

 **PROLITERACY**

Improving lives and communities through adult literacy

November 25, 2008

Ms. Melody Barnes  
Domestic Policy Advisor  
c/o Obama-Biden Transition Team  
Washington, DC 20270

Dear Ms. Barnes:

As president and CEO of ProLiteracy, representing a network of adult literacy and basic education programs in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, I congratulate you on your appointment as Domestic Policy Advisory for President-elect Obama. ProLiteracy and its membership look forward to working with you on adult illiteracy issues in the United States.

The attached document reflects the needs and concerns of the people who are on the frontlines of adult literacy in this country — the program directors, teachers, volunteer tutors, and the adult learners. It calls for specific and immediate action on the part of President-elect Obama and you as his chief advisor on critical issues of domestic policy. This document also calls for a change of attitude on the part of the Administration — to recognize adult illiteracy as a real problem in the U.S. and to formulate national policy to address the issue. This has not been done in the past.

ProLiteracy and its membership offer you our experience, expertise, and enthusiasm as you take on the challenge of adult illiteracy in America. I have enclosed additional information about ProLiteracy and this important issue. Should you require any further background data, please don't hesitate to call me.

I look forward to hearing from you soon to arrange a meeting. Please feel free to contact me at 315-422-9121, ext. 234, [dharvey@proliteracy.org](mailto:dharvey@proliteracy.org).

Sincerely,



David C. Harvey  
President/CEO  
ProLiteracy

ENC/rac



## First 100-Day Plan for Adult Literacy in the U.S.

### The Problem

Thirty million adults in the U.S. can barely read and write; an additional 63 million have significant gaps in basic literacy skills. This data, gathered through the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), describes a crisis in American life that affects virtually every aspect of our economy. It affects the ability of American workers to find and keep jobs that pay living wages and the ability of the United States to compete globally.

A disproportionate number of those who are unemployed, lack health insurance, and require public assistance are adults who struggle with daily tasks that involve reading, writing, and math. Research shows that adult education and skills development are key factors in addressing societal issues. When their literacy skills improve, adult learners find jobs, get better jobs, and take better care of their health and the health of their families.

### **Adult low literacy is connected to every socioeconomic problem this country faces today.**

**FACT:** More than half of the inmates in our state and federal prisons are illiterate. Inmates who receive basic literacy instruction during or after incarceration are less likely to return to prison. The average cost of housing a prison inmate is \$25,000 a year. It costs \$500 - \$800 for one year of adult literacy instruction.

**FACT:** One-half of the two million immigrants legally entering the U.S. each year are not literate in their own language. This makes it more difficult for them to gain the English-speaking skills they need to find jobs, advance to better jobs, and maintain safety on the job. Programs that provide these individuals with English-as-a-second-language instruction need support if they are to keep pace with the demand for their services.

**FACT:** Annual Medicare costs for adults with low literacy skills are more than four times greater than costs for others; medication errors, long hospital stays, and overuse of emergency rooms attributed to low literacy cost as much as \$238 billion a year — enough to fund health insurance for every uninsured individual in the U.S.

**FACT:** Basic literacy, GED preparation, and English-as-a-second-language services are provided by community-based organizations (CBOs) and adult basic education (ABE) programs. More than 90 percent of these programs have waiting lists for classroom space or tutors. People who seek out literacy services understand that they can change their lives and their families' lives by improving their reading, writing, math, and computer skills. They took that first important step by contacting a program — only to be told that it will be months before they can begin.

**FACT:** Current federal appropriations to adult literacy and basic education programs, combined with state matching dollars and philanthropic donations, make it possible for only 3 million adults to receive instruction.

### The Solution

Adult literacy and basic education is a fundamental human right. ProLiteracy calls for the following 100-Day Plan:

### **1. Include Adult Literacy Funding in Economic Stimulus Package.**

ProLiteracy calls for \$50 million in funding to be made available to adult literacy and basic education programs

**Rationale:** Millions of adults in the U.S. need to improve their English reading, writing, math, and computer skills to find jobs that pay a living wage and to keep those jobs. This is true during times of economic stability. It is especially critical during today's economic crisis. Without the assistance of local adult literacy and basic education programs, these individuals likely will need unemployment benefits and other forms of public assistance, adding to the drain on already-strapped local communities. Federal support for these programs now will bring a significant return on investment.

