PARAGON
DIGITAL MARKETING
MEASURABLY BETTER RESULTS

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U.S. Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship
Streamlining and Coordinating Support for Rural Small Business

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Thank you, Chairwoman Shaheen, Ranking Member Ernst, and all members of this committee. It is an honor to be here with you today to share my story of entrepreneurship in rural America and working with government agencies to start and grow my businesses.

I grew up in the small town of DeWitt, Iowa where my dad owned a photography studio. Entrepreneurship is in my blood. I started my first business in the 3rd grade building wood benches and selling them out of the front window of my dad's studio. I ended up in Keene, New Hampshire in 2010 as a trailing spouse and in 2012, I turned my side hustle into Paragon Digital Marketing. Paragon is a digital marketing agency focused on serving small to mid-size businesses across the country. We manage ad campaigns, do search engine optimization, email marketing and build websites that help our clients grow their businesses.

Starting a company that provides its services remotely over the internet came with its challenges in a rural area where, at the time, access to broadband was very limited. I attended round tables and wrote several letters on access to broadband and I greatly appreciate Chairwoman Shaheen's work on this issue. Thank you for all you've done to address this critical need!

As Paragon has grown, the need for a larger office space with suitable internet access was a major challenge in downtown Keene. In 2018, I looked at an old church that had sat vacant for nearly a decade right off Central Square in Keene with fiber internet on the poles across the street. That's where my story begins. After a lot of research into what it would cost to renovate the space and make it energy efficient, I threw caution to the wind and bought the building. It's a beautiful 13,000 square foot, red brick building, built in 1869 that is on the National Register of Historic Places. **I had no idea how much work was ahead of me but after lots of Googling, emails and conversations**, I connected with the NH Community Development Finance Authority (CDFA). I ended up utilizing a low interest loan from NH CDFA's Energy Fund that included American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) Funds to finance a new roof and 33Kw solar array. NH CDFA offered technical assistance,

connected me with the right people and agencies to get energy audits and rebates. I had to finance parts of the project through the NH Business Finance Authority that weren't covered by the federal funds. I was also the first business in Keene to apply for community revitalization property tax incentives (RSA 79-E) to help offset the initial investment in saving this building**. I worked with so many different organizations that had different processes, different requirements and everything was in silos, it was hard to find information and navigate everything**, all while I was running a business and raising small children. Without the assistance of the state's CDFA to help navigate everything, I don't think I would have been able to complete this project on my own.

We moved into our space in June of 2020 amid a lot of uncertainty. PPP Loans and an EIDL Loan from the SBA were crucial to the continued success of Paragon. The new office has turned out better than I could have imagined, the solar produces more power than we need to heat, cool and run our business. This has made my business stronger and more resilient; I have no energy bills so when energy costs spiked a couple years ago, it didn't impact my business at all.

My story continues with my next venture, an indoor beer garden in the large sanctuary on the second floor of the church building. I'm in the process of applying for a USDA REAP Grant to offset the cost of installing a geothermal heating and cooling system. With the grant I'll be able to replace the large oil-fired steam boiler with a zero-carbon heating system. This will help in the cold winters when all the businesses profits would have been burnt up in the oil boiler trying to heat the space, reducing energy cost and making this new business more resilient while solidify the survival of this historic building for another 150 years. I'm working with Clean Energy New Hampshire for technical assistance for the USDA Grant which, again, has really helped with navigating the process. **I'll likely apply for a NH Department of Energy Grant as well, but that grant is on a completely different timeline and completely different process for applying. The long approval times for both the USDA and NH Department of Energy grants will delay the opening of this new business but I feel the benefits of this energy project are worth the delays.**

