



Hearing on “Bringing Prosperity to Left-Behind Places: How Targeted Place-Based Development Can Expand Economic Opportunity”

Statement for Mr. Levon Johnson, President and CEO

Chairman Himes, Ranking Member Steil, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

I am here to talk to you about the City of Elkhart, Elkhart County, Indiana, and surrounding region. My testimony today will focus on our regions work to identify, develop, implement, evaluate, and continuously improve the economic station of everyone involved in our labor market.

The City of Elkhart has a population of 54,000. Elkhart County’s population is 207,000. We belong to the five county South Bend Elkhart Region, which includes three counties in North Central Indiana and two in Southwest Michigan and has a combined population of 732,000.

Like every community, Elkhart County has a combination of traits that make us unique. I am often asked what characteristics have allowed Elkhart County to remain an economic bellwether for the country. We believe our collaborative spirit, entrepreneurial ecosystem, economic resilience, philanthropic nature, and cultural diversity are the right mix that provide for opportunities in our communities.

We believe that place-based initiatives rooted in local inclusion and at the direction of impacted stakeholders have led to sustainable practices that give us the ability to be agile in all economic climates.

We also understand that there are common threads of challenges that impact all communities regardless of state, city, or zip code. Local identification of those challenges and the convening of community minded individuals and organizations has led to innovative and creative solutions.

Through regional collaboration we have established a goal of being in the top 20% of metro areas for minority income equality by 2030.

Prior to the inception of the South Bend Regional Partnership, Elkhart has been focused on four areas that aim to decrease the income disparity in underserved communities. Commitment to decreasing the skills gap in a continuously changing work environment, increasing access to wi-fi and internet service across our community, providing counseling and mentorship for aspiring and early stage entrepreneurs, and investment in quality of life projects has led to outcomes that have grown engagement by our underserved communities.

Coming out of the recession of 2008 and in-the-midst of the pandemic in 2020, Elkhart continues to exhibit economic resilience that is founded in grass root efforts that reflect the community’s identity. It is my belief that everyone in this room has the same goal of decreasing the wealth disparities that exist. Progress towards that goal takes surgical precision that deals with local needs assessments and is controlled by local stakeholders.

Again, I want to thank you for allowing me to be a part of this conversation and share Elkhart’s story.