

**Opening Statement**  
**JEC Hearing on “Expanding Opportunity by  
Strengthening Families, Communities, and Civil  
Society”**  
**April 30, 2019, 10:00am**  
**216 Hart Senate Office Building**

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Good morning, and welcome to this hearing of the Joint Economic Committee.

To begin, I’d like to welcome back the members of this committee from the previous Congress, as well as our new members; and I’d like to congratulate Representative Maloney on her return as Vice Chair this Congress. I look forward to working with all of you.

The topic of this hearing – expanding opportunity – is in many ways a quintessentially American topic. As Abraham Lincoln put so eloquently, the leading object of our government has been to “elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders—to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all, an unfettered start,

and a fair chance in the race of life.” In other words, to remove barriers to opportunity.

Often, however, policymakers have a limited understanding of what opportunity is. We sometimes see opportunity purely in terms of economic outcomes – namely, educational or financial success. And moreover, we can view financial capital as the only important source of wealth on which opportunity depends.

Economic wealth is no doubt important, and it is right that the federal government should seek to remove barriers to it. But to see opportunity *exclusively* in those terms fails to capture an invaluable source of wealth on which human beings draw, and one that is in fact key to expanding opportunity: social capital.

Social capital is the wealth produced from our associational life – what we do together. It inheres in the web of social relationships through which we pursue joint endeavors, and it comes from our families, communities, workplaces, churches, rotary clubs, and little leagues. And

it is through these institutions of civil society that we make a happy and productive life with other people. They shape our characters and capacities, help us address the challenges we face in life, and provide us with meaning and purpose.

For the past two years, the “Social Capital Project” of the Joint Economic Committee has documented trends in our associational life and its distribution across the country. It has studied the evolving nature, quality, and the importance of our associational life; and the relationship it has to different problems our nation is facing.

The Joint Economic Committee has recently undertaken the work of exploring the connection between opportunity and social capital. And it has found that opportunity is largely dependent on social capital, available to us through the relationships we have with our families, friends, neighbors, fellow congregants, and coworkers. These relationships are crucial for both our economic opportunities and our opportunity for producing and

sustaining a vibrant, healthy, and meaningful community life.

And so the goal of the JEC is now to craft policies rooted in social capital – policies that will expand opportunity for all Americans by strengthening families, communities, and civil society.

This undertaking will not be without its challenges. After all, social capital is not something we can see, touch, or directly measure. In addition to difficulties of measurement, there are also difficulties in establishing its causal importance. And while policy can certainly help promote the bases for a flourishing civil society, we must also inevitably confront its limits, and determine when and to what extent the federal government has a part to play in this project and the extent to which it is inflicting harm.

To bound the types of policies under consideration, and based on the past two years of its research, the Project has identified five broad goals related to opportunity: making it more affordable to raise a family, increasing how

many children are raised by happily married parents, connecting more people to work, improving the effectiveness of investments in youth and young adults, and rebuilding civil society.

Our distinguished panelists will help us to shed light on these issues and questions today. I look forward to hearing their testimony, and to seeing the fruits of our discussion going forward.

I now recognize Senator Hassan for opening remarks.