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Testimony before the House Committee on Ways and Means
"Reforming Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): States' Misuse of Welfare
Dollars Leaves Needy Families Behind"

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Thank you, Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Neal, and Members of the committee. I am Matt Underhile, I am 47 years old, husband to Leta, and father to 7 children. I work as a Corrections Officer at the Stoddard County Sheriff's Department and just accepted a position with the FCC (Family Counseling Center). I would like to share my story with you and how TANF funding has changed my life.

As a freshman in high school, I lost both of my parents to cancer and quickly dropped out of school and fell into a life of drugs and violence. I was homeless for about a year and worked inconsistent odd jobs and construction for cash, sold drugs, did the drugs, and had no employment benefits. During this time of about 17 years, I struggled to make my child support payments and support myself and family. It is not a life I am proud of. At my rock bottom I was invited to graduation for my best friend's son that I've known since his birth and when I showed up, I was so high on meth that my friend knew I was high and told me it was better if I left. That hurt and made me start rethinking my life choices. I did not go to rehab, I stopped using and running around with the people that were bad influences on me and I met my wife Leta. We married one year after meeting. She helped me to become a better person and live a life her and I both could be proud of.

I found out about the Missouri Excel Center program on Facebook, my wife and I agreed that I would earn my high school diploma, and she would work to support the family. I started classes in March 2019. The Missouri Excel Center helped me re-start and I graduated one year later. While enrolled, I participated in things like the Excel Center SkillUP program, they offered me transportation money to help me get to and from school as I was driving about 60 miles round trip every day. The Skillup program at the Excel Center offered all kinds of employment driven opportunities to students. They have classes that teach what it is to be a good employee, what employers are looking for in employees, soft skills like what to wear, how to communicate, and how to advocate for yourself. My Skillup Specialist put on a Career Day where local businesses came to school and presented to students what employment at their business looked like, what they were looking for in employees, and how to get a job and be a good employee. She designed it where employers would come to the school and let students apply for positions on the spot, interview, and get hired at these businesses. My Skillup Specialist is active in the community. If a student needed steel toe shoes or scrubs or anything to help them with their employment, Skillup could purchase these items for them, to help relieve the burden of the expense to work, or go to training.

While at the Excel Center I also participated in Coffee Club, a club put on by the school and Skillup, where graduates would get together to discuss what was going on in their lives and provide support, encouragement, and networking. After you graduated from the Excel Center, their support does not stop. You are always encouraged to come back. If life gets hard and you need to talk to somebody, they are there for you. If you are having trouble finding a job, they will help you. If you need to use a computer, they will let you. If you need help with food or clothing, they will help you. They treat you like family - for life.

Skillup helped me figure out how to dig myself out of the hole I dug by not registering for Selective Service when I turned 18. I was homeless and on drugs at the time, didn't do it. I wanted to go to college, I filled out the FAFSA, and learned that I did not qualify because of this. My Skillup Specialist found a way and helped me write a letter explaining the circumstance and that I wanted to apply for financial aid to go to college, and we got it approved. Then Covid hit and our local Community College didn't offer the classes I needed online.

I then got a job as a corrections officer at Stoddard County Sheriff's Department where I am now a shift supervisor. I also work at the local drug court doing UA's for the males.

I have discovered through this journey that I enjoy helping others like me. I have learned through the Excel Center and Skillup that there is always a way to remove any barrier you may have. That there are people and programs out there that care and can help.

I recently applied at Family Counseling Center in Poplar Bluff Mo to be a Peer Support Specialist, to be able to help others that are in the situation I was, as I have been helped.