

**The United States House of Representatives
Committee on Ways and Means
Hearing on Tax Reform and Charitable Contributions**

**Testimony of LaKisha Bryant, President and CEO,
United Way of Southwest Georgia**

February 14, 2013

Chairman Camp, Ranking Member Levin, Members of the Committee, thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

My name is LaKisha Bryant and I am the President and CEO of United Way of Southwest Georgia where our mission is: to improve peoples' lives by mobilizing the caring power of communities in Southwest Georgia.

In recent years, the United Way of SWGA has undergone dramatic shifts in how it works to serve our community. The historic community chest started in 1954 with a broad charitable mission has transformed into a community change agent focused on measurable impact, building partnerships and collaborations, engaging citizens on the common good and focusing on what matters most to donors – fiscal stewardship and return on investment. As an agency that represents twenty-seven partner non-profit agencies in our thirteen county geographic territory, we feel that it is imperative that the charitable deduction be preserved as it is currently written in the federal tax code and not be limited in any way.

Southwest Georgia is comprised of pecan groves, pine trees, farms and plantations yet nestled in the hub of major manufacturers like Procter and Gamble, M&M Mars, Coats and Clark and MillerCoors. And although the Marine Corps Logistics Base, the education and health care sector make us the foundation of SWGA's economy and the hub for commerce, we are still in one of the poorest Congressional Districts in the state and the bottom tier of economically disadvantaged districts in the country. According to census figures, our geographic territory has a poverty rate of 22.6% to the highest rate of 36.4%.

With these extremely low poverty rates, many of our citizens rely on the services provided by our partner agencies to help them live independent and fulfilling lives and support the needs of their children. Without the generosity of countless philanthropic gifts that we are given annually many of these services would be obsolete in our rural communities. And many of those gifts are given at certain levels based on the fact that they know they will have the charitable tax deduction awaiting them. Without that deduction, many of these funds would be lessened if not eliminated altogether. For a geographic community like mine, that elimination of funds could prove to be detrimental to agencies that would be faced with a decision to possibly close its doors; programs faced with the decision to serve smaller populations; and families forced to make difficult decisions about food, clothing and shelter.

The single most important action the Committee can take is to ensure the preservation of the charitable giving incentives that exist in the current tax code. We strongly oppose a cap on charitable deductions as a means of financing health reform, or for any other purpose. A cap would reduce charitable giving and undermine our ability to help ensure that individuals and families have access to food, housing, safe after-school programs for children in need, services for seniors and the disable and educational assistance during these challenging economic times.

United Way opposes any new limitations to the charitable deduction for any donor. Given the inevitable government cuts to critical education and human service programs, Congress should be looking for ways to expand incentives for private charitable giving.

One summer, there was a little girl that was about to embark on a new journey in her life. School was out for the summer and with both of her parents working, she had to find something to occupy her time and mind during the day. Her parents asked around about programs for girls and there were many that they discovered. However a particular United Way funded program had activities that they felt matched her personality. With her lunch box in her hand and book bag on her back she embarked on a new adventure far from the extremely modest cinderblock home on the South side of town.

After she entered the building, her nervousness soon vanished. She saw other girls with ponytails and glasses, smiles with missing teeth and a few familiar faces from her school. She was greeted by hugs and strong supporting arms of the teachers and staff. She learned many valuable lessons, new skills in education and learned about careers of the future. And before she knew it – the summer was over. And each year she looked forward to going back to the program. And she did go back, for five or six years until it was time for high school and moving on with her life. She never forgot the lessons she learned or the molding and shaping she received and vowed to always give back to a place that helped her so much. And she did.

But life has a way of getting more out of you. With the leadership skills she learned, she held many professional roles in her career even Executive Director of the organization that provided the summer programs she enjoyed so much. And now she continues to give back in an even bigger fashion.

I am the little girl in this story. I know first-hand that the funding support we provide such programs work. I know the values learned are irreplaceable. I know the messages taught take consumers to higher heights and deeper depths in this world. A United Way program played a major role in my development as a woman and a leader. And there are countless other faces of girls, boys, men and women that have benefited from the programs and services of United Way of Southwest Georgia and United Ways in other communities.