I recently completed the NH Export Accelerator program in which the NH Small Business Development Center (NH SBDC) brought together resources from the U.S. Commercial Service, NH Smal Business Administration District Office and NH's Office of International Commerce. I worked with SBDC Advisors to develop an export plan to export Paragon's services to businesses and organizations in Brazil and I've just been awarded a STEP Grant to help put my plan into action. I leave

in a week for a trade mission to Brazil, the U.S. Commercial Service has setup meetings with prospective clients, and I already met virtually with the first one earlier this week. **This is a great example of NH SBDC bringing together resources and funding from different agencies, helping businesses navigate the resources and develop a plan. I didn't know many of these resources existed and it would have taken me a lot of time to research and connect with the people at each agency.**

This type of multi- agency coordination and assistance is critical for small businesses like mine. However, business resource providers like SBDC, while they're well acquainted with SBA programs and very knowledgeable about business development issues, they don't always have the staff capacity to be aware of every program that could benefit rural entrepreneurs**. Enhanced coordination and communication among federal government programs that support small business is critical. Additional resources for rural businesses, and the organizations that support us, would be hugely beneficial. With this support we will be better prepared to navigate the landscape of federal resources available to us. We'll then have time to do what we do best, run our businesses, create jobs, build wealth for families in our communities, and help grow the American economy.**

Through much of Paragon's journey I've been a proud client of the NH Small Business Development Center. I turned to the NH SBDC for support and assistance applying for PPP and EIDL loans and have continued to work with their business advisors ever since. The NH Export Accelerator opened a great opportunity for Paragon to start exporting its services. When I decided to start my second business, they paired me with an advisor that has expertise in the service industry for assistance with market research, financial projections and business planning. I've also utilized their cyber security preparedness program among other programs. My business advisors have been an incredible asset to both of my businesses and have connected me to numerous resources and opportunities over the years.

I have one final story to share from my role as a trustee of Savings Bank of Walpole, our region's community bank. We have approved some amazing opportunities for local entrepreneurs that were backed by SBA and USDA programs. A recent one that really stuck with me included two farm hands that used USDA programs and loan guarantees to purchase the dairy farm they worked on from the retiring owners. This would not have been possible with the USDA backing and I imagine it will change the trajectory of the new owners' lives while keeping the dairy farm in production for many more

years to come. I'm curious to learn more about the potential synergies between USDA and SBA lending programs that could stand to benefit rural small businesses.

In summary, my business would not be where it's today and I wouldn't be starting a second business if it weren't for the resources from Federal, State and Local programs that support rural businesses. As a small business owner in a rural area, I've faced unique challenges, including limited access to broadband, lack of educational institutions in the area with programs related to my business, a limited number of service providers in the area to support my business needs, and shortages of qualified workers that are more severe than what is seen in more populated areas. My business is stronger and more resilient because of these programs. Unfortunately, these programs exist in silos which can make it hard to find information, understand requirements and eligibility and navigate without the help of someone who has been through the process.

Some ideas I have for more coordination between federal agencies and general improvement to federal programs that could make it easier for rural businesses to connect with and utilize these resources include:

- Having **staff on-the ground that serve as generalists or advisors that have an awareness of all the programs**, how they can be utilized, can build bridges between the silos, provide technical assistance, and facilitate communication and questions with the various agencies.
- **More programs like NH SBDC's Export Accelerator that bring together resources** from various stakeholders focused on solving specific problems for rural businesses.
- I appreciate that the USDA Grants have quarterly cycles but REAP Grants can take several months to get approved right now. **The timing and cycles of some of these programs don't always line up with real world business needs.**
- Specific to energy efficiency resources, I understand why 12 months of energy usage is required so the effectiveness of the funds can be measured by actual energy saved but not all projects will have historical energy usage. In my case both my projects are spaces that had been vacant for many years, and I didn't qualify for most of the incentives because I didn't have any heating history. **Exceptions for vacant spaces or adaptive reuse of spaces to use energy modeling or other methods to show energy savings** would be very helpful.

I appreciate all that you do to support small businesses like mine. Thank you for the opportunity and privilege to share my story and insights today.