

# **Goodwill Industries of Greater Nebraska, Inc.**

Written testimony of

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## **Introduction**

Good Morning to each of you.

Thank you for the invitation to testify on the challenges and opportunities of serving people who live in rural communities impacted by poverty. My name is Tammy Slater, and I live in Doniphan, Nebraska, a town of 850-plus people. I am the Chief Executive Officer of Goodwill Industries of Greater Nebraska Inc., located in the third largest city of Nebraska, Grand Island, with a population of 50,000. We are one of 163 autonomous Goodwill® organizations in the United States and Canada and one of four serving the state of Nebraska. We are a member of Goodwill Industries International, which provides support for each autonomous local Goodwill organization. Last year, local Goodwill organizations connected 312,000 people with employment in the United States and Canada. Altogether, local Goodwill organizations provided career and financial services to more than 37 million people last year, including 2 million people who engaged face-to-face with Goodwill team members and 35 million who used Goodwill mobile and online learning to improve their skills or access virtual coaching and counseling services.

Local Goodwill organizations have an assigned territory, and we focus services within our geographic area in response to our communities' needs. Goodwill Industries of Greater Nebraska's services promote independence and access to the community, help people become successfully employed, support goals of wellness and recovery, facilitate group classes to teach responsible behavior and provide safe and affordable housing. Many people benefit from multiple programs. Our Goodwill serves Nebraskans experiencing intellectual or developmental disabilities, severe and persistent mental illnesses, substance use disorders, behavioral health challenges or acquired brain injuries. Each year, we help more than 1,600 people in central and western Nebraska earn jobs and advance their careers by providing specialized services to meet their needs. This includes helping people stabilize their housing with services for people transitioning from homelessness. Each person benefits from case management and an individualized plan for the services they need to achieve success.

Our service territory includes individuals and families across an area that encompasses 55 counties and is around 54,000 square miles. To give you an idea of what this means, we have what we call the tri-cities in our territory – our home community of Grand Island with a population of about 50,000 people; the city of Kearney with about 30,000; and Hastings with about 25,000. Almost 90 percent of the cities in Nebraska have fewer than 3,000 people, a characteristic that is common in our area of the country. So, when we refer to a city, we're not talking about anything like Chicago or Washington, D.C. Many of the 55 counties we serve have only 100 or so residents.

### **Challenges to serving rural residents who live in poverty**

The challenges of poverty – stable housing, adequate nutrition, effective healthcare, reliable transportation, quality childcare, appropriate education and job training – are common to both rural and urban areas. How we respond to challenges in rural areas may differ due to our sparse population, limited local resources and scarce employment opportunities.

### ***Distance and Transportation***

In the past decade or so, rural areas have become enticing for families struggling to make ends meet; it is enticing yet deceptive to move to a lower-cost area. Now these families have relocated to rural areas with few employment options, increased distance to medical care and no public transportation. As the cost of living has risen in our Tri-City areas, rural communities have drawn in struggling families but have not provided a more stable environment that would allow these families to move out of poverty towards self-sufficiency. Service providers like our Goodwill may never have a location in a county with 1,000 people or less. Most residents are probably going to a “larger community” – a suburban or urban area—to access basic necessities like shopping, job training and medical care. Though there are far fewer options, opportunities and services available, Broken Bow, Nebraska is considered an urban area by census definition. With a population of about 3,500, Broken Bow has much more in common with rural areas in terms of the challenges residents have getting what they need to get ahead and the ways we connect to serve residents and the community. Even helping residents become aware of

services presents a challenge when there is not a community center where information can be shared effectively.

In our area, people often live far apart – sometimes more than twenty miles between houses. Distance, limited or unreliable transportation and the unpredictable Nebraska winter often make getting to work, training or services impossible. Goodwill of Greater Nebraska has service locations in seven cities and towns. We reach out to individuals and families in surrounding communities and provide transportation for some rural residents. Though connecting people who live 20 or 30 miles from Goodwill locations with services is both expensive and challenging, we believe it is critical to serve these less-populated areas. We may be their only opportunity to stay connected to people and resources in the community. The lack of job opportunities in rural Nebraska is more than a speed bump; it is a roadblock to lifting people out of poverty.

