

Proponent Testimony

House Bill 200

James Whitford

May 21, 2019

Good morning members of the House Health Committee. My name is James Whitford, and I direct a privately funded mission in southwest Missouri that helps families with food, clothing, and household goods. Our emergency shelter serves hundreds of homeless men and women. Our long-term program provides an opportunity for men to choose a path of independence through work readiness and character development. We meet more than 20,000 basic needs every year through more than 700 volunteer shifts filled every month. It didn't start that way. Nearly 20 years ago, when my wife and I opened the doors to a very small mission we quickly learned that our handout charity and good intentions were falling short of the outcomes we had hoped to see in people's lives. We had a lot of compassion but we were failing to empower the poor to rise out of poverty and were in fact part of the problem of dependency.

This is why we designed our Worth Shop. We call it a Worth Shop because we've learned that work awakens worth in people's lives. Now, whether it's a meal ticket for our evening dinner, a night of shelter or a piece from our furniture appliance bank, people earn it through employment in one of our small enterprises. People who are typically viewed as poor or disabled are esteemed as partners with ability.

I believe it's this model - of work on the front end of charity - that results in a 61% employment rate in our shelter. That's right. No one comes off the streets into our shelter with a job. But 61% leave gainfully employed. Why? Because work is a part of our charity. Work reminds us of our potential to be both free and valued in society whereas typical welfare and hand-out charity reminds people of their poverty.

Beth felt valued. I met this middle-aged woman after she had finished earning a week's worth of food from our mission. She said, "I know I could have gone somewhere else to get my food for free, but I was taught to earn what I need if I can." She called our office later and left this voice message: "Thank you for helping me crochet hats for newborns today. I didn't feel like I was less than anyone else. You made me feel worthy of what I was doing to give back a little-treating each other as equals... as I feel I was treated today. I just wanted to call and say thank you to all of you."

Mike, a mentally challenged man with no more than a 3rd grade education came in to the mission one day very excited. He said, "I saw you on TV say that the working poor are happier than the welfare poor so I went and got a job!" He had come in that day because he wanted to work for his food rather than use his food stamp card and more than 3 years later, he still has that very simple but rewarding job of holding a sign advertising the company he works for.

It's not always as easy as it was for Mike. Jocelyn was a drug addict for more than a decade living on the streets. She found freedom from drugs when she came to our mission, but freedom

from welfare came much later. After she finally swapped food stamps for a job, she told a local reporter, “It was harder for me to give up food stamps than it was for me to give up heroine.” Jocelyn went on to college, got her master’s degree and is full time employed at our mission helping others find the same freedom from dependency.

As individuals, we have a clear and scriptural mandate to help the hungry, but food stamps will never solve hunger. Only a job can do that. My state’s own version of welfare-to-work reform has resulted in 86% of able bodied adults finding freedom from welfare since 2016 and I’m sure that HB 200 will accomplish the same and more importantly remind the marginalized of Ohio that they too can enjoy a life of purpose, opportunity and prosperity.