

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

Testimony of Lisa Ireland, Executive Director,
United Way of Orleans County, Medina, New York

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Chairman Camp, Ranking Member Levin and Members of the Committee, thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify at today's hearing on behalf of both the United Way of Orleans County in Medina, New York as well as the United Way network in the United States.

New York State has suffered two years of devastating storms, concerns over a challenging economy, as well as both state and federal cuts to human service programs. All of these have put a tremendous amount of pressure on the charitable sector to address community needs. Any effort to limit the charitable deduction sends the wrong signal to all donors at the very time their gifts, particularly large gifts, are needed the most.

As an Executive Director of a smaller United Way that is situated in a mostly rural area, we rely heavily on a few major donors to continue to support our mission and the programs that we sponsor in our local area. We currently sponsor over twenty programs from a wide variety of service areas, including support for children, the elderly, those in poverty and those with disabilities.

As an example, we fund the only youth mentoring program in our community, "Just Friends Youth Mentoring," which has successfully created over 100 relationships between children and adults. The children in the program have what can be seen as a difficult home life. In many cases they are from single parent homes or are being raised by a grandparent, an aunt or an uncle. Many of them also come from households with transient members, where on a daily or weekly basis, different people live with them in their homes. As the name implies, our Just Friends Youth Mentoring programs matches at-risk youth with an adult figure who will be "just friends" with them. This allows for a constant, positive role model in their lives who will take the time to build a special, one-on-one relationship with them. In many instances the mentor and child spend their time together doing what many would consider normal family activities such as fishing, baking cookies, gardening, or learning about animals at the local country fair and enjoying some ice cream. However, for these children, these activities are ones that

they have never experienced due to their difficult childhoods. In building these relationships, our mentors are able to build up the child's self-esteem and also able to encourage them to aspire to achieve a better tomorrow for themselves. As an outcome to these relationships, we have seen an increase in school attendance, higher graduation rates, and more involvement in school activities. It is always our goal to work towards ending the cycle of generational poverty in our community and this program, funded by charitable investment, is one of the best ways we are achieving that at home.

Our local United Way is very concerned that any limitation on charitable giving incentives will have a detrimental effect on our ability to raise funds to support the programs that we sponsor in Orleans County. We have aggressively worked with our local representatives to make sure that any donor can give as they wish to and that they can do so with the understanding that their gifts will not be taxed and that they can help support the common good.

In closing, I have had the privilege of working in the non-profit sector in Orleans County for the past 12 years. I have worked with a variety of programs and an array of people whose lives have been directly impacted by the work of United Way. I have seen first-hand the success of these programs and the individual successes of the people whose lives have been changed by these programs. I cannot begin to put into words how important it is that we do whatever we can to enable our major donors to give. I encourage the Ways and Means Committee to preserve the charitable deduction as it exists in the tax code. Charitable donors have been, and continue to be the backbone of our success here at United Way of Orleans County.

Again, thank you for taking the time to discuss this important issue with both me and my colleagues from New York State and around the nation. I appreciate all of your continued support.