

TESTIMONY of Ms. Crystal Hodge 3/10/21

Good afternoon. Members of Congress, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you to Chairman Danny Davis and Ranking Member Jackie Walorski for holding this hearing today.

My name is Crystal Hodge and I am here today to tell you about my experience with the Health Profession Opportunity Grant Program – also known as HPOG.

I first heard about HPOG in January of 2011. I was working part time at the Schenectady library and had a small child a little over a year old. I was living with my child's father, but it was an emotionally and, at times, physically abusive relationship. I depended on him and his family for food, shelter but not my safety. The part time job at the library was not enough to support me and my baby.

Someone at the library mentioned the new program that was started at SUNY Schenectady County Community College. They were looking for people who were interested in getting trained in healthcare and who had more than a passing interest.

The program was based on a partnership between a community-based organization, Schenectady Community Action Program (SCAP), and the college. I applied along with seven other students and trained as a Nurse Aide. In April 2011 I passed my state examination and was certified. The instruction was really good and Mr. Bill Rowe will always be my first instructor – as a former director of nursing in a long term care facility, he knew the job and he was a mentor to many of us -, but what made the most impact was that the program was supportive unlike any other I had seen. In most welfare to work programs you get a voucher and are sent to school, but basically you are on your own. With HPOG, I received full wrap around support. I received books, supplies, uniforms and, most importantly, I had access to fully paid childcare while I was in school. That was HUGE! I did not have to worry about my baby being left with people I did not trust, and I could focus on my education.

Right after graduation, I worked at one nursing facility as a part-time staffer, and shortly thereafter I worked at another facility, Glendale, I was then hired full time by Glendale, and by the fall of 2011 I was working hard, getting by and hoping for more. By pulling double shifts, and working two jobs, I could afford to move out. By January of 2012, I found a small studio

apartment and could pay rent, have food on the table, and get out of the abuse.

HPOG 2.0 began in 2015 and by then I was ready to pursue not just a job, but a career in healthcare. I enrolled in the phlebotomy course to add a skill to my tool kit. At the same time the college had reached an agreement with Maria College, well known in the area for their nursing school. Because of the quality of the training I received at the community college and my subsequent experience, I was admitted at Maria College and I could have gone straight to the Registered Nurse track, but I chose the Practical Nurse class because I wanted to take baby steps. I took advantage of tuition reimbursement from my employer and HPOG supported me again by purchasing the books, supplies and uniforms I needed. Going to school part time, working full time at Glendale and part time at the Center for Independent Living, and taking care of two kids left no money for extra items, and I would have failed or would have had to delay my training until I had money to pay for what financial aid could not cover.

In May of 2019, I completed my training and passed the licensure exam. Within a few days I was offered a promotion at the same nursing facility. I work as a Licensed Professional Nurse with a living wage. This was very fulfilling, but I wanted to go on, and HPOG was there again to support me

with textbooks and supplies. I enrolled in the second year of nursing at Maria College after completing some prerequisites at SUNY Schenectady. Now I am in my final semester of nursing school and am looking forward to getting those two letters R.N. after my name.

You may think that I am unusual, maybe a bit stubborn, but when I think back at my path, I know I could not have done it without the financial, educational and supportive environment of HPOG. Most of my class mates from that very first class in 2011 have gone on to become LPNs or participated in other trainings and continue to work in health care. Under HPOG 1.0 the college and its partners recruited and trained over 1,500 individuals, and in HPOG 2.0 over 1,000 participants have started along different pathways.

We are a small community, but HPOG has made an invaluable difference in the private lives of so many--provided a future for families and reduced the welfare rolls. The investment you made in us has changed lives, and will continue to do so if you chose to fund more programs like HPOG. The success of the program is not just financial. The wrap around support from case managers, instructors, employment specialists, and employers will have a ripple effect for generations to come.

Please help us, help our community and our country.