

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee:

Good afternoon Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Smith and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Nakitta Long, and I reside in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Winston-Salem is one of the richest cities in the country. It has its challenges of crime, poverty, low paying jobs, and housing disparity.

I was born in North Carolina, but my mother believed better economic opportunities would be available by migrating North. We settled in Bronx, New York and I would spend my childhood and teenage years enjoying a multicultural view of the world. My life in the Bronx would shape my interest in law, politics, criminal justice reform, housing disparities, and wage inequality.

I did not realize how underserved my community was and many families lacked the basic things I considered to be luxurious. We had a car in the 1980's, and that was a really big deal. It was a Renault, but it gave us an alternative to that hot, stuffy public transportation and it made me feel like we were rich. In my eyes, we were rich.

I swore I would grow to be a judge and change the world. I was going to fight criminal justice disparities and open opportunities for at-risk youth and fight for higher wages. But I became stuck in the same systems that I watched oppress and suppress so many others' dreams and aspirations. I was going to open a skating rink and pay good money.

And then, I grew up. I became an adult and started looking at things through a different lens. I started experiencing obstacles families face daily. I became a mother and the dreams that once kept me motivated seemed like a distant illusion. I moved to NC and I saw what other levels of poverty looked like. I saw what my mother had run from when she moved us from NC, manufacturing and low wage restaurant and retail jobs.

I realized wage disparity led to many social problems and a deadly fight for resources and opportunities. A belief in the hierarchy of human importance always led to war and crime. Poverty was not based upon a magic number. Poverty was the deprivation of basic resources needed to sustain a healthy, safe, and meaningful life.

I spent most of my adult life working in manufacturing. I have a master's degree in criminal justice and over \$160,000 in student loan debt to show for it. I attained my associate degree and realized the jobs I wanted in criminal justice required a bachelor's degree. I went back to college, graduating Cum Laude with a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice. I had a family and most jobs in criminal justice were not 9-5 schedules, were male dominated, and required extensive experience I lacked. I went back to college and graduated with a master's degree in criminal justice. Companies were

reluctant to hire me with a master's degree for an entry level position. Repeatedly, I was told I was overqualified. I was told I was underqualified because I lacked years of experience for more senior positions.

Manufacturing jobs were easy to get, quick hiring process, and an overload of overtime offset low wages. I worked night shifts or weekend shifts because I had a family and not making enough to pay bills and afford childcare. I worked while everyone else was asleep, came home and got the kids ready for school, and headed off to college classes. When I saw an opportunity for a job with better wages, I jumped on it. But the trade-off was heavy metal jobs, steel-toed boots, and long hours.

I have never worked a job making more than \$30,000 a year, and I have a master's degree. I do not have a criminal record, and still, I have faced many obstacles. I have spent my life trying to break down systemically oppressive walls for myself and so many others facing similar barriers.

Like millions of Americans, COVID-19 yielded a heavy financial blow to my family. The initial response to COVID-19 was chaotic, divisive, and forced so many families to take on challenges most were not financially, physically, or mentally prepared to handle. I was unexpectedly laid off from my temporary job in late March 2020. Devastated, I went into panic and survival mode, thinking of what I needed to sell and what I could cut back on to keep my family afloat. Like millions of families, I anxiously waited to see if there would be any financial relief coming for people losing their jobs.

Before the pandemic, I was contracted for an automotive sensor parts manufacturer through a temporary agency. Wages were not bad, and the hours worked for the needs of my family. I worked there for nearly two years, waiting to get hired, but there was always a reason why the company had to halt full-time hiring employees. I waited and worked. I had no savings; my credit was in a downward spiral, and my dreams of buying a big house would have to wait.

A lifeline, the Cares Act, allowed me to apply and receive unemployment compensation through NC, and I was approved for the federal unemployment boost. This was a lifesaver in an ocean of uncertainty. With this additional financial help, I received \$823 weekly. I could keep my family safe, and now we could comply with federal and state stay at home mandates. I could afford my rent, my car payment, my utilities, and the cable bill.

I remained concerned about COVID-19 as the days and months went on and the numbers of innocent citizens lost their lives to a deadly enemy that had crept quietly into our society's normalcy of organized chaos. I feared sending my kids to school. I feared getting sick and making my family sick.