### **2. Reauthorize and Update the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1999 (AEFLA, also known as Workforce Investment Act Title II).**

ProLiteracy calls for an Act that includes program requirements and evaluation methods that are flexible enough to meet the varying capacities of local literacy and adult basic education programs. These programs must meet the needs of all adult learners –new readers, those transitioning to higher education, and everyone in between.

**Rationale:** The largest source of federal funding for adult education and literacy, AEFLA, has not been reauthorized since 2003. Reauthorization creates an opportunity to review the Act and to make adjustments necessary to keep its provisions relevant to the needs of individuals currently using the system.

The Education Department must revise data collection and evaluation provisions related to the implementation of AEFLA, including the National Reporting System. Programs should be tailored to meet the wide range of needs and circumstances of the learners they serve. Instruction should support students' learning styles, challenges, and abilities. The evaluation methods need to reflect the many reasons learners cite for entering a program — to help their children become better students, to stay healthy, and to vote as well as to get a job or get a better job.

### **3. Fund a national study on the scope and size of the adult literacy problem and develop a national plan to reduce adult illiteracy in the United States.**

ProLiteracy calls for up-to-date information regarding the status of adult illiteracy for the federal government, business and industry, the K-12 education system, adult literacy and basic education programs, institutions of higher learning, and the American public.

**Rationale:** The most recent assessment of adult literacy in the United States was completed in 2003; results were released in December 2005. The "small area estimates" component of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) has yet to be released, despite repeated requests from ProLiteracy and local programs.

The NAAL data was two years old at the time of its release; the "latest" information available regarding the English reading skills of America's adults now is more than five years old. The state, county, and city level literacy data contained in the small area estimates is important to local programs' efforts in seeking public and private funding. When this information is finally released, it too will be more than five years old.

It is not enough that we collect information on this national issue. Data on its own has little value. It is the plan we make and the actions we take based on the data that will make the difference in our efforts to address illiteracy in the U.S. It is this essential step that has been missing from prior data collection efforts; it must be included in future studies.

- 4. Establish an Undersecretary of Adult Literacy, elevating the assistant secretary for vocational and adult education. Create an education/adult literacy “czar” to be part of the White House domestic policy council. Appoint a nationally recognized expert in adult literacy to the directorship of National Institute for Literacy (NIFL).**

ProLiteracy calls for the issue of adult illiteracy to receive the attention of the federal government that the size and scope of the problem deserves.

**Rationale:** Creating an adult literacy “czar” and establishing an Undersecretary for Adult Literacy will elevate awareness and emphasize the importance of the issue within the federal government. It also will promote discussion of adult literacy in other areas where it is a factor but has not been addressed adequately; for example, health care, poverty alleviation, employment and workforce skills, and crime prevention.

Congress’s original intent in establishing the National Institute for Literacy was to provide a focus on adult literacy and education that it felt was lacking in the Education Department. Over the past several years, however, the Institute’s focus has shifted from that original mandate. It is imperative that the Institute’s focus be returned to its original purpose.

- 5. The existing adult literacy and basic education system should be the primary service provider for English-as-a-second-language instruction in any immigration reform program President-elect Barack Obama considers.**

ProLiteracy calls for additional federal funding to the current system to support a significant increased demand for services.

**Rationale:** The existing adult literacy and basic education system already is well-established as a primary source of English-as-a-second-language instruction in communities across the country. Teachers and volunteer tutors have received appropriate training for working with adults.

- 6. Create research and demonstration projects on new and innovative community-based adult literacy and basic education practices, using leadership grants and other mechanisms available under AEFLA.**

ProLiteracy calls for program models that will help dedicated teachers, trainers, and tutors to translate research findings into effective classroom practice.

**Rationale:** The adult literacy and basic education field is heavily populated by part-time teachers who are certified in K-12 education and volunteers who receive considerable training before becoming tutors. Program directors require technical assistance to enable them to build program capacity and to design innovative, state-of-the-art programs. We call on President-elect Obama to use leadership grants and other mechanisms already available under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act to conduct research that identifies best practices. The federal government should use this information to create program models, pilot these programs in the field, and then make them available.



