

**Testimony of Deborah Kelly**  
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**Member, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), AFL-CIO**  
**before the**  
**U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**  
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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the nine million working men and women of the AFL-CIO on the important issues facing us every day.

I'm proud to be a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). I'm an apprentice lineperson for the Chugach Electric Association. We work hard every day to provide power to the Anchorage, Alaska area.

I made my decision to join the IBEW early in high school. I thought about the traditional options available: a variety of college degrees, resulting in various careers. But what intrigued me most was the idea of working in a trade, working with my hands, and working to build and create. This interest, coupled with the possibility of a lifelong career that included health insurance, a living wage, and the promise of a pension when it came time to retire, tipped the scales away from the traditional college path. While in high school, I took a construction electricity class that solidified my focus in the electrical trades. Then, it was on to the tougher stuff: I had to work on convincing my parents that this was the right future for me. I graduated high school after three years, magna cum laude. Though I had already told my parents about my plans, and the advantages of a skilled trade, they were still a hard sell. They pushed me to pursue a more typical path like my older sister. She'd gone to Cal Tech at age 16 and earned an engineering degree. She went on to work at NASA for several years. While I was proud of what she had accomplished, I'd already decided that was not for me.

To me, the options looked like this: years of school, a mountain of debt, and an unknown direction; against the choice of challenging work, decent pay, and an occupation that would be rewarding to me.

I applied for the IBEW communications apprenticeship the day after I turned 18, when I finally met the age requirement. I was accepted and worked on construction projects installing data cabling and fiber optic systems. I then worked for the local telephone company on a line crew, maintaining the overhead and underground cables that provide phone and data service to the majority of Anchorage. I fell in love with the challenges of the physical work and constant exposure to all types of weather conditions. After seeing what the high voltage power linemen did through the apprenticeship school, and getting a sense of the nature of their work by observing them on the job, I applied to that apprenticeship program.

The first job I had as an apprentice in the power line program was working seven days a week, twelve (sometimes more) hours a day building a high voltage transmission line section between Anchorage and a nearby hydroelectric plant. The line stretched across a mountainside, and the rough terrain presented many additional challenges to what was already heavy and difficult work.

By this time, I had already gone through the first segment of lineman training: seven weeks of school where we learned a great deal about staying safe, through classroom instruction on the specific hazards of line work, and through extensive hands-on work outside, working under supervision of the instructor. Building the transmission line required heavy equipment, rigging, lifting, and high tension operations, where any misstep could be fatal. Thanks to my detailed classroom training and the supervision of highly trained and experienced journeymen, we pulled off these operations safely and professionally.

My experiences on the job led me to become a member of my union's safety committee. This allows me the opportunity to give back, influence on-the-job safety, and increase my coworkers' awareness. We're all proud of the skilled work we do under extreme conditions.

Since my first major project, I have worked a variety of jobs encompassing the scope of my trade. I've worked building electrical substations; putting in underground duct systems, including setting vaults, pulling and terminating cable; performing utility maintenance work, whether it be a routine upgrade, or a power outage caused by storm; and other construction jobs.

I am forever grateful that I had an equal opportunity to join the trade and be a member of my union. Because of this, I had the chance to prove to my coworkers that I am worth my weight, and I can be an asset to my crew and to the industry.

Being the only woman in the line trade initially presented its challenges. There was resistance from some employers and a few linemen. None of these issues affected my employment or my ability to do my job. For this I am in debt to my union. The Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee makes sure every apprentice has a positive experience and the opportunity to work and learn without unfair hindrance. Most importantly, I know I'm never alone—my union provides a safety net to help ensure that I get an equal training experience and meaningful (not just on paper) equal opportunity for employment.

I have also benefited greatly from the union-based health care plan. Shortly after I turned 18, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. I was not yet covered by union insurance, and had to rely on my parents' private insurance plan. Unfortunately, their plan was more tilted towards catastrophic coverage. For my necessary surgery there were large co-pays. I am grateful that my parents were able and willing to support me financially through the procedure. But since then, I have had extensive follow up testing and monitoring, an expense I could not afford if I didn't have the excellent union provided health care. My

union health care – for which I was eligible after four months of apprenticeship -- even helps cover these follow-up thyroid tests, which is something most insurers wouldn't have covered as a pre-existing condition. Without this insurance, I'd be in a lot more debt (the yearly tests alone can cost \$5,000, of which my insurance covers most of the cost).

Thanks to my union, I have a solid career with a future. I know I can work hard, earn a decent paycheck, and I don't have to worry about an unexpected illness leaving me destitute. I know I will always receive equal pay and equitable treatment from my employers. I know that my pension means I will not have to work late into old age to survive, if all else fails. I know I will work with the most highly trained people in the industry and I will come home safe every night. Because of all these things, I am grateful for the opportunity to be a union member.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today.