



**Testimony of Heather Reynolds
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**Before the U.S. Senate
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Subcommittee on Food and Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Organics, and Research**

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Introduction

Thank you, Chairman Fetterman, Ranking Member Braun, and Members of the Committee. I serve at the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities, or LEO, at the University of Notre Dame, where we work with innovative service providers to build rigorous evidence around programs designed to move people permanently out of poverty.

Prior to joining LEO, I spent two decades as CEO of Catholic Charities Fort Worth. The clients we had the honor to serve are people who taught me about poverty, about struggle, about strength.

I will never forget meeting Marsha. Marsha was a single mom, working a full-time, minimum wage job that just didn't cut it. Her annual earnings were just over \$15,000 a year. She spent hours a week figuring out which bill to pay, and how much of it to pay—because when you make \$1,200 a month, you have to spend a significant amount of time making these sorts of choices. Do you grocery shop so you can feed your children this week or do you pay just enough of your utility bill to ensure that you don't lose power?

Marsha came to Catholic Charities because she had no more choices—the avalanche of poverty had closed in on her. She had run out of food, her utilities were about to be shut off, and where she was living was a place that no one should ever call home. They had no running water in the bathroom and no hot water at all. As a mom, I cannot fathom my child growing up in a situation like this. Can you? Can you imagine your child or your grandchild living in a home with no hot water? No bath time ritual, no hand washing lessons, no warmth from the chill of the winter. We worked with Marsha to stabilize her situation, helping her with food via SNAP, utilities, and getting her into new housing.

When Marsha and her children moved into their new apartment, Marsha taught her daughter a life lesson that I pray I never have to teach mine. Marsha took her daughter's hand and held it under the warm running water. She squeezed her hand tightly and told her to never take anything for granted. It brings tears to my eyes to put myself in this mother's shoes and that she even had to share this life lesson with her child.

I struggle to tell this story without feeling sad, and if I am honest, pretty angry. It makes me want to just shout "come on!" How much potential did our country lose from Marsha because she had to spend so much of her time figuring out how to feed her family? How behind are her children in school because she was not reading to them or because they were hungry, which we know is not ideal for learning? Instead, Marsha spent her energy just trying to ensure her family survived in poverty.

Today, I want to use my time to suggest two points which I believe would have made Marsha's situation better.

Most people don't want to be on government benefits. Most people want to provide for their families. Most people want a way out of poverty. Which is why my first point is so important—as we think about the Farm Bill, we need to be less focused on just work requirements and **more focused on evidence-based reform that will ensure we give people a way out of poverty.**

Work requirements do not get people out of poverty. 75% of SNAP recipients with children who are not disabled or elderly already work. They are just underemployed

or underpaid. Our solution must be to give them programs that work towards upward mobility and are proven to be successful, so they can feed their families and live a life outside of poverty.

That's why we at Notre Dame spend so much of our time working hand-in-hand with innovative service providers to study what works for a pathway out of poverty. At LEO, we have over 90 research projects across the country. And our partners have solutions that our research shows work for people like Marsha.

Solutions in Texas: LEO recently completed a randomized controlled trial study to understand the impact of the Padua program, a holistic case management program designed by Catholic Charities Fort Worth to address the unique assortment of barriers faced by families in poverty. Around 63% of these families utilize SNAP benefits. Because of small caseloads, Padua case managers are able to build strong relationships with families. Families have access to strategic, flexible financial assistance that case managers can use to incentivize the behavior that leads them to achieve their goals. Padua clients were 25% more likely to be employed, and those who were unemployed when offered Padua services earn 46% more. They are 60% more likely to be stably housed 24 months later and experience a sharp decline in credit card debt that persists over time. And it is cost effective. Participants' earnings gains over the first eight years equal the cost of the program. For participants who were unemployed when they first enrolled, it takes only five years for their earnings to surpass the cost of the program.

Solutions in New York: The Bridges to Success program is designed by Action for a Better Community to provide working poor residents of Rochester, New York with economic mobility mentors. 73% of these participants utilize SNAP at the time of intake. Their mentors help participants move out of poverty, one issue at a time, by focusing on housing, family support, debt and savings, education, and employment. Participants set explicit goals and work to achieve self-sufficiency while being provided with financial incentives along the way. This pairing of mentorship and financial help allows the clients to handle today and make measurable steps closer to a life outside of poverty tomorrow. In collaboration with our Bridges to Success partners, LEO worked to build evidence around this program through a randomized controlled trial and results show that participants, compared to a control group, are more likely to be employed. This result persists over time.

Solutions in Indiana: The Goodwill Excel Center of Central and Southern Indiana operates 15 tuition-free, public charter high schools that support adult learners in completing their state-certified high school diploma. The Excel Center provides small classes on a flexible schedule, assistance with transportation, on-site childcare, and life coaching. LEO's rigorous study of the Excel program shows amazing impact—adults who enroll in and complete the program increase earnings by 38% and these results also persist.

What if Marsha would have had access to one of these proven programs five years before finding Catholic Charities? Would her daughter then have had to learn about the joys of running water? Probably not. In our country, we have Employment and Training programs designed to increase the employment prospects of SNAP recipients. In 2016, only 3.3% of SNAP recipients who were subject to work requirements participated. States are not incentivized to invest in these programs.

Which brings me to my other point. **We need to scale up evidence-based solutions. And we need the federal government demanding it to be so.**

Senators, you have access to resources that Catholic Charities Fort Worth, Action for a Better Community, and Goodwill Excel Centers do not. But they have already done the hard work for you. They have provided you with the solutions that work to help people with their immediate needs—in many cases leveraging programs like SNAP—while getting them out of poverty over the long haul with a goal of not needing SNAP. They have given you the answers, they have allowed us as researchers into their businesses, despite research adding complexity to their already hard jobs, and now we owe it to them to let their evidence-based solutions scale.

Families First and Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) laws and clearinghouses that provide us with evidence-based programs give us good precedent for how bipartisan leaders can put evidence first and make it actionable for providers. In both cases, federal law now requires providers to either use an evidence-based program or to build rigorous evidence in the new program they are running to serve people in need. The clearinghouses verify the validity and strength of the research proving a program is impactful. This combination of legislative requirements plus a well-run clearinghouse that is accessible to

providers shows us a way forward towards continued evidence building and usage to ensure SNAP works better for more people.

Closing

It is your role to pay attention to this evidence and to use it. As policymakers, we need you shouting from the rooftops—or said another way, allocating policy dollars to allow evidence-based services to scale, because they work.

What bothers me most about Marsha's story is that while it is one story, I know there are millions of others just like her. I am asking you to put evidence to work. Thank you.