



**VALDOSTA STATE
UNIVERSITY**

**Testimony
of
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of
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Valdosta State University
Valdosta, GA
To the
United States House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Reform**

Madame Chairman,

Thank you and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of rural Americans and, specifically, rural Georgians. I have spent my entire career in South Georgia Economic Development, and I have been directly involved in numerous projects in that time that have generated over \$325 million in direct investment and over 3,500 new jobs in rural Georgia.

I was hired as the first Executive Director of the Valdosta State University Center for South Georgia Regional Impact in November of 2018. The Center serves 41 rural counties in South Georgia, which are home to some of Georgia's most economically challenged residents. We partner with community leaders in this region to identify challenges facing their communities and connect those challenges with the expertise of Valdosta State University's faculty, staff, and students. Together, we develop solutions that are scalable and transferable to other communities facing similar challenges. In one year we have engaged in more than 50 projects focused on community and economic development in our region — with new ones coming in every week.

The Georgia Chamber of Commerce recently released the results of a state-wide population trends study. The projections for South Georgia are particularly dire, underscoring the importance of counting each and every resident. Census data has a direct impact on funding for education, healthcare, social programs, infrastructure projects and economic development.

I have seen this firsthand. Prior to my role at Valdosta State University, I served on the development authority in Colquitt County, a rural community in South Georgia with a strong dependence on agriculture. During the 2010 census, I served on a local committee that implemented a plan to secure an accurate count for our community. The result of our efforts was an 8.19% population increase in Colquitt County while virtually all of our neighboring South Georgia counties experienced population declines. Colquitt County used the positive Census data to help promote the community to numerous industrial, retail, commercial, and housing development projects, which led to continued growth.

As I transitioned into my new role at Valdosta State University, we realized the potential impact the 2020 Census will have on the 41 counties we serve as a regional comprehensive university. We are working with multiple partners in the region and the state, including the Governor's Complete Count Committee and representatives from the US Census, to develop a plan to help all of our communities secure an accurate count in the 2020 Census.

We serve a very diverse region, and what works in one community may not work in others. To address the needs of these communities, we have met with leadership in all 41 counties, as well as regional organizations throughout South Georgia, to share best practices and help each community come up with a strategy focused on their success.

We also conducted focus groups and worked with a statewide marketing committee to create a comprehensive marketing plan to educate the public and raise awareness about the benefits of participating in the 2020 Census. We created customized posters that target different

demographics and feature community leaders, table tents for every restaurant table in the region, and billboards throughout all 41 counties.

Beginning this month, Valdosta State University will deliver over 65,000 posters and 45,000 table tents to 48 Georgia counties. In addition, we have developed coloring pages for children that are being distributed to age-appropriate organizations throughout our region. Each of these promotional items is designed with intentionality to encourage every resident of South Georgia to respond to the census, so that our region receives an accurate count.

Valdosta State is committed to being a catalyst for regional comprehensive progress. We are focused as an institution on increasing the number of graduates produced for our workforces, providing more transformational and experiential learning opportunities for those graduates, and enhancing the University's existing impact on the region we serve. To that end, our aim is to educate residents of rural Georgia on the importance of responding to the 2020 census as it relates to funding for education, healthcare, social programs, infrastructure projects and economic development. The stakes are very high for our region, as they are for similar regions of rural America.

Thank you for your time today.