I am Dr. Bill Dietz, Chair of the Sumner M. Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness at the Milken Institute School of Public Health, George Washington University. The views expressed in this testimony are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the George Washington University.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the Zero Waste Omnibus Amendment Act (B23-506). This legislation would help make the District a leader in efforts to combat climate change through reducing food waste and increasing composting.

One of the charges of the Redstone Center is to help make the District the healthiest capital city in the world. To improve the health of all residents and end the chronic disparities in the District, we must have a food system that provides access to nutritious food for all residents and is sustainable. Recently, I served as co-chair of The Lancet Commission on Obesity. In 2019, the Commission released a new report called “The Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition, and Climate Change.” The report found that three pandemics—obesity, undernutrition, and climate change—constitute a syndemic, or synergy of epidemics, because they co-occur in time and place, interact with each other to produce complex sequelae, and share common underlying societal drivers. The report calls on global leaders and policymakers to rethink economic incentives and commercial interests within the food, transportation and land use systems and recommends actions that would address these growing public health problems. While many solutions will require policy change at the national or international level, cities play a critical role in implementing and testing strategies to create sustainable food systems that deliver healthy food to all people without jeopardizing the health of the planet. These double duty solutions are part of what is proposed in the Zero Waste Act.

Food waste is responsible for approximately 8% of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG). The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that if food waste were a country, it would be the third largest emitter of GHGs behind the United States and China. The Natural Resources Defense Council has found that food waste in the United States is responsible for as much GHG emissions as 37 million cars. Food waste contributes to climate change in two ways—emissions related to
producing and delivering food that will get thrown out and release of methane, a more destructive GHG than carbon dioxide, caused by food rotting in landfills. Effective strategies that reduce food waste and send less waste to landfills can reduce GHG emissions. Cities can and should play a leading role in this effort and there are a number of promising examples from other jurisdictions. Many of these strategies are also double or triple duty solutions in that they both reduce GHG emissions while also addressing problems such as obesity and malnutrition that are connected to our food system. For example, policies that increase food donations to food banks and other organizations of food that is past the “sell by” date, but still safe to eat, reduces GHG emissions and reduces malnutrition and under nutrition.

There are a number of policies that have been adopted at both the city- and country-level that are showing positive results. Efforts to change labeling on food to include a “sell by” date as well as a “use by” date, indicating how long food is actually safe to consume, result in less food thrown out by both grocery stores and private individuals. Grocery stores can help this effort (and make nutritious food more affordable) by lowering prices as food approaches the “use by” date. Many municipalities are also increasing connections between commercial generators of food waste, namely restaurants and grocery stores, with organizations that provide food to residents experiencing food insecurity. This can be accomplished by both mandatory policies (requiring “expired” food to be donated as is done in France) and voluntary or incentive-based policies. In New York City, pick-up of compostable waste is charged a lower fee than non-compostable waste and an on-line portal exists to facilitate donation of unwanted food from business to local community-based organizations that can use it to feed residents in need. For the non-commercial sector, a number of cities, including Baltimore, Denver, Los Angeles and San Francisco, have adopted residential composting of food waste. Early data from these new programs have shown substantial reductions in organic waste going into landfills. Seoul, South Korea reduced food waste by nearly 95% by instituting a fee on food waste and making composting convenient for all residents.

The District has shown a willingness to lead on climate change. As a member city of both the American Cities Climate Challenge (ACCC) and the Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40), the District is at the forefront of committing to reducing GHG emissions and mitigating the effects of climate change. Reducing emissions from food waste are among the strategies used by the ACCC and C40 networks. The legislation before the committee would go a long way toward positioning the District as a leader in this space. The legislation has four primary components in regards to reducing food waste and increasing composting. First, it would require development of a comprehensive plan to manage organic waste in the District. Second, it would implement mandatory composting for large commercial food waste generators. Third, the bill would strengthen the District’s food donation infrastructure by directing DOEE to establish a Donation and Reuse Program. Finally, the bill would amend the Solid Waste Disposal Cost Recovery Fund to expressly support new and/or additional methods of waste diversion.
The legislation is worthy of support as introduced, but there are several areas where it could be strengthened:

1. Include a residential component, either to establish a curb-side composting program or amend the comprehensive plan section to include developing a plan for non-commercial composting.

2. Provide both mandates and incentives for composting by commercial generators. Incentives could be used to encourage participation by smaller commercial food waste generators. These might include no-cost technical assistance or support or assistance with paying pick-up or other fees/costs associated with composting.

3. Invest in a public education campaign with information about the benefits of reducing food waste and resources on how District residents can do so. For example, Seattle attributes a substantial portion of their success in lowering food waste to a robust public education campaign.

4. Create a platform for food donations that can improve linkages between local CBOs, food retailers, and other entities with food that would otherwise be discarded.

Confronting climate change is the defining challenge of our time and cities will continue to play a leading role in this work. Given the inaction by the Federal government and the current administration, it is imperative that cities address climate change with urgency and effectiveness. In addition, the policies contained in the Zero Waste Omnibus Amendments Act would serve as double-duty solutions that would lower GHGs and address other pressing problems in the District, including lack of equitable access to healthy and affordable food. I urge the committee to strengthen and move forward with the legislation.