

**TESTIMONY OF CHERI HONKALA
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES
OF THE HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE
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CHERI HONKALA[†]

INTRODUCTION

My name is Cheri Honkala. I am a welfare recipient. I'm part of a volunteer community group in my neighborhood in Philadelphia which works with AFDC¹ moms.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today and thank you for scheduling additional hearings on welfare reform so that members of the public have an opportunity to present their ideas and opinions. I am honored to be asked to speak about the problems my son and I face.

As a poor mother, I agree with members of Congress that the welfare system must change in fundamental ways. However, I am disturbed about the assumptions many people make about welfare recipients, and the demeaning ways that people talk about us.

I. MY STORY

I love my son and I do my best to take care of him. I'm really

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1. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Title IV-A of the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 601-17 (1995).

proud of him. He's 14 years old, and he's a good student. He goes to a magnet high school that he had to pass a competitive exam to get into. He's not on drugs; he's not violent; he's a really good kid. Things haven't been easy for us. Sometimes we've been homeless, and sometimes we've been hungry. I want my son to understand that just because we're poor doesn't mean that we aren't good people. My son is hurt every time someone talks about women who get welfare as being terrible people and bad mothers.

When I was a teenager I had to leave home because of domestic violence in my family. When I was 17, I got a job at Red Barn, a fast food restaurant in Minneapolis. I moved into an efficiency apartment with a girlfriend. While I was working, I became pregnant. At this point, going on welfare was the last thing on my mind. However, while I was pregnant I was laid off from my job and had a lot of trouble finding work. Because welfare in Minnesota wasn't available to women until late in their pregnancies, welfare wasn't an option for me.

Since I had no income, I couldn't pay my rent and I was evicted. I had nowhere to go, and I had to sleep in my car every night. When a drunk driver hit my car and totalled it, I had to live in a series of shelters. Finally, in my last trimester, I became eligible for AFDC benefits. Welfare helped me and my newborn son, Mark, get back on our feet.

Welfare made it possible for me to go back to school and get my high school degree. I found work again and held a series of different jobs in Minneapolis. Over the years, I worked in a cafeteria, as a nursing assistant, as a cashier, as a waitress, and doing child care. Eventually I got married and moved to Philadelphia, where my new husband had a job. I also got a job in Philadelphia.

After about a year on the job in Philadelphia I was laid off and couldn't find another job. The stress of trying to live on one income put a severe strain on my marriage and my husband and I broke up. When I got divorced, me and my son had nowhere to go and nothing to fall back on. Most of my family and friends were back in Minnesota and I was unemployed. Although I pounded the pavement looking for work, I was finally forced to apply for welfare again.

Like most welfare recipients I know, I would much rather work than live on welfare. Whenever I can find work, I take it. But the

jobs I can find don't last, don't pay enough to live on, and don't provide health care benefits for me and my son. I hope that I will find another job soon, but I worry about what will happen if I get laid off again.

I'm thirty-one years old now, and my son is in 9th grade. I'm not a teen parent anymore, but under the Personal Responsibility Act² provision cutting off AFDC for children born to teen parents, my son wouldn't be eligible for help now, 14 years later. It wouldn't matter that I've been employed, it wouldn't matter that I've been married, it wouldn't matter that my son is well-behaved and a good student. The only help we would be offered is foster care or a group home. I love my son. It would hurt both of us terribly to be separated. He doesn't need to be raised by strangers, and I don't need a group home. What we do need is money to live on and help finding a stable job at a living wage with health benefits.

II. THE VALUE OF THE SAFETY NET

I think that my experiences, and the experiences of women I know, show how important welfare is to our survival.

First of all, welfare is an important safety net for poor families. I've needed welfare at several different times in my life — in order to finish high school, then later when my marriage broke up, and when I've been laid off from jobs. If welfare had not been available when we needed it, my son and I would have been sleeping on the streets. Welfare helped me hold my family together, and take care of my son.

Second, I know from my own experiences, and from talking with other welfare recipients, that young women do not have babies in order to get a welfare check. Because of the hardship I went through, I tell young women I know to wait to have kids until they are really ready. But I know that cutting off welfare for teen parents will end up hurting the children; it won't stop teenagers from getting pregnant.

Third, many of the women I know who get welfare have been beaten up by abusive boyfriends or husbands. A lot of times battered women lose their jobs, because of the abuser making trouble. Welfare

2. H.R. 4, 104th Cong., 1st Sess. (1995).

is often the only thing that makes it possible for a woman who is being abused to get away and to protect her children from the violence. I get upset when people say that women who get welfare should have gotten married instead, or should have stayed married, because I think they must not understand that for women who are being battered, staying married means broken bones and black eyes and danger for their children.

I also think that people don't understand that when you're being beaten, you don't have choices about when to have sex or whether you get pregnant. I know women who have been forced to have sex, who have been beaten because they said no, or because they tried to use birth control. I know young women who have gotten pregnant as the result of rape or incest. Fourth, most people who get welfare have worked in the past and want to work now. Welfare benefits are extremely low. My son and I barely survive on \$316 a month in AFDC — the maximum grant in Philadelphia — and another \$212 in food stamps. It is almost impossible to live on that amount of money. There just aren't enough jobs for everyone who wants to work.

In my community, for instance, the Scott Tissue Company, the William Penn Company and the Philadelphia Navy Yard all recently closed. The electric company just laid off 2,000 more people. The unemployment rate in Philadelphia is 8%. Arbitrary time limits on welfare don't recognize how hard it can be to find and keep a job in today's economy.

The low-paying jobs I've gotten don't have health care benefits or sick days and don't pay enough to cover the costs of decent child care and transportation to work. All of these things are necessary for women with children to keep our jobs.

Without sick days and reliable health care, child care, and transportation, poor women end up missing work and risk losing their jobs. If your kids get sick, you have to miss work. If your child care provider gets sick, you have to miss work. I know many women who were fired when they missed work because of an ill child or a sick elderly parent. Meaningful welfare reform has to recognize that without child care, health care and transportation, low income mothers can't get and keep jobs.

Another thing I know from my own experiences is that welfare benefits are not enough for a family to live on and look for work at

the same time. Just living on welfare means constantly scrambling. I have had to sell my last belongings at a pawn shop; my son and I get our clothes at a thrift store; we've had to wait in lines at the soup kitchen, and go without heat when I can't pay the bills. Our phone is shut off more often than it's on.

Looking for work costs money. To look for work you need money to either pay your phone bill or to buy quarters to call from a pay phone. If you can't afford a phone, which I often can't, prospective employers can't call you back. You need money to buy a newspaper to read the want ads or money to get to the library to read the paper there. You need money to buy shampoo and detergent to look acceptable at a job interview. AFDC grant amounts should be increased and the AFDC rules should be changed to allow families to find jobs and to keep a little of their welfare money as they make the transition to work.

Poor mothers like me struggle to do what's right for our families and we are good parents. The assumption that poor families don't take good care of their children is wrong. When I was a teenage parent I did everything I could to make sure Mark had what he needed.

You may look at me and think that because I'm on welfare there must be something wrong with me, that somehow it's my fault that I'm poor. I am here to tell you that there is nothing wrong with me. I am a hard working person and a good mother. Everyone needs help sometime.

Thank you.