

Good Morning,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today to share my experiences and thoughts on Fostering Women's Entrepreneurial Success.

My name is Hester Clark. I am the founder and owner of Hester Group, a professional services firm providing logistics, strategic communications and program management services. Hester Group has 28 employee positions across the United States and we average over \$2.5 million in revenue. We are located in Jacksonville Florida.

In preparing for this presentation today, I read the July 2017 report by the National Women's Business Council, entitled, "*Necessity as a Driver of Women's Entrepreneurship*". The report explores and expands upon the concept of necessity as a driver of women's entrepreneurship in the United States.

Twenty years ago I was a necessity entrepreneur, a mother seeking work-life balance so that I could raise my 12-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter. As a necessity entrepreneur, I needed resources and ongoing support. Entrepreneurs like me are most successful when they have an entrepreneurial ecosystem, with access to human, financial and professional resources within their own community.

Thankfully, the Small Business Administration and resource partners in Jacksonville Florida are my entrepreneurial ecosystem.

I am humbled today to share my journey.

For almost 20 years, the SBA and Hester Group have traversed challenges and successes together. There is not one day since starting Hester Group in 1998, that I have been without the support of the SBA and its resource partners. It is as if the SBA and its resource partners took my hand and said to me "*Come on Hester, I'll show you the way*".

Sometimes I held on tightly, fearful of taking a big step, and sometimes I held loosely, knowing with confidence and assurance that the support of the SBA and its resource partners was always nearby.

My entrepreneurial ecosystem includes:

- Jacksonville Women's Business Center
- Jacksonville SCORE
- Florida Small Business Development Center at the University of North Florida
- The North Florida District Office of the SBA

I have relied on the SBA and these resources partners at each stage of my journey. One of the first workshops I attended in 1998 was presented by the Florida SBDC at the University of North Florida.

When I did not know how to establish a financial accounting system, I participated in the Financial Matters Business Mentoring Program of the Jacksonville Women Business Center. A mentor was assigned to help me understand financial basics, and most importantly he helped me to understand the importance of hiring a financial expert.

When I did not know how to establish human resources policies and procedures, the Jacksonville Women's Business Center provided six mentors of the Athena Link mentoring program. They helped me to understand and build our corporate infrastructure, and maintain compliance with HR requirements.

When I needed ongoing support and advice, SCORE Jacksonville provided me with a patient and experienced retired executive who guided me through the hiring of our Vice President. He knew exactly what Hester Group needed to succeed, and our Vice President, Ms. Roslyn Mixon Phillips continues as a vital member of Hester Group today.

When I needed access to capital, I was able to receive an SBA 7(a) loan with the support of the North Florida District Office. The 7(a) loan has been the foundation for our growth and expansion.

The SBA and its resource partners in North Florida continue to extend a helping hand to Hester Group, and we continue to hold on tight!

My journey as a woman entrepreneur is not unusual. There are over ten million women entrepreneurs in the United States. We share similar paths. Each of us are unsure, at times unknowing, yet we are unafraid to become an entrepreneur. And each of us need support and guidance.

I have shared my journey with you today as an example of the direct benefits of SBA and its programs. I recommend the SBA continue to:

- Expand Access to Capital
- Expand Community Outreach in rural and underserved communities
- Expand Funding to Resource Partners for mentoring and educational programs
- Provide Disaster Assistance Funding and Support
- Enhance Online Resources

In summary, I encourage this committee to provide the SBA with the funding and support needed to hold, perhaps *just one more or one million more*, hands of woman entrepreneurs.

Thank you.