was no flexibility to work at home or move at a faster pace, and if something came up where I needed to miss any class time, there was not a good way to make up the work. In addition, I knew that I wanted a diploma, not a GED. I know everyone says they're the same, but I think an actual diploma looks better to employers and colleges, and that's what I wanted.

Luckily, last summer, my Hennepin County probation officer told me about a new program in Minneapolis, where I was staying in transitional housing and trying to find work. I contacted PPL and immediately enrolled, becoming one of their first students when they opened in July of 2022. Working with the teachers at Diploma Connect, I was told I would be able to count the high school credits I had already earned and then complete the remaining courses at my own pace. And that I would get a diploma, not a GED. They gave me a laptop so that I could work at home and not be limited by classroom hours, and they worked with me to understand the materials and finish up my assignments whenever I had problems. They even worked with my probation officer to get in touch with me when some personal issues came up and my phone number changed. It's like I have a whole team behind me who really take the time to understand me and make the program work for any situation that comes up.

I am currently working on my last assignment – a short research essay – and will be graduating next month. This is great timing because I just enrolled in a forestry program through Hennepin County Probation. I am really excited about this because working outside is something I love to do, and it will be a path toward my goal of someday owning my own landscaping company. After this forestry training, I am planning to go to community college to take more classes, including some business classes, to continue with this career.

Without PPL and Diploma Connect, I don't know if I would have found an option to complete my diploma. The flexibility of the program and personal approach are what got me to this point. I am really proud of myself for sticking with this and really happy I found this program. Now, some of my other family members are interested, and I have been able to show them how successful they can be.

I hope my words today help you understand the importance of PPL's Diploma Connect program and all the people they can help.

Thank you for your time today.