### ***Lack of Education***

Education and job opportunities are scarce for people in rural areas. In 2015, rural employment was still below the pre-recession rates, and earnings are generally lower in rural areas than those in urban areas (American Community Survey, <http://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty/guidance/data-sources/acs-vs-cps.html>). In our territory, one in ten adults doesn't have a high school diploma, and three in ten has only a high school diploma. Another one in four has only some college with no degree. So – my neighbor's prospects are not good, and they aren't getting better fast. The growth rate of young adults (age 25-34) with bachelor's degrees is slower in rural areas than in urban areas (USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Census Bureau's 2000 Census and 2013 American Community Survey, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/employment-education/rural-education/>). Our state, like many, relies on one or two industries to employ those who manage to complete a degree. Although financial services jobs are numerous in Nebraska's larger urban areas, most of the state's employment in other areas is connected to industries that are slowing down, like agriculture.

### ***Funding Constraints***

We want to serve everyone in need in our communities, especially those with high needs. While poverty is painful for all, we know African American, Hispanic and American Indian communities in our area have two to four times higher rates of poverty than Caucasians.

Many of the families we serve have complex needs and require comprehensive services to help them stabilize, keep a place to live, be safe and have what they need. Goodwill cannot do our work alone. Partnerships with state and local agencies are important to address the complex needs of people living in rural Nebraska; community partners such as public schools, United Way, area churches and Salvation Army help us build a support network. Partnerships with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Administrative Office of Probation, Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation, Region II Human Services, Region 3 Behavioral Health Services and the Social Security Administration help people living in rural communities get and keep their lives on track.

The reality is that funding and reimbursement for services has changed. Administrative requirements like reporting, documentation and billing are more complex today than in the past. Being a good steward of government funding is essential to ensuring people who need services get them in a professional, compassionate and meaningful way.

Though partnerships are crucial to success, it is tough in rural areas because there are not many community organizations; those of us who work in social service organizations often struggle to sustain funding and continue services due to the long distances between communities. We at Goodwill are grateful for our social enterprise model that creates jobs and helps fund the services we provide, especially in a time when federal and state budgets are tight.

### ***Economic Development***

Also, we need economic development to create more jobs in our communities. We rural Nebraskans are hard-working people; we want good work that helps us support our families with a paycheck. My own husband was part of a shut down for five weeks at the end of this past year because of a business slow down; fortunately I have a job, so we are okay. Not all my

neighbors are as fortunate.

### ***Self-Reliant Communities***

One of the most difficult barriers to overcome is the stigma of seeking help. Rural Nebraskans, like many Americans, regardless of their age, race, ethnicity or family situation, are proud of their work ethic and have a strong sense of self-reliance. Whether there is a need for mental health services or someone lost a job and needs a new career path, asking for help somehow feels shameful. Our strategy as an organization is to be visible, available and aware of what our neighbors are facing. Neighbor-to-neighbor word-of-mouth “advertising” is often the best way to connect people with our services to help them move toward self-sufficiency.

### **Solutions**

Our Goodwill is committed to connecting individuals and families in our rural communities with opportunities, and we are not the only Goodwill doing this. Local Goodwill organizations across the country share ideas, innovations, effective practices and lessons learned so we can all better serve people who live in rural areas. Most of the 157 autonomous local Goodwill organizations in all 50 states include rural areas. In 2014, Goodwill Industries of Southwest Florida, for example, launched an ADA-compliant modified Winnebago Adventurer recreational vehicle that travels through rural areas twice per week, partnering with local organizations so people can have a place close to home for financial literacy services, health screenings, employment services and help with education financial aid (FAFSA) applications, access computer workstations, internet access and professional support. The Mobile Job-Link includes partners from health, financial and education organizations (<https://www.goodwillswfl.org/mobiljoblink/>).

In Peoria, Illinois, Goodwill Industries of Central Illinois established computer labs in two rural areas within their territory when they learned from employers that the most common skills missing from local job seekers were Microsoft Word and Excel fluency along with other computer skills. The labs are open full time; at certain times of day, anyone is welcome to use the computers to practice skills and work on tasks related to job searching with the assistance

of Goodwill staff. The lab also offers a regularly scheduled computer skills class in several-week sessions. Attendees have shown an increase in skills of greater than 50% after completion and have earned jobs with 16 area employers. Particularly in rural areas, employees spend a significant amount of money just to get to work; a 20- or 30-mile commute to and from work is a reality, and without public transportation can be onerous. The employer relationship is vital in these areas. After reaching out to job seekers and employers, CEO Don Johnson of Goodwill of Central Illinois offers these key takeaways:

- While the initial goal may be employment, it is just as important to equip people with the skills that will keep them employed and allow them to move up the career ladder. Therefore, Goodwill must provide job readiness skills training in addition to technical skills.
- Very few organizations offer workforce development programs in rural areas since it is difficult for people to find good-paying jobs without the skills employers need, which is why it is crucial to create relationships on both sides – with job seekers and employers – so that we can educate people in the skills employers need.

