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Pathway Ministries

Testimony for Ways and Means Committee  
Subcommittee on Work and Welfare  
“Dignity of Work: Lifting Individuals Out of Poverty”  
Field Hearing - Chicago, Illinois  
April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024

My name is Brian Butler, and I am the Director of Residential Ministries at Pathway Ministries located in Peoria, Illinois.

I grew up in southern Illinois with hard working parents and learned the value of work at an early age. However, my early years were full of substance abuse, dysfunction, and continual family break ups. I left home after I graduated High School and continued my journey into alcoholism, drug use and eventually homelessness. In 2003 at the age of 40 I was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in the Indiana Department of Corrections for selling drugs, carjacking, and auto theft. It was at the beginning of my incarceration that I met Jesus and He began to turn my life around. In prison I was disciplined by Chaplains and met men in Christ who valued servanthood and work. It was there that I truly learned the value of work and education. During my incarceration I earned a Bachelor of Science Degree from Indiana State University, worked two jobs, volunteered in Church activities teaching Christian 12 Step classes and tutored men in the GED program. I served 6 years and 105 days, not that I was counting.

In 2009 I arrived in Peoria, Illinois where I lived with my daughter, got a job washing cars and a job at The Salvation Army working as a monitor in their homeless shelter for men. In 2011 TSA received a grant to implement a daytime Drop-in-Center for the homeless and I was given the opportunity to be a case manager. I was able to use some old TSA Work Therapy Material and create a Work Therapy program of our own at that location. People off the street went to classes about work, did mock interviews and learned skillsets that taught them how to be good employees and the benefits of being a good employee. But the real transformation took place when we gave them responsibilities at the Drop-in -Center that mimicked real jobs. We had former prostitutes working our reception area and ex-convicts serving food. We had hard core substance abuse users as teachers' aides and we saw countless others who were tired and broken come to life, because they saw and felt

value in themselves as they learned the value of service and work in a variety of different roles.

In 2014 I was called by God's Grace to what was then Peoria Rescue Ministries and is now Pathway Ministries. Our ministry was founded in 1955 after 2 ladies toured Pacific Garden Mission and came back to Peoria to begin serving coffee and donuts and sharing the love of God with men who were experiencing homelessness. The ministry has grown to now operate across 7 different facilities with more than 75 committed staff members serving nearly 2000 individuals across our residential and advocacy ministries. We average more than 160 men and women staying with us on a nightly basis. In the past year we served more than 100,000 meals and provided over 50,000 nights of shelter. Last year we graduated 151 folks from our Residential Programs that include varying aspects of education, counseling, life skill attainment, and work-readiness training. We are a Gospel-Centered, Ministry of Mercy that comes alongside our neighbors in need and walks with them on a pathway from poverty to progress. We serve adult men and women struggling with homelessness, abuse, addiction, and abandonment through our live-in residential ministries. And we serve our community neighbors through our Advocacy ministries of Empower Life and Barnabas Counseling Centers.

I started my career at Pathway as the Assistant Director of the Rescue Mission. At that time 85% of our focus was on crisis care: providing overnight shelter, meals, and clothing for men who were homeless. We did, however, have our men's work program at Victory Acres for men who came in with addictions and other life controlling issues that wanted a program to help overcome their current lifestyle. The men worked with wood waste, building pallets, and producing mulch. At that time the VA program had a spiritual aspect but was more labor intensive and lacked the whole person approach we use now at Pathway.

In 2018 under our new Executive Director, Jon Rocke, I was given the task of directing programs. I was able to write a new vocational program called Next Step and with our new ministry philosophy of creating pathways out of poverty through Jesus with our neighbors in need, we were able to revamp our Victory Acres program to a more wholistic, whole person approach.

Since that time Pathways focus has completely changed. We went from an 85% focus on crisis care and a 15% focus on transformational care to now a 85% focus on transformational programming and a 15% focus on crisis. While the pathway to transformation is usually met in crisis, we continue to meet people right where they're at when they come through our doors. The difference now is that we offer various programs to

get people out of crisis who no longer want to be in crisis and into transformation. We focus on poverty at the individual level.

Our mission is to create pathways out of poverty through Jesus with our neighbors in need. It begins with our understanding of poverty. We don't see poverty as simply a lack of material things like money or a home. We believe poverty is more complex – that poverty is the result of brokenness in the 4 fundamental relationships of life – our relationship with God, our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with others, and our relationship with the rest of Creation or work. We've all experienced brokenness in those four relationships so at some level we all experience poverty. We believe that Jesus came to renew and restore not just our relationship with God but all four of those relationships and that when those relationships are renewed, we can flourish as God intends us to.

Poverty will look different for each of us and some of our neighbors are experiencing devastating effects and circumstances from poverty such as homelessness, abuse, addiction, and abandonment. We seek to surround those folks with the love and support of a community that will provide shelter and stability but more than that will invite them on a pathway out of poverty. A significant aspect of the path will be the dignity and sustainability that work can provide. We have been created to work – to provide for ourselves as we are able and to care for and serve others and work is how we can do that.

