

Testimony of Mandy Zalich (Southwest Regional Hearing)

As CEO of Westmoreland Community Action, and a lifelong resident of Westmoreland County, I am very familiar with the strengths and needs of the county. I have had the pleasure of seeing the county transition through seasons, climate, economic and cultural. As part of the Laurel Highlands, Westmoreland County offers vast natural resources and recreational activities. Beautiful mountains, running creeks and streams, available parks and forests color the landscape. It is a wonderful place; it is home.

Nestled in a more northern section of the Appalachia region, there are cultural and heritage nuances that separate Westmoreland County from other suburban counterparts. The county is filled with history and connection of generations of families who have remained in the area. Impacting faith and food, these traditions add texture to the communities.

However, with all of the wonderful blessings felt in Westmoreland County, there remains struggles. There are many factors impacting a shrinking population in Westmoreland County, but that decrease is like a pebble hitting the water at Twin Lakes park. There is a ripple effect into the economy and businesses. With a shrinking tax base, but expanded need for road and infrastructure updates (like bridges that have not been fixed in 50 years) struggles hit our municipalities and local governments. With the loss of some workforce, businesses have left the area, with new ones not coming here to fill those places. In turn adding another toss into the water, and fueling the expanded loss of residents. Instead of remaining close to family ties, as has been the county tradition, many have left the county for jobs elsewhere. And the struggles continue.

Westmoreland County has a unique set of struggles versus our neighboring counties. With a mix of urban, suburban and rural areas across one of the largest land county in Pennsylvania, there are unique struggles across and within this county. While it is the 8th in land size in PA, it has more than double the population of any county that has a larger mass. This adds to the challenge of meeting the needs of the constituents. There are many sections of the county that go without reliable internet and cell phone coverage and support. There are portions of the county that do not yet have cable hook-ups as an option for residents. Funding that can support sewage and water efforts are not getting close to many Westmoreland county citizens; there is no public option for these amenities for large areas and groups of community members. Every year that there is a dry summer, these residents worry about meeting basic needs.

With WCA, I see families struggling with transportation, seeking life and family-sustaining employment, seeking childcare, seeking physical and mental health services, seeking utility assistance, seeking clean and safe living conditions. Families are seeking support for internet for themselves and their children to be connected to this necessity; without the internet education, employment and health are all impacted, as further evidenced by the recent pandemic. I can give you an example of all of these needs. I can explain why resources are so needed across the vast area of the county from New Kensington to Monessen, from Jones Mills to New Florence, from Laughlintown to Trafford. The differences vary, the stories shift, but a connection to the need for growth to support current, and hopefully future residents, links all of the communities. We need to work together as Westmoreland County residents to build a stronger County, while ever increasing our flavors and textures!