My original \$208 in food stamp assistance for a family of three had been increased through provisions under the CARES Act, which helped to keep meals on the table.

I have just been offered full-time employment with Amazon. I am happy, but I am still concerned about overdue bills and potentially exposing myself and my family to the virus. Millions of people are still unemployed. Millions of people are still sleeplessly watching the clock and waiting for evictions to sweep the nation. Millions of people are living in unsafe environments because of these factors. Millions of people are shutting down mentally because they are worried about what the future holds for the economy.

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I want to make clear: at no point did the assistance from the CARES Act diminish my desire to find a job and go to work. But I am one of the lucky ones who found a job. So many others need this help to continue staying afloat in an economy that is paralyzed by this virus.

I, like so many millions of working families and individuals, did not have additional resources available before Covid-19. I, like millions of working individuals, was living payday to payday with nothing left after bills.

Fast forward to now, and here we are. Here I am. Fighting to keep a safe roof over my family's head. I am fighting a battle I never saw coming. My landlord, for reasons undisclosed to me, has decided to sell the home I have been renting for over 5 years. A place I have come to call home, although it is a rental. A place my kids have grown to love because it is a very safe community. A high number of homes in my community are owned and the diversity is amazing. Neighbors are friendly and we throw a huge Halloween community event that welcomes hundreds of children every year. I had only a 3-day notice through text and the home was online, up for auction. I had no voice. I was told I would have to vacate by October 1 and that date shifted to whenever I could vacate in September. Now I am scrambling to find a home, which is almost impossible because I have been unemployed since March 30 and my reserve is depleted.

My kids are terrified that we could be homeless, or forced to live somewhere unsafe, or at the very worst scenario, we must put their puppy in a shelter. Life at this house is tense and the laughter I love to hear resounding from my kids' rooms has turned into an awkward silence and we are taking the pictures off the wall just in case we get that

knock. When my kids look into my eyes, I want them to see promise. I want them to see strength, and I want them to see courage.

The darkness of this pandemic is only at the beginning of being revealed as local and state governments continue digging into surpluses, families pull from their last savings and resources, and wage inequality explodes beyond repair. There is only so far families and individuals can stretch.

My landlord has offered \$500 cash if I will move my family out by October 1, and are willing to forfeit a trip to eviction court if I will just sign on the dotted line, cut my losses, and move on. My landlord is threatening eviction and arguing for fees and rent I do not recall owing. I have signed a new one-year lease in May 2020 that gave me some level of right to this dwelling until May 2021. The home has been sold and the new owner wants to move in right away. The new owner cannot possibly know that a family is being forced out. I should at least try to be heard so that the judge can know that my family matters. NC Legal Aid is short-staffed, and budgets are tight they say, so my case at this stage is not one they are wanting to represent and take to court.

I dare not face what happens to the kiddie painted pictures hanging on the wall. I do not want to face those now broken memories we created together in this home. The other day, I was watching a movie with my 4-year-old and I was yelling at the television, as I always find myself doing. My 4-year-old started laughing and I told him that I was being a lawyer. And he looked up into my eyes and said he wanted to be a lawyer too. I say that to say, my kids have dreams and aspirations too. I want to help them achieve those dreams and aspirations, and I want to provide safety and comfort while they grow up to be healthy and powerful contributors to their society.

As you close out for the day and discuss strategies for helping families through the tax code, and my testimony becomes a reflection in your mirror, consider my story being retold over 30 million times. Thank you. That is an estimate of the numbers of voices I carried with me today. The voice of families and individuals living in unstable housing situations. The voice of families and individuals unable to provide consistent meals to feed our kids. The voice of families without affordable healthcare or with inadequate healthcare. The voice of families and individuals unemployed and underemployed through no fault of our own. The voice of families and individuals fearing the next knock at the door will be a sheriff, a deputy, or constable enforcing an eviction judgement. The voice of families and individuals facing economic injustice through income disparity and inequality. The voice of families and individuals working temp jobs with little to no benefits, such as paid vacations and sick time.

As I close, let me leave with these questions on the hearts and minds of all who will read my story. What is wrong with my family having more than enough to just pay bills.

What is wrong with my family having savings we can use for travel at our leisure? Why does the working family always have to fight between survival and comfort?

We are fighting to save our families and our homes. We are the American dream.