



**Lorain County
Urban League**

Written Testimony of Dee Baker

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“Renewing Prosperity in the Industrial Heartland: An Economic Agenda for Forgotten Communities.”

Select Committee on Economic Disparity and Fairness in Growth

Monday October 18th 1:00 pm – 2800 Pearl Ave, Lorain, OH

Chairman Himes, Ranking Member Steil, Congresswoman Kaptur, and Members of the Select Committee on Economic Disparity and Fairness in Growth, thank you for the opportunity to testify today at the committee’s field hearing on “Renewing Prosperity in the Industrial Heartland: An Economic Agenda for Forgotten Communities.” My name is Dee Baker, and I serve as Director of Outreach and Civic Engagement for the Lorain County Urban League.

Since its founding in 1978, the Lorain County Urban League has been devoted to empowering African Americans and other historically marginalized groups to enter the economic and social mainstream. From its earliest days in the civil rights movement, through years of partnership with government and public agencies, the Lorain County Urban League has been a beacon of hope and a catalyst for positive and lasting change in Lorain County. Our mission here is undoubtedly inspired by Lorain-native Toni Morrison, the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. It was in this very city—in buildings like the Carnegie Library, where Morrison worked during high school—that her love for reading and literature began to bear the kind of fruit that later earned her national recognition, including a Pulitzer Prize, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom by former President Barack Obama in 2012.

Our vision is to create a pathway for clients to increase their income, secure housing, and become financially stable using a holistic coaching approach to deliver housing, employment, financial, and educational services.¹ Last year, we served 6,944 people. We supported 71 elementary and high school students with after school tutoring, college and company tours, workshops, and internships. Our Employment Program helped address the needs of the underemployed and unemployed by providing 130 job seekers with individual job coaching, employment information and access to various employers through hiring events. Our Entrepreneurship Services assisted 80 Lorain County entrepreneurs with management, technical, financial and contract procurement assistance in addition to loan and bond packaging services in an effort to help them sustain and expand their businesses. Additionally, we supported over 800 businesses applying for the State of Ohio Small Business Relief Grant program, 61 of which received \$10,000 grants to help their businesses stay afloat and recover from the devastating economic challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹ <http://www.lcul.org/services>

Through our HUD-certified Housing Counseling Assistance services, 468 renters and homeowners in Ohio received counseling assistance in 2020 to better understand the financial tools and resources they can tap to avoid facing eviction and foreclosure, improve their living conditions, and resolve landlord and tenant issues. The crucial counseling services provided to these individuals included budgeting, credit management training, and homeownership readiness assistance. As a result of our efforts, 94 percent of these clients developed a sustainable household budget, 26 percent received an updated credit report, 5 percent participated in financial education workshops, and 74 percent benefited from rental and foreclosure prevention counseling. Moreover, of the 94 individuals that came through our pre-purchase counseling program, 72 percent became proud homeowners.

Across the nation, the National Urban League provides technical support and resources to help 91 Urban League affiliates across 36 states and the District of Columbia stand up economic empowerment programs in education, workforce development, housing counseling, and small business development.

Economic Struggles, Opportunities

The economic struggles of Lorain County mirror the devastating fate many other Rust Belt regions in the Midwest have faced over the last three decades. Across the region, manufacturing industries that once turned natural resources into economic wealth have faced precipitous decline due in large part to advancements in automation and the expansion of global trade, leaving many of the small towns that once served as the country's economic heartbeat on life support.

Each year, companies in Lorain County continue to shutter, placing workers in an increasingly precarious position. So many companies have downsized, forcing full-time workers to subsist on part time hours and pay. Laid-off steelworkers are struggling to find work and provide for their families. Their cars have been repossessed. Their homes have been forced into foreclosure. They have suffered both a financial and mental toll.

