Hello. I’m Victor Dickson, President & CEO of Safer Foundation. Safer provides services to help people with arrest & conviction records become employed, productive members of society. Most of our clients are poor, but when we investment in developing their skills, they secure living wage jobs. With a living wage job, they can lift out of poverty and recidivism drops significantly. Because of these results, we are focused on the intersection of mass incarceration and poverty and the need to bring economic development, including human capital development, to the neighborhoods where our clients live.

I know what living in poverty is like. My siblings and I lived with a single mom who suffered from a serious health problem and was unable to work. We lived on public aid, in a cramped apartment, above a store, on busy south Racine Avenue in Chicago. Fortunately, when I was a kid, there were more resources available than today. Many people had living wage jobs, the public schools were vibrant, there were summer camps for kids, summer jobs for teens and financial aid for college. With a lot of support, I went away to college, landed a job in a fortune 500 company and pursued a corporate career. My mother died when I was 15 years old. Her birthday was April 3rd, she died on April 12th. This time every year I feel a bit sad, but also very grateful for her, how she struggled to provide the best life possible for us. I am thankful for how she prepared me for the future! Thanks mom!

In the 20 years I was away from Chicago the city changed dramatically. The industries dried up, jobs disappeared, investment in the neighborhoods stopped. I came back to a community flooded with drugs, devastated by the War on Drugs and Mass Incarceration. Many people had now been locked into poverty for multiple generations. The resources that helped me escape were no longer abundantly available.
Recently, there has been an increase in investing in neglected neighborhoods. Unfortunately, there are times when these well-meaning efforts are thwarted, because various market forces take over and the inclusive benefit expected is not realized.

There are several examples in recent years where investments have produced unwanted consequences, like Chicago’s 606 and transit oriented housing initiatives making housing less affordable. A few years ago, TIF incentives were used for a major retail pharmacy chain to open a store in the Woodlawn neighborhood. This should have been a win-win proposition - expanding access to prescription drugs & food and new jobs in the neighborhood. But that’s not what happened. Sadly, a small, Mom & Pop pharmacy, there for 30+ years, was unable to compete and closed. Soon after, the national chain that opened using the TIF subsidy, closed as well. That neighborhood, with a high percentage of senior citizens, had lost the investment and had now become a “pharmacy desert”.

So, how do we ensure that our well-meaning efforts to invest in communities really produce the desired results?

Remember when Congress tried several times to repeal the Affordable Care Act? It seems that the independent forecasts by the Congressional Budget Office, predicting that 13 to 23 million people would lose healthcare coverage, was the only thing that stopped the repeal.

What if we brought a similar process to Chicago to ensure our investments produce the right results? We can do that by conducting and publicizing socio-economic impact studies that monetize the benefits of inclusive economic investment and forecast the consequences of inequitable investments?
If we are truly committed to addressing the “Tale of Two Cities” dynamic in Chicago, we must create and fund an Independent Equity Office & Chief Equity Officer position. The Equity Office will be responsible for publicizing the analysis and recommendations to achieve inclusivity in economic investments.

The City of Chicago allocates billions of dollars each year for city services and investments. Our “Call to Action” is for the city of Chicago to create, and fund, an independent Equity Office, led by a Chief Equity Officer, to provide the checks and balances needed to ensure our economic investments are inclusive. Twenty percent of Chicagoans have lived in poverty for more than twenty years. We must use our investments to build economic equity. Economic Equity must be our definition of One Chicago!