

Ellen Weaver Testimony before the South Carolina Senate Human Services Subcommittee

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My name is Ellen Weaver and I am the President of Palmetto Promise Institute. We research and promote public policy solutions that break down barriers to success and empower a free and flourishing South Carolina: a Palmetto State where every person has the opportunity to reach their full, God-given potential.

Thank you for allowing me the chance to speak briefly today about three short – but powerful – bills that I believe represent a compassionate, common-sense step towards making that vision a reality.

Others here have spoken very capably about the details of each bill, so I would like to focus my comments on the context of why they are so important to the social fabric of this great state.

For some, the words “welfare reform” conjure up visions of Ebenezer Scrooge counting out his dollars and cents. And yes, the fiduciary responsibility that our leaders bear to the people of our state and nation to wisely steward limited taxpayer dollars is important.

But just as important, I believe is the moral responsibility to wisely steward the human potential of the citizens of this state through sound policy decisions that recognize and foster personal dignity and “neededness.”

Last year, Palmetto Promise hosted an event here in Columbia with Dr. Arthur Brooks, a nationally-renowned political scientist and President of the American Enterprise Institute. That evening, he gave a powerful talk based on a broad body of research he has conducted on what he calls: “America’s dignity deficit.” His basic point: the only way we move our communities forward is when everyone has an ore in the water.

Quoting from an article in which he summarized his findings:

“At its core, to be treated with dignity means being considered worthy of respect. ... We feel a sense of dignity when our own lives produce value for ourselves and others. Put simply, to feel dignified, one must be needed by others.”

He continues:

The War on Poverty did not fail because it did not raise the daily caloric consumption of [those it intended to help] (it did). It failed because it did nothing significant to make [them] needed and thus help them gain a sense of dignity. It also got the U.S. government into the business of treating people left behind by economic change as liabilities to manage rather than as human assets to develop. ...

The question for leaders, no matter where they sit on the political spectrum, must be, ‘Does this policy make people more or less needed—in their families, their communities, and the broader economy?’”

Some of the most successful welfare policy of our generation were the bi-partisan reforms passed by a Republican Congress and signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996. The unifying theme of those reforms: recognizing that a well-meaning War on Poverty had deprived generations of Americans of their fundamental sense of dignity, by diminishing the significance of work. Additionally, trillions of dollars and 30 years later, it had barely moved the needle on the 14.7% poverty rate that existed in 1966.

At the time, critics of reform said there were no job opportunities to be had and that work requirements would force single mothers and vulnerable children further into poverty. What happened? Exactly the opposite! Since 1996, child poverty in single-parent homes has fallen by more than ten percent and overall child poverty is at an all-time low. The point: commonsense work requirements can incentivize people to seek employment without crushing them or their children.

Which brings us to the choice before this committee today.

As you know, in the throws and aftermath of the 2008 recession, many states waived work requirements. The result: food stamp usage spiked 60% nation-wide. Now, with the economy humming and a low unemployment rate, the time will never be better to reverse that concerning trend and move as many South Carolinians as possible from dependence back to dignity through work.

- In South Carolina, administrative action was taken in 2015 to resume work requirements for able-bodied, working-aged adults with no dependent children who receive SNAP benefits. S.920 simply makes that administrative requirement permanent law.
- S.921 builds on the proven premise that child support lifts nearly a million individuals out of poverty every year, by requiring both absent and custodial parents to cooperate with child support orders to be eligible to receive food stamps. At least 8 states currently have this reform on the books and one state that pursued this reform – Kansas – saw child support collections for these families rise between \$1-2M dollars a year.
- S.922 would help preserve limited resources for the truly vulnerable by preventing South Carolina from using eligibility loopholes to waive federal asset tests. Asset tests are limited to truly liquid assets like cash, bank deposits, stocks and bonds. Non-liquid assets like cars that help people get to work, retirement accounts, their home and the like are exempt.

Other states are moving forward with these types of proven reforms to move back toward long-established policy norms that we know work. South Carolina should do no less. The upfront investment of staff time and financial resources to set up strong compliance and implementation of these bills would certainly pay offsetting fiscal dividends down the road. But most importantly, these bills walk a careful balance: protecting the truly vulnerable while bettering lives of those who are able...through the ennobling demands of work and responsibility.

Once again quoting Arthur Brooks, “Our goal should never be to merely make poverty less miserable for people. Our goal must be to make poverty more escapable.”

The fact is, WORK is what makes poverty escapable. Both common sense and academic research from across the ideological spectrum have demonstrated time and again that keys to a happy life are building a stable family life, belonging to a strong community, and working hard.

Welfare programs meet immediate material needs. But for those who are able, it should never be more than a bridge to work and the sense of “earned success” it creates. Work is the key to a fulfilling, dignified life.

Through this Committee’s work, I hope that many South Carolinians will be blessed with a fresh opportunity to live their best life, embody the highest ideals of this state and reach their full, God-given potential.

Thank you.