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Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing on Welfare and Poverty
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It was Ronald Reagan who said, “the best social program is a job.” I think it’s fair to say that for most Americans, a principal goal of the social safety net is to help individuals and families in their times of struggle and reconnect them to gainful employment so they can pay their rent, pay for groceries, and take care of their children.

Extreme poverty has risen substantially, but a key program that’s supposed to connect people to jobs so they can rise out of poverty— Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF – isn’t working. TANF is a fixed, frozen block grant that states can use for a wide variety of anti-poverty programs. But too often these dollars aren’t making a dent in poverty or connecting struggling parents to employment.

Our social safety net has frayed. Millions of people are walking on an economic tightrope forced to make tough decisions like whether they should pay to keep the lights on or food in the cupboards. And the safety net isn’t working for them.

Today we’re going to hear from a witness who has walked that tightrope herself. Ms. Aretha Jackson, a disabled veteran and former TANF recipient, has served her country since she graduated from high school in 1989. After a tour of duty in Iraq and serving in the U.S. Army, the Army Reserves and the National Guard, the idea that Ms. Jackson should have to overcome homelessness in the country she fought for is unfathomable.

We’re also going to hear from Dr. Luke Shaefer, who will talk about what his research into \$2 a day poverty means through the stories of real people like Jessica in Tennessee, who has scars from donating plasma twice a week for \$30 a donation – as often as the law will allow. Many of us can only imagine what it’s like going to bed scared to death that our child might get sick because we can’t afford to take a day off from work, much less a doctor’s bill.

One area that I’d like to focus on is how TANF can be used as a tool for employers to hire, train and empower those in need of safety net services so they can have a far brighter future. We ought to be thinking about how we can help make that possible.

What’s striking about all this, and what Dr. Shaefer found in his many conversations with people in poverty, is that people want to work. But when they can’t get work, they are left with desperate choices.

I’m particularly troubled by the fact that poverty rates are especially dire among single mothers and minorities, who are 2-3 times more likely to live in poverty than the rest of Americans.

From Oregon, state officials have passed along the story of a single mother who we'll call Mary. Mary first received TANF four years ago to help provide for her two children – one who is living with Autism. Mary overcame a drug addiction, a criminal record, and family adversity and got a job at a commercial printer. Her first week, she worked 54 hours and was able to go off TANF last February. Mary's case manager said of her, "She just keeps going."

There are 47 million Americans in poverty but many of them don't even know that TANF exists to help them, and in many cities and states across America, they're absolutely right.

I don't think it's naïve of me to think a jobs program should measure how well it connects people to jobs. But TANF doesn't. States shouldn't get credit for simply kicking families out of the program regardless of whether they've helped them find work or not. What really ought to count is whether recipients find their way into a job that can support their families.

The answer is to improve the program – to make it more relevant, more accessible, and more effective for families in poverty. TANF should build ladders that help families find good jobs and climb out of poverty for good. We ought to work together on a bipartisan basis to fix this lifeline to meet people's needs and give them a springboard to better opportunities. This hearing is a chance for the Finance Committee to consider ways to improve TANF and accomplish that goal.

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