

Written Testimony of

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Chairman Reichert, Ranking Member Doggett and Members of the Committee, it is an honor for me to sit before you today to tell you my success story. I am Sandra Collins, and I am now the Assistant Manager at the Goodwill® Outlet store in Kent, WA. I'm about to become a homeowner. I've come a long way!

In April 2007 my life looked very different—I was homeless, living in a shelter with two children, had been a meth abuser for 17 years, a victim of domestic violence and I felt alone. I had burned all my relationships with family and friends. I had zero credit, no HS diploma, and a stack of legal offenses that kept me from a driver's license. My self-worth and confidence were at all-time lows. It was time for a change but I didn't know who could help or how to get started.

I went to the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) office to apply for TANF, enrolled in the WorkFirst Community Jobs program, which is Washington State's transitional jobs program for people on public assistance. DSHS assigned me to my Community Jobs caseworker, Cindy Farnsworth. Cindy was the first of many new trusting relationships that I was going to form. I was hesitant to share all of my problems with her at first for fear of having my kids taken away, losing my financial assistance or being put in jail. My license had been suspended and I didn't tell Cindy I was homeless. It took a few months of weekly meetings to build trust. She would tell you that I was closed up. I felt as if I had no self-worth.

One of the first things Cindy did was get me placed into a work program at a Tacoma Goodwill outlet store. I also needed my GED so she assigned me to work close to the GED site. Little did I know it would turn out to be the best job for me and would change my life permanently.

Without a car, and living 2.5 miles from a bus stop, my commute was 4 hours a day round trip but I was punctual and worked hard, even volunteering to do additional work beyond my normal responsibilities. Though things were dark, there was a tiny light of hope breaking through. I knew the power of having a

job would help me escape poverty. My manager was willing to flex with my commute schedule. Not only did I expand my work skills but everyday co-workers showed real happiness to see me. I felt special and important. I had meaning in my life and gained self-worth. It made me want to return to work every day.

Cindy helped me enroll in a program that provided me with transportation to the bus stop, making my commute so much shorter. Cindy's role as a Community Jobs case manager was critical to the changes happening in my life—eventually I did open up and with every problem that I revealed, Cindy provided resources or solutions. I didn't feel as helpless or alone anymore. She helped me get my license back—I wrote letters to each of the courts where I had amassed violations and the Community Jobs program provided the funding for the license reinstatement fees.

And by the time the 6 month Community Jobs program ended, I had completed my GED and my Tacoma outlet store manager, impressed with my reputation for hard work, recommended me for the perfect full time job at a nearby Goodwill store.

I remember my first day very clearly—On January 15th, 2008 I started my job at the Lakewood Goodwill as a production worker. That April the original Tacoma outlet store I trained at had an opening and asked me to return. It was a great accomplishment to be wanted back. I remember thinking “I am somebody!” In July 2008 I was promoted to supervisor back at the Tacoma Outlet Store. Another great success. Work was changing my life and people were supporting me as I worked hard and proved myself.

While working, other Goodwill services also made a huge difference—I took the Goodwill financial literacy course and opened a bank account. The course taught me how to set goals, short and long term, and reach them. My short-term goals were to focus on the day-to-day: stay clean and sober, get to work, keep my kids safe and from going down the path I did. My long-term goals were to get a car

and to buy a house. At the time, I jotted them down as “pie in the sky” but in 2009 I was enrolled in the Goodwill Wheels to Work program and I was able to get financing so I now own my own car. Last October I found out I needed to move, and I’m proud to say I’ll be buying my own home for my family in August.

One of the greatest things is that since becoming a supervisor, I have had an amazing opportunity to bring on and support people who have faced similar problems. Out of the 36 employees at my store, 13 are Community Jobs program graduates and a few others are enrolled in the program now. I take great pride in serving as a mentor and helping them. People call me the “volunteer queen” because I always have a handful of Community Jobs participants placed at my site. Because of my experiences, Community Jobs participants open up to me about their lives. I’m able to give back to them what was given to me. Support, encouragement, challenge, resources.

Now it is time for me to set some new goals. I just interviewed for the Goodwill Lacey Store Manager position. I’m confident I can do this job. As a Goodwill employee now I understand how important my retail work is - more than 9,000 people a year get job training and education in many careers thanks to the revenue from our stores.

In closing, people like me need a second chance to get our lives on a better path. Goodwill and the Washington WorkFirst Community Jobs program gave me and many others that chance. I couldn’t have done it alone. I thank you and my family thanks you, for the federal funding and support that has helped me get where I am today. Please keep these programs alive—they make a difference and I am living proof of it!

Respectfully Submitted,

Sandra Collins