The most effective way we can meet the needs of our rural neighbors is through partnerships that include businesses, nonprofits, community-based organizations, places of faith and state and local agencies. When we connect with local organizations, we learn to appreciate the community's assets, earn community trust, gain an understanding of people's needs and help neighbors plan and implement education and career paths that work. In Nebraska's combined state plan to implement the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and workforce agencies partner to help people find jobs and enhance their career options. When productive education and skill-building opportunities that lead to career advancement can be used toward meeting TANF requirements, these relationships help ensure that people with barriers to work can connect with the state workforce development system and organizations like Goodwill that equip residents with career guidance, education, training and skills to help them earn jobs and advance careers.

To establish relevant services in rural (or urban or suburban) communities, each autonomous local Goodwill organization must understand the community's assets and needs and how the Goodwill can financially support service delivery. Having Goodwill in a community creates a ripple effect and contributes to economic stability and community development when services are sustainable. We must have well-trained team members who are familiar with both the workforce development system and rural communities, people in whom both our organization and community members can have confidence. We are hiring someone who can provide a service, whether that's helping people living with a severe or persistent mental illness or substance use disorder recover, supporting a person living with an intellectual disability learn daily activities or develop relationships with employers, or supporting a job seeker with a felony. Whatever the specific job task, it is necessary for the employee to be able to navigate an information system. When employees aren't able to both perform their human or social service role and navigate the information system, it can be problematic. To combat this, we invest in training and education to ready our staff.

Our team members work to understand our neighbors in the communities we serve and how we can equip them to overcome poverty. One of those neighbors is Peter. When Peter was referred from Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation to Goodwill, he faced a number of barriers, and his circumstances were complex. He was unemployed and receiving Social Security benefits after being diagnosed with bi-polar disorder, adjustment disorder with anxiety and depression and narcissistic personality disorder. While he was enrolled in Central Community College, he was failing; he did not understand or comprehend the curriculum in spite of receiving support from tutors. His special education counselor encouraged him to seek additional help and return to school in the future. Peter was also on probation for felony assault on an officer, and his longest employment retention was only two months. It is easy to understand why Peter was pessimistic about his future. Thankfully, Peter was able to access an array of services from Goodwill such as:

**Comprehensive benefits planning** – helping Peter understand his social security benefits and get his Medicaid reinstated. Health insurance is very important to



maintaining both physical and mental health. Our benefits coordinator coordinated with the Social Security Administration on behalf of Peter when wages were earned.

**Behavioral health day services** – programming to assist Peter to learn and understand his mental health diagnosis, communicate, problem solve, manage triggers and stress, relate to others and make friends, increase confidence and recognize the strengths, talents and gifts he can offer to the world around him.

**Behavioral health employment program** – supporting Peter throughout the job search and job securement process, applications, interviewing, advocacy, clothing, budgeting and on-the-job supports.

These team meetings involved Goodwill employees from our Behavioral Health Services and Employment and Career Services, the local probation office, the special education counselor at Central Community College, Nebraska VR and Peter's family members. This team worked together to support Peter with great results. Peter has been employed for over a year. He continues to work with Goodwill's Behavioral Health Employment Program and Benefits Planning Program and successfully completed probation. While he decided to not enroll in college at this time, he has made tremendous progress and continues to work successfully.

## **Conclusion**

Serving rural residents impacted by poverty is an opportunity and a challenge. While many of the challenges are similar for urban and rural areas facing poverty, the solutions can be significantly different. Autonomous local Goodwill organizations have found success when we identify community assets, evaluate community needs and customize solutions accordingly. Skilled team members with partner coalitions including local, state and community-based organizations and agencies use these community asset mapping and needs assessments to focus on essential actions that can help reduce poverty in Nebraska and other rural areas across the country. And, in order to successfully move people out of poverty, we need more people equipped with the necessary skills and more job opportunities.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our experiences in the vast rural expanses of Nebraska. We appreciate the Subcommittee's interest in hearing from the field and are happy to serve as a resource as we commit together to providing services that lift individuals and families who live in rural areas out of poverty.