

Response to Questions for the Record From Chairman Gerald E. Connolly, Subcommittee on Government Operations

By Amy Jo Hutchison, organizer West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families/Our Future
WV

Being asked to contribute through a follow-up question from the committee is an honor for me. Since the hearing, my testimony has become a viral whirlwind. I have seen that it has reached nearly 40 million shares across social media, and I have received an overwhelming number of messages from across America, thanking me for telling the story of so many others. All of this to say that America's working poor are reaching out and speaking up because they, to use the words of so many, "feel seen and heard for the first time." I am hopeful that Ranking Member Meadows' request for more insight into what the biggest obstacles are to escaping poverty can serve as a way for us to have honest discussion about what it looks like to be an average American doing the best they can with what they have. As this conversation and work move forward, I hope that we, as a country, can stop viewing poverty as a character defect and begin to realize that the system feeds on inequity and needs to be repaired so that every American has the opportunity to secure an improved quality of life.

I realized that my voice and opinion was not the only one necessary to answer this question, so a survey was put together and shared on social media. At the time of the report, 450 responses were analyzed. The survey has actually gathered a total of 491 responses since its beginning date through today, March 12, 2020. I also want to point out that responses were given from 26 of our 50 states, which shows that these issues are important to people across our nation and not just one geographic location. While the largest number of responses were from West Virginia, I do feel it is important to realize that Americans are struggling with self-sufficiency across our nation.

One last viewpoint that I want to share is that I have been contacted by Americans from both major political parties. Personally, I have had friends who have distanced themselves from me because of our differing political beliefs reach out to thank me for shining a light on their situation as well. This goes to show that the struggles of the working American, the working poor, is NOT a partisan issue but, rather, a human one; an issue that should seek, in my opinion, a solution that is based upon values and an honest, though uncomfortable at times, look at the barriers in place that are preventing millions of us from living the American dream.

Thank you.

Amy Jo Hutchison

Question:

What are three ways that the federal government could support families in West Virginia struggling with poverty to gain opportunities and break the cycle of poverty?

Survey Results

Out of 450 unique responders, the following demographics were calculated:

AGE

- 16 were between the ages of 18-24 (3.6%)
- 84 were between the ages of 25-34 (18.7%)
- 185 were between the ages of 35-44 (41.1%)
- 105 were between the ages of 45-54 (23.3%)
- 49 were between the ages of 55-64 (10.9%)
- 11 were above the age of 65 (2.4%)

LOCATION

- 373 live in West Virginia (82.9%)
- 25 live in Ohio (5.6%)
- 6 live in Pennsylvania (1.3%)
- 6 live in Michigan (1.3%)
- 5 live in Florida (1.11%)
- 5 live in Arizona (1.11%)
- 3 live in Kentucky (0.7%)
- 3 live in Indiana (0.7%)
- 2 live in Massachusetts (0.4%)
- 2 live in New York (0.4%)
- 2 live in New Hampshire (0.4%)
- 2 live in Virginia (0.4%)
- 2 live in South Carolina (0.4%)
- The other 13 responses were spread between 13 additional states, with one response each (0.2%)

DEPENDENTS

- 93 identified 0 dependents (20.7%)
- 97 identified 1 dependents (21.6%)
- 128 identified 2 dependents (28.4%)
- 79 identified 3 dependents (17.6%)

- 38 identified 4 dependents (8.4%)
- 12 identified 5 dependents (2.7%)
- 1 identified 6 dependents (0.2%)
- 1 identified 7 dependents (0.2%)
- 1 identified 8 dependents (0.2%)

SINGLE PARENT Y/N

- 170 were single parents (37.8%)
- 280 were not single parents (62.2%)

PARENTAL STATUS

- 240 answered "Not a Single Parent" (53.3%)
- 154 answered "Single Mother" (34.2%)
- 4 answered "Single Father" (0.9%)
- 11 answered "Single Grandmother" (2.4%)
- 1 answered "Single Grandfather" (0.2%)
- 40 answered "Other" (8.9%)

