



Statement before the House on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Welfare and Work
The Dignity of Work: Lifting Individuals Out of Poverty

Eradicating Poverty through the Dignity of Work

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April 9, 2024

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Thank you, Chairmen Smith and LaHood and Ranking Member Davis. Thank you to the distinguished members of this committee.

My name is Matt Paprocki. I am the founder of the Center for Poverty Solutions, a project of the Illinois Policy Institute where I serve as president and CEO.

In my testimony today, I'll explain why work is the best way to eradicate poverty and restore people's dignity. I'll close by offering three solutions to get us there.

First, let me give you an overview.

The Center for Poverty Solutions has taken a data-driven approach to understanding the main creators of poverty. We work with direct service agencies, partnering to pass bipartisan solutions to reduce poverty by creating opportunity.

Our goal is to eliminate poverty, starting in Chicago.

The good news is we've found a way to do it. One single factor can reduce poverty by over 87% – work.

Poverty rates among people with a full-time job is just 2%.

Take for example my friend, Steven Blake.

Steven was a homeless veteran. But thanks to the help of this place, the Pacific Garden Mission, he was given housing and job training. Today, Steven is an entrepreneur selling fresh fruit in downtown Chicago.

One day I saw Steven selling fruit in freezing-cold rain. I said, "Why are you out here today?" Steven pointed to a man holding a sign reading, "Please help." He said, "That used to be me. I asked everyone that walked by me how they can help me. Today I ask the opposite. I ask everyone that walks by how I can help them."

This is the same question I have heard members of congress ask at the end of every meeting, "How can I help you?"

I looked back at Steven and a huge smile crossed his face: "I've got to be out here. People need me."

That's dignity.

A dignity that's enshrined in our constitution, in the phrase "the pursuit of happiness."

A dignity that pulls people closer to the image and likeness of God.

A dignity that lifts people out of addiction, dependency and mental illness.

It's what's missing from our system, which too often tells people they can't. We need to shift that mindset. Today's poverty isn't just about food and housing insecurity – it's a problem of hopelessness and despair.

Meaningful work can solve all of these problems.

I know. Because I've lived it.

When I was 24, I worked as a professional staffer, similar to the fantastic staff you have here at Ways and Means. Like them, I loved that job. But I got a call one day from my mom. She said, "Matt, I'm at the doctor, and they just diagnosed me with cancer." After that call, I left the job because my mom needed me. For the next eight months, I had the honor of taking care of her. One cold December day, she died in my arms. I lost my purpose. I had no job. No money. No parents. Nobody needed me.

In the following months, I qualified for most welfare benefits. I thank God I never took them, because welfare is rarely a temporary safety net. It's a snare.

Today we have a record number of people trapped in the complex web of welfare – SNAP, TANF, EITC, public housing.

Those in the snare are often stuck for generations. A Pew study found 70% will never escape government dependency, and it extends to their children and grandchildren.

My escape from poverty was the same as Steven's and millions of others – we found jobs.

More precisely, we found dignity through work.

We built families, became active in our communities, volunteered.

We can help millions of Americans also rise up by changing policies. Here are three solutions this committee can enact:

- 1) End the benefits cliff. Our archaic benefits systems leaves people with impossible choices: provide for their family at a job or reduce work activities and receive greater benefits from government assistance.
- 2) Expand tax credits for apprenticeships. The average income of someone after an apprenticeship is \$77,000.
- 3) And institute work requirements with welfare benefits, similar to the successful bi-partisan reforms we saw in 1996, which increased work and decreased dependence.

I ask you today to help us create a better America.

An America that lifts people up.

An America that creates opportunity.

An America that helps people pursue happiness.

That pursuit starts with the dignity of work.

Thank you, Chairmen Smith and LaHood, Ranking Member Davis and members of the committee for this opportunity.