We write to you to urge you to preserve critical funding for adult literacy programs in New York City. The $12 million in adult literacy funding supports over 7,500 adult basic education (ABE), high school equivalency (HSE), and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students in community-based adult literacy programs, CUNY campuses, and libraries across NYC. These programs are designed to help New Yorkers gain the literacy skills and credentials they need to successfully integrate into their communities and increase their employment and earnings potential. From immigrant New Yorkers looking to improve their English skills so they can support their children’s education and improve their employment prospects, to native-born New Yorkers with interrupted formal education due to family care needs, health issues, or other circumstances who now are seeking to earn their high school equivalency diplomas, these programs reach thousands of New Yorkers each year. Adult literacy programs and providers are part of the larger human services sector, providing critical services to millions of New Yorkers. This sector must be kept whole as human services providers will be on the frontlines as our City responds, reopens and recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are living at a moment when the need for digital literacy and health literacy; the ability for parents to independently support their children’s education; and the ability to access, understand, and interpret complex information; has never been more apparent. Yet, today in New York City, there are more than 2.2 million adults who lack basic literacy, numeracy, English language proficiency, and/or a high school diploma. Many of these 2.2 million adults are on the frontlines of the current pandemic, performing essential work that is sustaining our communities. Some are the grocery store workers, delivery workers, and home care workers who are risking their lives to maintain their livelihoods and to care for us all. Others are the restaurant workers, salon workers, and domestic workers who have lost their jobs and incomes and face a harsh reality with no safety net. Adult literacy education – and the additional support services that adult literacy programs provide – will play a vital role in the coming year to help stabilize the lives of many of our most essential, yet vulnerable, fellow New Yorkers. Adult literacy programs have the potential to now reach thousands of adults who may not have been able to dedicate the time to continue their education in the past, individuals who may now be able to pursue their HSE, or ESOL students who could be working on learning English using web-based curricula. The educational gains made during this time can prepare our adult learners to help restart the economy instead of leaving them even further behind.

Adult literacy programs are frequently the main connection that immigrant adult learners have to the wider network of New York City’s programs and services. This has become even more evident in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Programs have quickly and effectively pivoted to remote support for adult learners by altering group activities, providing information on the rapidly changing health situation, and transforming programming to ensure that adult learners do not get lost. Using online platforms like Google Classroom and Zoom, students continue to learn grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing, while also continuing to learn how to complete employment applications, write resumes, and practice conversational skills. Non-English speaking parents are being supported through these classes, leaving them better prepared to take on a greater role in the education of their school-aged children, a role that has become necessary in our current environment. There are thousands of adult literacy students and prospective learners that are home, scared, and in need of the support that a trusted teacher provides them.

The benefit of keeping program staff employed is critical for New York State as we face economic uncertainty and extreme public health concerns as a result of COVID-19. Thank you for your efforts to
ensure that adult literacy programs can remain whole, as they provide vital education and support to vulnerable New Yorkers during this pandemic. We look forward to working with you to restore $12M in essential funding for community-based adult literacy programs.