My name is Melissa Clark, Director of Community Impact at United Way of the Dutchess-Orange Region. I had the privilege for the last year to be a part of the United Way Worldwide Economic Mobility AmeriCorps program. This program is new to AmeriCorps having kicked off in May of 2017. Our site was the first to host an AmeriCorps VISTA to manage critical community programs that offer increased access to services for low-income individuals in our community. We were extremely fortunate to have an exceptional VISTA serve who has since been hired by our organization.

We were able to recruit 300 volunteers, secure $50,000 in monetary donations and provide free tax preparation to 7,800 individuals. This initiative, coined the CA$H Coalition, brought $6.6 million back to our community in otherwise unclaimed refunds and created an entire economic impact of $12 million! Through the CA$H initiative, we target individuals in particular need including older adults, the ESL population and those working but facing challenges to meet basic needs. Post survey results have demonstrated that individuals benefitting from this service use the funds to pay off past debt, create a savings account or pay approaching bills.

The economic mobility program was offered in 14 communities and has since expanded to 30 sites for the upcoming year. I am thrilled to see its expansion across our nation, which will elevate people out of poverty and on a pathway to financial stability, a core United Way value. Collectively this opportunity helped thousands of our fellow Americans facing economic challenges, secured $1.1 million in cash and in-kind donations and motivated 1,527 people to volunteer.

I cannot say enough about the power of this program in creating an avenue to financial success for those struggling to make ends meet. In addition, we offered financial literacy programming to ensure that our strategy was two-fold, offering prevention in addition to financial security measures through our CA$H Coalition. After one such workshop, I had an individual approach me and say, “I now feel empowered to take charge of my personal finances.”

In addition to the program itself having an exceptional benefit to our country, I was extremely impressed by the administration who manages data and reporting. The “boots on the ground” programming is led by AmeriCorps VISTAs, a passionate group making a sacrifice to fulfill their desire to perform national service and add value to our country and community programs. The administration is led by the Director of Volunteerism at United Way Worldwide but managed by an AmeriCorps VISTA Leader, truly offering another level of peer to peer model engagement.

Lastly, I want to mention that I am an AmeriCorps Alum. Before my tenure at United Way, I completed two years of VISTA service to my community and nation. I am indebted to that experience, and it has shaped as a professional and as an individual.

Thank you for your consideration of the Economic Mobility AmeriCorps program. I believe this program exemplifies excellence in AmeriCorps programming.