

TESTIMONY OF MISSY HANKS

Executive Director, The ELM Foundation Before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work & Welfare

“FROM ASSISTANCE TO INDEPENDENCE: RESTORING THE PROMISE OF WORK AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY”

Chairman, Vice Chair and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Missy Hanks, and I serve as Executive Director of The ELM Foundation in Huntsville, Alabama.

The ELM Foundation is a privately funded operating foundation that provides grants and relational case management to ELM participants for education and workforce development programs. When needed, we also provide stipends to program participants for supportive services such as childcare or transportation. We are an effort based nonprofit and all participants must work at least 20 hours per week in order to be eligible for our program. All participants must be actively engaged in education and work force development programs aimed toward gainful employment, self-sufficiency and service of others. We help individuals make and keep goals to this end. We have many stories of the effort-based model resulting in freedom for our participants, but I will only share two- Jackie and her 9-year-old son were homeless and had recently escaped a domestic violence situation when they were referred to ELM. We assisted Messie in returning to school with tuition assistance, rental assistance and transportation. When she completed the ELM Foundation program, she had used this opportunity to graduate from college, become an RN with supervisory responsibilities, and to purchase her own home. I believe that as a result, her son excelled in school, earned a full scholarship to Amherst College and is now in a medical residency to become a pediatric doctor.

Brody, a recent high school graduate was referred to The ELM Foundation for assistance in becoming highly employable quickly. He was assisted with case management and tuition assistance to a local workforce development program so that he could become a utilities lineman. He has successfully graduated this program and is now employed at a regional utility company with a career that can support a family one day.

I come before you today, not as a policy expert, but as someone who works every day with nonprofit organizations, community leaders, and the individuals who experience our social-service system at the local level. I have spent my adult life working for and with people. I have worked in federally funded and privately funded programs. I have seen that the government programs can and do trap people and their children into dependency. I saw daughters and granddaughters in caseloads receive benefits while not working or making any effort to leave the government programs. I left the social service industry for many years because I did not feel like I was truly helping anyone. Far too many people on my caseload relied on programs to address their immediate needs, but were not utilizing the programs offered that would lift them out of poverty. Older citizens who relied on social security were only assisted minimally because

their social security income reduced their benefits- one client that I remember was food insecure because his food stamp allotment was only \$16 per month. He had to visit local food bank in order to feed himself. It was not easy for this elderly man to do so because his mobility was limited. I can only recall two instances of families that qualified for food stamps due to a job loss, utilized the programs for a matter of months and then closed their cases due to secured employment. They utilized the programs as they are intended. I am only here today because The ELM Foundation follows an effort-based model and give opportunities for people to leave poverty.

I want to begin my testimony with something I believe most Americans agree on:

Most people want to be self-sufficient. They want to provide for their families. They want a home, a paycheck they can depend upon, and the dignity that comes from knowing they can take care of themselves. When a hardship is experienced by our neighbors, it is our solemn responsibility to provide opportunities that can lead them to wholeness through accurate and effective charity. As assistance providers, we should not complicate their journey with dependency.

At The ELM Foundation, we ask a simple question that guides our work as we provide opportunities to individuals that we serve-

“What can we do for you today so you won’t need us anymore?” That question represents a fundamental difference in how we think about assistance versus most charitable providers. We believe that government and nonprofit assistance should be a bridge—not a destination- and that accurate and effective charity is only possible through a local provider. The people that we serve should be seen as individuals with inherent potential and not just a problem to be solved. We also know that work is an essential part of that journey. Work provides income, but it also develops technical as well as life skills, problem-solving ability, social capital, confidence, and dignity.

And that distinction should matter to federal policy. As a nation, we must ask ourselves: what are the outcomes of our current social service programs?

Our current system of federally funded programs can perhaps tell us the cost of programs, how many applications were processed, or how many people received assistance, but they do not measure the outcomes of the charity or the change that was a result of the charity. Federally funded programs are too far removed from the individual and cannot and will not effectively achieve transformational or generational results.

This distinction should become much more central to how we evaluate our nation’s safety-net programs.