HOUSEHOLD INCOME

- 68 indicated their income as being less than \$15,000 (15.1%)
- 128 indicated their income as being \$15,000-\$29,999 (28.4%)
- 110 indicated their income as being \$30,000-\$49,999 (24.4%)
- 71 indicated their income as being \$50,000-\$74,999 (15.8%)
- 45 indicated their income as being \$75,000-\$99,999 (10%)
- 23 indicated their income as being \$100,000-\$150,000 (5.1%)
- 5 indicated their income as being greater than \$150,000 (1.1%)

EMPLOYMENT

- 20 had 0 jobs contributing to their household income (4.4%)
- 174 had 1 job contributing to their household income (38.7%)
- 178 had 2 jobs contributing to their household income (39.6%)
- 53 had 3 jobs contributing to their household income (11.8%)
- 16 had 4 jobs contributing to their household income (3.6%)
- 5 had 5 jobs contributing to their household income (1.1%)
- 1 had 6 jobs contributing to their household income (0.2%)
- 2 had 7 jobs contributing to their household income (0.4%)
- 1 had 8 jobs contributing to their household income (0.2%)

These respondents answered the open-ended questions as follows:

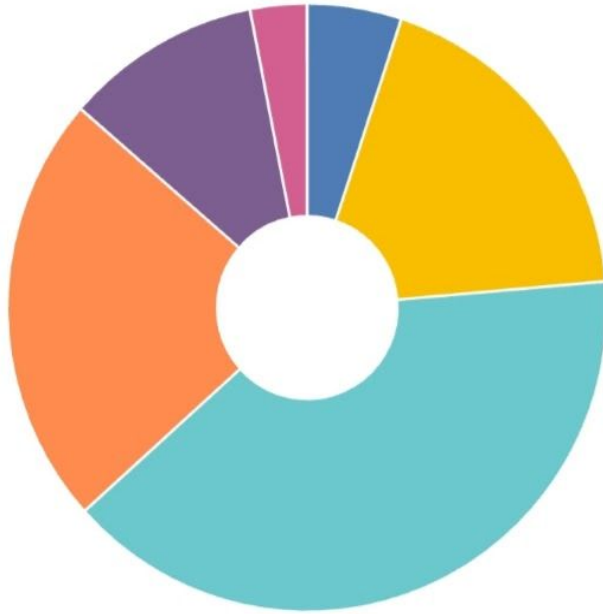
TOP FIVE BIGGEST OBSTACLES TO GETTING OUT OF POVERTY

- 119 identified low wages (26.4%)
- 92 identified a high cost of living (20.4%)
- 81 identified the high cost of bills (18%)
- 73 identified a high cost for housing (16.2%)
- 73 identified a high cost for healthcare (16.2%)

TOP FIVE THINGS THAT WOULD HELP

- **175 suggested a higher minimum wage (38.8%)**
- **133 suggested better access to healthcare (29.5%)**
- **93 suggested more job opportunities (20.6%)**
- **89 suggested better access to childcare (19.7%)**
- **86 suggested an increased access to government benefits (19.1%)**

1. How old are you?

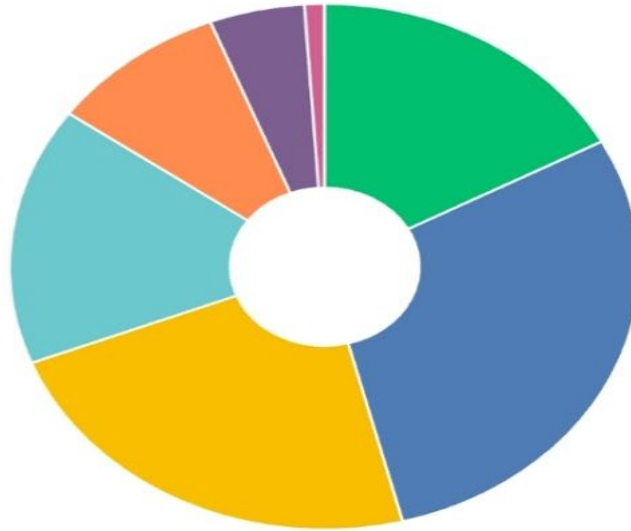


Answered: 491

Skipped: 0

Age Group	Percentage	Count
Under 18	0%	0
18-24	5.09%	25
25-34	18.53%	91
35-44	39.71%	195
45-54	23.01%	113
55-64	10.59%	52
65+	3.05%	15

