



**Statement of Toby Thomas, President
Austin Electric Services, LLC**

**Before the House Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Human Resources**

April 12, 2018

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Members Davis, members of the subcommittee, thank you for your invitation to speak today about workforce development and our work with the Home Builders Association of Central Arizona and Arizona Department of Corrections.

As the housing market began to recover, we quickly identified that we had a labor shortage. As production demands increased, so too did the shortage of qualified workers. To grow our business and capitalize on the increase in demand, we began an in-house training program to teach people who wanted a new career how to wire new homes. In rolling out our training program, we found the single biggest challenge was attracting individuals who wanted to learn a new skill. After an exhausting six-month recruitment effort, we simply could not find enough people with an interest in construction to grow our workforce in the numbers we needed.

In early 2016, we connected with Connie Wilhelm and the Home Builders Association. Prior to our introduction, Ms. Wilhelm had been working on several solutions to address the labor shortage. One of her initiatives was to work with the Arizona Department of Corrections. Over the next several months we participated in job fairs at prisons across Arizona. Through these job fairs, we were excited to find an eager population willing and ready to learn new skills in the electrical field.

Through our partnership with the Home Builders Association and Department of Corrections, for the past ten months, we have operated a 60-day training program at the Lewis Prison outside Phoenix. During this training, we teach wiring, blueprint reading, and other work skills. In addition, we teach conflict resolution and lessons to improve character building abilities that will not only enhance them in the workforce, but within their personal life and community as well.

To date we have trained and hired 86 former offenders from our training program and have an 80% retention rate.

Although we have had immense success with the program, we have had some challenges. The most glaring are transportation, housing, and proper work attire. These challenges can have a direct effect on an individual's ability to succeed on the job. Then there are the psychological aspects. While trainees are in the program, we have their undivided attention. Once they are released there are outside influences that could have negative impacts professionally and personally.

Fortunately, this has been the exception and our program has lead to the workforce expansion we planned for. More importantly, the program has exceeded all my expectations with the impact it has had on individual lives and the community at large. We are excited to continue the program and grow our company.