My experiences in the Huntsville and Madison County, AL community gives me a local perspective on this national conversation. The ELM Foundation not only provides direct services, but is also the administrators of the Huntsville/Madison County Charity Tracker network and the accompanying software database. This network is sponsored locally and is free for all qualified organizations. This software gives us the capability to work together, share information and coordinate our efforts. As of July 2026, the network included 384 agencies, with 936 agents. While this is only a small percentage of the many nonprofits operating in

Madison County, those that are reporting their assistances through Charity Tracker, shows that in 2025, \$5,054,835.82 in assistance was distributed in our community-77,271 assistance services involving 9,049 households and 10,058 individuals. We can also determine through the data that approximately 49.9 percent of the individuals served were adults between the ages of 18 and 59—the prime working years. Therefore, if a significant portion of the people receiving assistance are working-age adults, we have to ask a difficult, but necessary question of ourselves:

Are we doing enough to help those that we serve become economically independent?

Food assistance can feed someone today. Rental assistance might prevent an eviction this month. Utility assistance can keep the lights on. Those things matter, but if the same person needs the same emergency assistance six months later—and again the following year—we should consider our job finished simply because the assistance was delivered? Assistance should address the immediate crisis while also expecting appropriate achievable effort toward self-reliance through employment, education, stability and independence.

I believe that federal welfare reform must make effort, work, and reduced reliance on government and nonprofit assistance core outcome measures across federal social service programs and appropriated agencies. Each program should demonstrate efficacy through data tracking and measuring the outcomes of their assistance.

My hope is that you will strengthen and incentivize coordinated case management at the community level.

People do not experience poverty one federal program at a time. They are most often experiencing several crises simultaneously, yet our systems are often organized around programs rather than the person. We must know and understand the people that we serve and that can only happen if the services are provided on a local level. In order to coordinate services in my community, The ELM Foundation, the local Community Foundation of Greater Huntsville and private funders offer the Pathway to Sustainability program. This is a yearlong cohort of nonprofits, churches and other helping groups that receive case management and coordination training and instruction on how to use the Charity Tracker software so that HIPAA compliant communication can occur between providers. We work together to coordinate our efforts and reduce duplication of services in our community resulting in a shift from simply providing aid, but toward understanding the individual's journey and intentionally coordinating resources toward sustainable outcomes.

Instead of asking: "Has anyone helped this person?" we can see in the Charity Tracker database who is already working with them, what resources have they already received, their goals, their progress and what we can do together that will provide opportunities for them toward self-sufficiency.

My experience is that the answer to need is not simply to add another program or nonprofit. We do not need more social service programs. The answer is to better utilize the resources that we already have- coordinating care, eliminating duplication, and connecting assistance to measurable progress. Often, we see duplication of services and this duplication depletes resources and prohibits our community from serving those that are incapable of helping

themselves- the elderly, the infirmed and children. There must be an expectation that providers share resource information and data to avoid this reality. I often describe the social service industry as the “wild, wild west” because most often nonprofits, churches, government agencies and other helping groups are functioning in silos, not sharing information, not tracking outcomes and not leveraging resources.

I believe that federal policy should strongly encourage coordination and accountability at a local level.

I want to emphasize one point because I believe it is critical to this discussion:

Accountability and compassion are not opposites.

In fact, accountability can be one of the most compassionate things we offer those that we serve.

Accountability is not punishment. Accountability is empowerment. We should expect effort from people because we believe that they are capable of achieving more.

Washington can establish policy, but policy must result in accountability from providers as well as individuals. States can administer programs. Employers know the workforce needs, but communities and local nonprofits know the people and should be the lynchpin in the system of care.

Ultimately, I would ask you to change one fundamental question.

Instead of asking:

“How many people are we helping?”

I ask you to consider asking:

“How many people are we helping become independent?”

At The ELM Foundation, we believe in self-sufficiency, accountability, and a desire to serve others.

Our message to the people we serve is simple:

We will help you. We will walk with you. We will help you remove the barriers standing between you and your goals. But you must lift yourself. Our goal is for you to reach a place where you can stand on your own—and eventually help someone else stand, too, which is the ultimate symbol of gratitude.

And that is what I believe effective welfare reform should restore.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am eager to answer any questions that you may have of me.