

**“The Needs of the Working Poor: Helping Families to Make Ends Meet”**

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**Written Testimony of Debra Abston Greenwood, MSW**

**I have been a single mother for over 22 years, and I spent approximately 16 of those years cycling between low-wage jobs and welfare. Throughout that time, I either worked full-time, attended college full-time, or a combination of both. The earlier years (I call them BC, or “before college”) were the most difficult. I had one child at the time, and despite working full-time, we struggled constantly.**

**I was often forced to choose between paying rent, or paying our heat/electric bill; I tended to choose rent, deciding it would be better to have a roof over our heads. I can assure you our electricity and heat were disconnected for non-payment more than once.**

**Transportation to and from work was problematic for someone without the income to pay car and insurance expenses. I often spent as much as three hours on public transportation to take my child to daycare and travel to work, making my days incredibly long and exhausting.**

**Child care was our most difficult issue, nearly insurmountable in many instances. One of our most memorable examples was a time during my son’s first grade year, when I obtained a position as a sales clerk at a local retail department store. The store was open evenings and weekends, and child care was not available during those times. I searched frantically for care, because I had been told by DSS that I could not refuse this job offer due to child care problems or they would not assist me either. I finally had a note placed in the parents’ notes at my son’s school, asking other parents for assistance. Finally, one parent offered to let my son walk home with her daughter, and she would care for him in her home.**

**So, I began working, catching a late bus at 9:20 PM after work, then walking eight blocks to the care provider’s home. I picked up my son, who was now up almost two hours after his bedtime, walked another four blocks to our home, and put my son to bed. I was forced to send my son to school exhausted, and even ill, because the department store had an unwritten policy: call in sick when you are new, and you won’t work here anymore. The final blow struck when I picked up my son one night and was greeted at the door by the care provider holding an ice pack on her face; my son was hiding in a back room. I had discovered that the care provider’s husband abused her fairly regularly, and my son was witnessing this.**

**I contacted the DSS office the following day, to inform them of the circumstances of my son’s care provider, and to ask if I could receive assistance so that I could quit this job and look for a job that would allow me to obtain better care arrangements. The DSS caseworker asked if my son was being physically abused in this situation, and I replied that he was not, but he was certainly witnessing the violence and was terrified. I was then informed that if he was not in danger personally, then this was not a sufficient reason to quit my job and would not receive assistance if I did so...but I was certainly allowed to seek**

a new job in my “spare time” if I liked. I did look for a new job, but it took another eight months. My son lived in this violent home for eight to ten hours a day, for almost one year.

At times, we did not qualify for state Medicaid and we could not afford medical insurance. We were forced to wait until we were ill enough to go to the hospital emergency room, or we would see a doctor until they refused to see us for lack of payment. This left us without consistent medical care for years.

**Ironically, I was able to stop this cycle of poverty through a welfare program. Washington State developed a pilot program called the Family Independence Program through the Family Support Act of 1988. This program provided an additional cash incentive to recipients who obtained a job or enrolled in an educational program. Once I had received my bachelor’s degree, I was able to both continue my education through graduate school and successfully “move up the career ladder” into positions which paid a living wage and provided adequate benefits. In fact, my most recent position was as Executive Director of a statewide policy advocacy organization in New York.**

Even this, however, has not completely moved me away from some of the same concerns. For example, my 11-year-old daughter has become a “latch-key” child, since child care in our area of Westchester County runs between \$350-500 per month for only three hours after school. And I still cannot afford overnight care for my daughter, so when I travel professionally, she must accompany me. She has missed 12 days of school in her first semester of this academic year, yet she miraculously maintains a GPA greater than 3.8.

I am currently attending a doctoral studies program at Fordham University in New York, while continuing to work full-time. One day in a few years, I will introduce myself as “Dr. Debra Greenwood, former welfare recipient,” and I will be proud of both; it has certainly been a struggle. But my goal now is to fight for those working poor families who still struggle: they need quality, affordable child care; medical insurance; access to affordable transportation; affordable housing; opportunities for education and training; and many other supports if they are to survive as low-wage workers. Can we do any less for our children?