Pathway Ministries has partnered with Caterpillar for more than 25 years to provide an environmentally sustainable wood waste recycling program that takes wood waste and turns it into rebuilt pallets through our Peoria Pallet Works Enterprise. In 2023 our students built over 104,000 pallets and over 2000 truckloads of wood waste was recycled. Wood that can't be recycled or rebuilt into pallets is turned into premium mulch through our Peoria Mulch Enterprise. In 2023 Peoria Mulch produced over 10,000 cubic yards of premium mulch. Our students work at Peoria Mulch producing mulch as well as delivering and spreading mulch for customers. It's a wonderful experience for the customers and the students. And soon Pathway Ministries will be training students in our Reclaimed brand of home décor items that celebrate the wood and lives that have been rejected by some but are being reclaimed for good by God.

Our residential work-readiness classes and training focus on the soft skills everyone needs to excel in employment. We also partner with Educational and Work-Readiness partners as needed, to support and prepare students for the work they would like to do. We provide GED classes and tutoring. Building partnerships with entities in our community has played an important role in providing our guests/students with employment opportunities and sustainable income. One of those partnerships has been with Illinois Central College and their workforce certification program. We have had several students who have

participated in these programs and went on to really good jobs. One man, TJ, who went to ICC's truck driver training program got a job locally with Nussbaum trucking and drove over the road for a year. TJ eventually got married and now drives a truck for Pepsico in Indianapolis, Indiana making a sustainable living wage. Ericka, a former student, also went to ICC Workforce program, graduated, and is now employed as a second-year carpenter at the McCarthy company helping to install one of the largest solar fields in Illinois called Black Diamond. Ericka has also been reunited with her 5-year-old son, Michael. They are living on their own and are staying on the pathway out of poverty. We partner with many employers who have very good manufacturing jobs who recognize how our work-readiness emphasis and programs prepare good team members. Many of our students go on to further their education (which we support with scholarships) or higher-level skill training programs to achieve their hopes of a fulfilling career. In the past 4 years we have placed more than 600 men and women in employment and assisted more than 400 men and women in securing Permanent Housing.

Our Next Step programs at Pathway Ministries are a 90-day commitment, however each participant can stay past 90 days if they are actively engaging in their guest advocacy plan. Each participant is required to be accountable in their finances, to save and budget their income, meet with their Pathway Advisor weekly, and work on moving forward in accordance to meet their agreed upon goals. Pathway Advisor meetings may include, but are not limited to helping our students find employment and/or our job-readiness training, housing, medical healthcare, mental/behavioral healthcare, identification documents, social services, education services, recovery services, etc. Next Step encourages our participants to take their next step forward toward personal responsibility and self-sufficiency as they partner with Christ and Pathway Ministries. Next Step students could receive stipends in our job readiness program up to \$50 per day. We provide transportation passes and laundry vouchers for men and women in our Next Step programs and teach them daily life skills to prepare them for self-sufficiency when they move out on their own. Heartland Health services provide Pathway Ministries on-site health clinics to address students and guests' physical and mental health needs.

Our Renewal Programs are nine-month residential treatment programs. Our programs are Christ-centered and are focused on a whole person approach for transformation. This approach includes restoring mental health, physical health, emotional health, relational health, and spiritual health. Our curriculum includes addiction recovery and support programs, classes on healthy relationships and codependency, conflict management, professional counseling and trauma care, and work readiness. We provide case management for all medical and legal needs. Students live on-site and are escorted to and from appointments, local court appearances (distance appearances we advocate

for Zoom), Sunday morning church and extracurricular activities by staff members. Students are expected to attend classes and complete their homework assignments, participate in counseling and addiction recovery programs, submit to random drug and alcohol screens, complete job-readiness assignments and maintain healthy relationships with staff and students. Students earn a stipend of \$50 per week and receive the stipend upon completion of the renewal program.

We have a Graduate Society for students who successfully complete our programs where they can continue to receive services and support from us for up to 3 years at our men's 1212 Community Apartment Building or our Knoxville Ave and Allen Road locations for women. Graduates pay affordable rent and can continue to restore their lives financially, emotionally, and spiritually. Graduates agree to be held accountable in their work lives and financial lives with our Aftercare Ministry Coordinator.

Let's not forget that work can be hard. Working in the summer sun building pallets or delivering mulch on a cold spring day can be less than comfortable and emotions can run hot. Our students are surrounded by staff who can help them work through situations that may occur at any workplace. We help our students navigate those emotions and compulsions so that they are prepared in the future when those situations arise on the job. Our students have counseling on site, at the residential center where they reside, and they also have access to the Barnabas Counseling Center. Barnabas Counseling is also a member of Pathway Ministries where we offer licensed clinical counseling to our students and the Peoria community.

We have learned that when people are taught the dignity of work and the value of providing for themselves financially, they are empowered to live lives that bring life to the Peoria community. Pathway Ministries is growing the local church with new members and the economic gain to Peoria by new taxpayers makes a difference in many arenas. Working with our guests and experiencing with them their first paychecks, paying off debts, saving for their future and moving out on their own without financial assistance from the government empowers them to stay out of the poverty cycle that they were stuck in when they came to us. It's not an easy fix but by working on those 4 fundamental relationships Jesus does provide a pathway out of poverty.