As recent Census data reflect, Lorain County is increasingly losing young residents aged 25 to 44, a worrisome trend given that these individuals make up the majority of working-age adults in America. This so-called "brain drain" adds challenges to economic resurgence and the recruitment of new companies to this region, and has negative implications on job growth, health care, and the tax base that funds area schools and social services.

Meanwhile, the "sandwich generation" of individuals are trying to keep their children healthy and send them to school while also caring for their older family members, and at the same time have faced layoffs, downsizing, and cut hours. They are trying to survive COVID physically, mentally, and financially -- often dipping into retirement funds (if they exist) early and draining any savings they have. This reality means these workers will need to work later into life. We have to ensure there is opportunity and security available for middle-aged workers, as they are a source of stability for older and younger generations.

The effects of globalization on the local economy have only been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic -- accelerating layoffs and business closures, and limiting economic opportunity overall -- but especially for workers of color and low-income workers.

Be it a result of the pandemic, globalization, or both, many workers in Lorain County are asking themselves “Do I retool? Do I try to do something different? How and where do I get help to start the process?” These individuals need access to job training, wrap around services and support like help with housing, access to computers, and more.

Our organization recently hosted our 7th annual Diversity and Inclusion conference, called Destination Financial Wellness, focused on building financial literacy and skills necessary to build economic security. Every day, the Lorain County Urban League works tirelessly to serve the whole family -- we had the pleasure of working with a husband and wife who had been impacted by downsizing to get them ready for new opportunities. At the end of their time with us, both individuals got new jobs with livable wages and cried tears of joy in our office.

Policy Solutions and Promising Practices

As the economy continues to evolve, be it from globalization, a pandemic, technological advancement, climate change, etc, workers need access to the training and supports necessary to retool and thrive in any job. Workforce development is a key feature of our organization because we have recognized its absolute importance to the economic empowerment of African Americans and other historically underserved individuals.

Additionally, the Lorain County Urban League has seen an increased need for access to computer devices and high speed internet. We have tried to fill this gap by creating our own computer lab, so our clients can be connected to jobs and develop valuable skills navigating technology. However, this is a bandaid on the underlying problem the majority of our families face, which is the lack of access to a computer device or broadband at home.

Our organization has a small staff but we make our numbers count. We have a culture of service and servant leadership, to deliver the best resources and opportunities to our community. In fact, during the entirety of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lorain County Urban League never closed our doors. People know and trust the Lorain County Urban League. We can go where others can't go.

Because of our experience supporting our clients as they face economic challenges as a result of globalization in particular, we were so glad to see President Biden's Build Back Better Agenda and Infrastructure Plan. As negotiations for these legislative vehicles continue, we urge you to hold fast to the bold promises and investments, especially surrounding workforce development, higher education, the care economy, housing, small and minority-owned business, and broadband. Given the disparate economic and public health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people of color, it is imperative that the federal government target these resources to communities most in need.

Congress should ensure that investments in job training and workforce development are substantive and targeted at underrepresented populations and individuals with high barriers to employment. It is equally as important that national and community based non profit organizations that promote skills development, technical training, internships, and job placement opportunities for African Americans and urban community members also have access to federal job training funds. Investments in higher education should increase access, affordability, and completion of degrees and certifications for students of color and low-income students. We must meaningfully invest in the care economy, lowering the cost of child care and allowing parents a wider range of work options. Housing investments are essential to ensure individuals and families have access to safe, decent, and affordable housing and have the ability to build wealth. Support for minority-owned small businesses is vital to increasing economic opportunity for communities of color. Additionally, funding to connect millions of Americans to reliable broadband has been and will continue to be paramount to ensuring families in low income communities are able to access education, jobs, healthcare, and more.

Conclusion

As the nation looks to recover from the economic challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, and continues to grapple with globalization, is it absolutely vital that workers of color and other historically underserved communities are given opportunities to re-tool, up-skill, and secure economic security and power. We appreciate the committee's interest in this topic and are grateful for the opportunity to share the experience and perspective of the Lorain County Urban League. I look forward to answering any questions members of the committee may have.