

Senate Hearing Testimony

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Kittanning PA

Blight is often associated with large cities, but the effects are very noticeably felt in small towns across the rust belt. Kittanning is like many other places in Western Pennsylvania. It was once a manufacturing economy with large employers built around the river economy. Over the past 50 years, most of that manufacturing that made our towns prosperous has disappeared, along with the stable jobs they provided for over half of our residents.

As a result, everything has been destabilized. Jobs were lost, families were uprooted, tax bases eroded, and cycles of generation poverty began. It's difficult to quantify the ripple effect of trauma that the loss of a large manufacturer has on a small town, but it is very real. Obviously, the housing market has suffered dramatically as home prices plummeted along with demand, and small towns were overwhelmed with the task of maintaining abandoned homes and enforcing codes during annual budget squeezes.

Many towns feel as though their communities have been lost and they don't have any hope for the future. But there is still hope.

In 2014, Living Water Church started a program called 'Summer of Serve'. Our goal at the time was to begin to bring back hope to the neighborhood. We started by caring for abandoned properties by cutting grass and cleaning up garbage. Over time, the program evolved into helping rebuild porches, painting, and doing whatever projects we could find to help our neighbors and begin to stop the downhill slide of the neighborhood.

We have been encouraged by the gradual transformation. When one person steps up and does something to make positive change, it has its own momentum, a ripple effect of positivity. When that momentum adds up, it becomes a real force for transformation.

In 2019, we did our first property survey in the Borough to begin to track the change that we knew was already taking place. We looked at every house and documented work that needed to be done. We also came up with a ranking system to help us identify the areas with the greatest need and to target our efforts to make the biggest impact. It has also helped other local non-profits organizations and our Borough to be able to make targeted efforts for house remodeling and codes enforcement.

Since that time, we have been able to track the changes over the course of 3 calendar years. The transformation is incredible. We have seen year to year improvements of 13.41%, 13.21%, and 12.30% and a cumulative improvement of 32.14% in just 3 years. This means that if we can keep the current pace, Kittanning will have made a complete turnaround on the issue of blight in less than a decade.

Our system is simple and can be taught to anyone to use in less than 15 minutes. With half a day, I could train anyone with basic technical knowledge to do what we're doing. This includes the process all the way from mapping to working in the field. The real power of our system is the ability to empower

private citizens to help rebuild their community. I believe it can work in any neighborhood, urban or rural. We have not expanded our mapping to nearby Apollo PA and will be mapping Freeport PA just one day from now.

As I stated before, local governments have great difficulty in solving these problems. There are some things that only they can do, such as enforcing codes, placing liens, and taking control of abandoned properties to keep them making progress. Many times, cities end up spending so much time on the little things, that the big things like these go unaddressed. Our theory is that if citizens can step up and help with the little things, then resources can be properly allocated, and local governments can have a better chance of doing the things that only they can do.

The real beauty is when the community gets involved and we all take some responsibility to help our town recover. We find joy in neighbors loving neighbors and great pride in getting our hands dirty to make things better. It's the ultimate in civic duty and it also fulfills the mission of the Church for who are supposed to be as human beings.

There is hope for small town (and struggling urban) Pennsylvania and I believe Kittanning will be a shining example in the future for how the current housing issues can be overcome. Thank you for your time.

For more information on our system of Solving Blight, visit <https://gcityw.org/solving-blight/>