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## ABOUT PROLITERACY

### The Issue of Adult Literacy

In the United States, 30 million people over the age of 16 struggle with daily literacy tasks — understanding a newspaper story written at the eighth grade level, following the directions on a medicine bottle, adding numbers on a bank deposit slip.

Around the world, 800 million men and women are illiterate in their native languages, leaving them vulnerable to poverty, disease, and human and gender rights abuse.

**ProLiteracy is a nonprofit international organization that advocates for adult learners and represents a network of people and programs that help these adults learn to read, write, and do basic math.**

### ProLiteracy Worldwide

- Analyses public policy and works with federal policy makers to promote legislation and public policy that help reduce the number of low literate adults in the United States.
- Works with international nongovernmental organizations to integrate reading, writing, and math instruction in programs to start and maintain new businesses, improve health care, establish peace, end gender abuse, and improvement the environment in developing countries of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America
- Publishes materials used to teach older teens and adults reading, writing, math, and English as a second language
- Trains literacy program directors, teachers, trainers, and volunteer tutors in efficient program operation and methods for teaching adults in one-on-one, small group, or classroom settings

Each year, ProLiteracy touches the lives of nearly one million adults who realize that being able to read, write, understand, and perform basic math is the way to improve their lives, their families' lives, and the communities where they live.



## Adult Low Literacy to the U.S.

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) estimated that 30 million individuals aged 16 and over read at the “below basic” literacy level. This means that they struggle with such simple daily tasks as: understanding a newspaper story written at the eighth grade level; choosing an item from a menu; using a television guide; and filling out a job application. An additional 60 million adults read at the “basic” level, not well enough for the requirements of today’s high level, high technology jobs.

Low literacy in the United States affects the country’s ability to be competitive in the global market. It can be linked to crime rates, raises the cost of health care, and costs local, state, and federal governments billions of dollars each year:

- Labor economists indicate that 70 percent or more of all future jobs will require some education beyond high school.<sup>1</sup>
- The lower an individual’s reading level, the more likely he or she will be unemployed.
- Low literate adults are more likely than strong readers to use taxpayer-supported public assistance and welfare programs and state-funded medical care.
- 22 percent of all inmates in state and federal prisons can barely read and write, according to the 2003 NAAL. In Connecticut, the average yearly cost of keeping an inmate in prison is more than \$44,000.<sup>2</sup> The average cost of one year of adult literacy instruction ranges between \$500 to \$800.
  - Adult literacy programs in prisons work. The Maryland State Department of Education reports that inmates who participated in education programs while in jail commit fewer crimes after release, are more likely to find work after they are released, and behave better while they are incarcerated.
- The 120,000 California young people who leave high school without a diploma cost the state \$46.4 billion in unemployment, crime, state-funded medical care, welfare, and lost taxes.<sup>3</sup>
- The District of Columbia would save \$70 million a year in crime-related costs if the male graduation rate increased by 5 percent.<sup>4</sup>
- A study at the Feinberg School and Northwestern Memorial Hospital showed that low literacy impairs people’s ability to obtain critical information about their health and can shorten their lives by as much as five years.<sup>5</sup>
- Low health literacy costs the U.S. an estimated \$106 billion to \$238 billion each year. That represents 7-17 percent of all personal health care money spent annually, and is enough to ensure the 47 million Americans without health coverage.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jones, Dennis and Patrick Kelly, *Updated Profiles for all 50 States and Including International Comparative Data*, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, May 2007

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, Paul, *Costs of Prisons Soar. Medical training costs almost as much as a year in medical school*, The Republican-American, March 2, 2008 (The Real Cost of Prisons Weblog)

<sup>3</sup> The California Dropout Research Project, February 28, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education, *The State Card Report*, March 14, 2008

<sup>5</sup> Baker, David, MD, *Health Literacy and Death Rates*, Archives of Internal Medicine, July 23, 2007

<sup>6</sup> Vernon, John, Ph.D., Trujillo, Anthony, Ph.D., Rosenbaum, Sara, JD, and DeBuono, Barbara, MD, MPH, *Low Health Literacy: Implications for National Health Policy*, University of Connecticut, October 2007