6. What is your household income?



Answered: 491

Skipped: 0

Under \$15,000	17.11%	84
Between \$15,000 and \$29,999	28.92%	142
Between \$30,000 and \$49,999	23.01%	113
Between \$50,000 and \$74,999	15.89%	78
Between \$75,000 and \$99,999	9.16%	45
Between \$100,000 and \$150,000	4.89%	24
Over \$150,000	1.02%	5

As for solutions, one response that was given repeatedly was a **grace period to combat The Cliff Effect**. For example, before losing one's SNAP benefit, which is typically the first benefit lost, as soon as wages increase, provide recipients with a 6-12 month period in which to prepare for the loss of benefits. The almost immediate loss of assistance is crippling, leaving them to decide for the sake of their families to resign from promotions, raises, and increased hours. The system is quite punitive in that way and works against itself in an effort to promote workforce participation. The Cliff Effect affects families on other fronts as well, such as not marrying due to immediate loss of benefits.

Low-wages are one of the biggest obstacles named. Subsidies are utilized by employees of businesses which do not offer livable wages or full-time hours. When we are talking about a state such as West Virginia where WalMart is the largest employer, the corporations' reliance on/use of Safety Net programs to subsidize their employees must be taken into consideration. No one working full-time in the United States should be struggling to pay rent or to provide the basic needs of their families.

Increasing the income guidelines for Safety Net programs would go a long way to help those working but still struggling to make ends meet. These guidelines need to reflect cost of living, housing, healthcare, and wages. I had a friend reach out to me after viewing my video testimony to tell me that she had been working as a full-time manager in retail and lost her health coverage for herself and her son, so she had to make the decision to cut her hours to part-time. Her wage was \$13.25 an hour and she was receiving \$15 a month in SNAP benefits for her child under the age of 6. Her hourly wage is well above the minimum wage and yet she had to choose to decrease her workforce participation to protect her family's health and well-being. Stories like this are far too common because the current income guidelines are irrelevant when it comes to what it really takes financially to maintain a family.

If policies such as work requirements are going to be placed upon safety net programs then we need to take a look at the available supports to make workforce participation possible, such as **child care**. As an example, in Hampshire County, WV, the Census counted over 6500 families with over 1100 of those families identified as lead by an unmarried woman. There are no child care options in that county and 20% of the county lives in poverty. Calhoun County, with our state's highest unemployment rate, does not have a child care facility, as yet another example of the child care barrier. Without affordable and accessible child care, we cannot expect our families, especially those of single parents, to be able to work and be self-sustaining.

A family in West Virginia will pay over \$8,000 a year for one child to attend childcare. This is more than a year's tuition at our state's two largest universities, Marshall

University and West Virginia University. Affordability is an issue, but accessibility is as well. Just like week I was sitting with a childcare center director who read three email requests from out-of-state parents wanting to explore childcare options as they were moving to West Virginia. She had to tell those families that some waitlists are up to one year at her center, and I know that one local center has a waitlist of up to three years, depending on age of the child.

The systems in place do not provide the basic foundation blocks on which families and individuals can build a life of self-sufficiency. **Low wages, outrageous rents (especially in WV due to the oil and gas boom), unaffordable healthcare, lack of access and affordability of childcare, and lack of financially sustaining jobs create the perfect storm for poverty.** West Virginia is one of a handful of states whose poverty rate has continued to increase under this current administration, despite talk of economic boom and growth. I personally do not feel as if the unemployment rates take into consideration that a majority of folks are working more than one job to survive. The Safety Net was designed to protect individuals and families but instead, it is designed in a way that captures them and makes it nearly impossible for them to escape. We need to make it possible to work and meet our families' needs, and a policy change that recognizes the shortfalls created by the system's design is absolutely critical for the well-being of our most vulnerable, children, and families.

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<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/hampshirecountywestvirginia>