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“Dignity of Work: Lifting Individuals Out of Poverty”  
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Good morning, Chairman LaHood and Ranking Member Davis and all the members of this committee.

Thank you, Chairman, for giving me the time to speak before your committee regarding both my personal experience growing up within the welfare system and my professional reflections on the matter.

I grew up on the Southside of Chicago. During that time, for many years my mother was addicted to crack cocaine and our family endured only via government housing and welfare. But a government can only do so much.

In my experience, there are two kinds of people who get on government assistance. The first is those – who really don’t have a choice. They see government assistance as a *temporary* measure to help get through a rough patch and get back on their feet. Which is how the system was originally created.

But in the last fifty years, it has become a way of life for many Americans. A *permanent* solution. And the promise of the so-called “Great Society” became a trap for millions of Americans. In many cases, those who get on government assistance, too often get comfortable, and figure out how to manipulate the system as much as possible so they can continue on that same pathway going forward.

I’ve seen such thinking take down even the strongest of people.

For years, my grandmother was our family’s saving grace. She’d visit our apartment in a government housing project on the South Side – where drugs and gangs were in every hallway– and she would come in with bags of groceries and shoes that she bought us from Payless. She tried to take care of us from afar, but eventually she had seen enough and my siblings and I moved in with her. She was a no-nonsense woman of faith and industry. Nana as we called her worked ten hours a day as a private duty nurse and we were doing okay... for a while.

Until our Nana’s car was struck by a habitual drunk driver and this woman, who’d worked hard her entire life, could no longer do her job. Her back brought agony with every step. She

tried to work a reduced schedule and was now doing overnight shifts – harder on her life and well-being, but easier on her body—but then she couldn't even do that anymore. The government checks began to arrive again. Not for my mom anymore, but for my grandmother.

When you get into this dependency mentality, it changes everything. Your focus can . . . change. Your thought too quickly becomes: *How can I get more?* More housing, more food stamps, more cash. *From the government.* My grandmother's desire to work the system all too quickly took on a life of its own. People in the community would come around and say, "Listen, these are the kinds of things I've been pulling off to get more of this and that." And my grandmother would lean into it. One can completely lose their pride as they try to figure out how to survive by working the system. Even more tragically, you begin to pass down these tactics to your family and those around you.

I got into public service volunteering at the local Alderman's office at fourteen and my first job working part-time for the Social Security Administration by sixteen. But there were times in my teens I was told not to work because it could jeopardize the government assistance our family was receiving. Even then, the idea was both astonishing, and horrifying to me.

But I don't necessarily blame my grandmother for that. Poverty and government dependence don't just affect your bank account. Eventually, it begins to affect your mind. You see nothing but what's in front of you. And when what's in front of you is a politician with another handout: *Watch Out!*

How many Americans have accepted the narrative that only government handouts are the answer to all that ails? Too many. More often than not, the people around me weren't simply deciding to give up. They were living in a culture of dependency that'd been passed down from birth. Both my mother and grandmother gave in to that culture. And they expected me figure out the best way to live on that same track.

For in neighborhoods like the one I grew up, there is no perceived incentive to advance. After all, the checks for housing and the food stamps and other assistance arrive every month.

This is why the system must be reformed. Welfare should exist only for a certain period of time, unless you're totally disabled and can't physically work. It should not last for a generation. The government should, instead, provide more incentives for real-world training and education to recipients about a life *beyond* government dependence.

I believe reforms to welfare should be approached with the same bipartisan spirit that Speaker Newt Gingrich and President Bill Clinton had during the 1996 Welfare Reform Act—a bipartisan compromise and overhaul – that significantly changed our nation's welfare system to require work in exchange for *time-limited* assistance and supports. Its official name was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Personal responsibility. It's been almost twenty years since we've revisited, and recommitted, to this idea.

Many will point to institutional racism or generations of poverty that have made it tougher for many – particularly Blacks in our inner cities – to succeed. Truthfully, racism has had an impact on many people, however, citing racism as the sole reason for a lack of success is merely another trap meant to keep underprivileged people dependent.

People have to *want* the power that comes with personal responsibility. But first they need to even know that such capability and power exist. There is not one government handout that can pour into you the desire to better your own life. As Ronald Reagan once warned: We should measure welfare's success by how many people leave welfare... not by how many are added.

He understood – as do I from firsthand experiences – that those trapped within government assistance will eventually *devalue their own lives*. So much so, that life itself would take on little meaning. Thus, the shootings and teenagers ready to murder without hesitation, as easily as grabbing a bite to eat.

Merely throwing more money at this “problem” is *clearly* not the answer. Until we have the courage to articulate and address issues of personal responsibility – of better parenting, schooling, accountability – then whatever welfare we pander with is only making things worse. There is no doubt that our cities are crying out for help – as my family did many years ago. But how we answer that cry will determine the level of dependency or success for future millions across America.