Testimony Presented Before the United States Senate

Committee On Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

Tales from the Unemployment Line:

Barriers Facing The Long-Term Unemployed

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Thank you Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and members of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions for the invitation to testify before you today. As the Senior Pastor of Cascade United Methodist Church located in Southwest Atlanta, GA, I lead a congregation of over 4,000 members, which attracts worshippers from all parts of a roughly 8 county, 40 mile radius metro Atlanta region. We proudly minister a very broad demographic range including cooks, clerks, drivers, teachers, active and retired military, corporate professionals and executives, business owners, doctors, and judges, native born and first generation Americans, and new immigrants. This is the same church where Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery served as pastor. Woven in the fabric of who Cascade is as a faith community, built into their DNA is a social awareness and passion for justice and equality for humanity.

Of the 50+ ministries that are a part of Cascade, the one to which we have given particular attention for this hearing, is our Cascade Career Network, led by Valerie Jones (who is with me today). This ministry focuses on informing, encouraging, and empowering the unemployed and underemployed with the techniques, skills, and expectations of the job search. Valerie leads a team of individuals who speak to the spiritual, emotional and psychological well being of the unemployed; in addition, to training them in job search skills that include—self assessment, planning the search and targeting opportunities, resume writing, use of online tools, networking, and interviewing skills.

Like many other career ministries across the country, this is a volunteer team of working professionals, retired professionals who are seeking further employment or building businesses to sustain their future, independent professionals and business owners who rely on their time to feed their families, and yes, unemployed job seekers!

So let me be clear—Though you honor us with the opportunity to speak to you and American people, we know we have serious resource or capacity limitations by virtue of the time and availability of our team to organize, strategize, and deliver programs to job seekers and assist them in connecting with employers. But we have no lack of vision, and appreciate the Dept of Labor's recent symposium which assisted us in collaborating with other ministries, and more importantly, beginning the exploration of how we can learn from and collaborate with various government agencies.

So let's explore some of the other barriers we encounter. You have recently been laid off. The business you worked in for 15 years shuts down, or your corporate employer has a layoff to bring in the end of year profit numbers, or a major client has diminished. There are no 6 month career transition programs paid for by the company you work for. No one has even brought in the DOL or told you there may be assistance. So the first barrier, for many, is having access to knowledgeable career advisors and training; and even for those who have access to programs such as ours, the question is how we can create more access at their point of need?

Secondly, like millions of Americans who created a bonanza on Cyber Monday (the phenomena when workers return to their work computers after Thanksgiving), you have no access to a computer, or internet compatible software, or internet service at home. You have at best 1 hour per day to use a computer at a library if you have transportation or if there is a library in your community. The DOL offices may be an option but are much farther away.

A third barrier involves childcare. You stopped daycare the week after you lost your job. But how and where can you get childcare while you job search?

Finally, you cannot afford COBRA premiums and therefore have to pay out of pocket for medical care or go without if you or a family member gets sick; or if you have a chronic ailment like asthma that requires regular medication; or if you need contact lenses; or if you would like to see a therapist regarding the recurring panic, anxiety, sadness, or despair that has begun to invade your life. I wish I could tell you about the families that could have been saved if we had created a conversation about the immobilizing effect that job loss can have on an individual, and if we had developed techniques and strategies for the job seeker. **It is not laziness. It is grief, disbelief, and devastation.**

That missing paycheck within a few short months can lead to your car being repossessed, loss of credit and plunging credit rating and pending foreclosure. The credit rating is another barrier to landing a job in some organizations. Most of our members could afford the homes they bought, until they lost their job or a spouse lost their job. Now while trying to learn where and how to network, post your resume, stay on top of unemployment compensation lifeline –"When you got the letter to say your benefits where exhausted, where they really exhausted?"—you also need to find out about a myriad of resources on how to avoid foreclosure, while avoiding scams that can take you to the brink of despair. It would be presumptuous of me to say that people don't get discouraged and when you think of the challenges that our job seekers experience, it's not unlike being kicked in the gut when you were not expecting or prepared for it.

Across the country companies are struggling with knowledge management—how to retain the knowledge and experience of how to run the business while eliminating jobs while other select retirement. I don't think any of us would miss an opportunity to have a talk with

Warren Buffet at 81, Colin Powell who is 69 , or Richard Branson at 62. Yet many job seekers speak to numerous hurdles when seeking a job because of their age, the year they graduated, and years of work experience.

I am saddened that even today we hear about recruiters screening applicants based on what a person's name suggest in term of ethnicity, or what zip code a person lives in, I'm shocked and saddened. There are people who walk 5 miles to get a job, ride a train and then catch a bus for a job, drive 40 miles from South Fulton to Alpharetta everyday and show up on time; and for years people have driven a hour through 2 counties to get a job in a plant. We have to be very careful with the actions we take, because our actions become who we are. And our children are watching who we are and will become who we are one step removed. And then we may become disposable, too.

The headline in Friday's Atlanta Business Chronicle was "Atlanta's top companies pile up $25B in cash". I wish some of the CEO's and CFO's would love their communities and customers a little more than they love the cash. Instead of starving the pump, I wish they would drive the streets of Atlanta and make a concerted effort to invest in America now. Be bold. Be daring. Put America back to work. We have an issue with the condition of the heart and it is going to take the voice of the Faith Community to speak to the moral fiber of this great country in order for us to consider our ways.

On Tuesday of this week I was one of the speakers at a Faith Based Economic Development Summit held on the campus of Alabama State University in Montgomery, Alabama. One of the facilitators, Dr. Christina Clamp, Dir. Community Economic Development Center for Co-Operatives and CED at Southern New Hampshire University, stated that "the

Faith tradition goes beyond partisan political culture. We can take this country beyond where it is."

The Faith Community, especially the African American church, has been the bedrock for formulating ideas, birthing movements, and changing hearts and minds. It is not surprising that some forty years after the Civil Rights Movement the black church is again taking the forefront of a movement. It is also not ironic that Dr. King's final campaign upon his untimely death was the Poor People's Campaign. We must take the lessons of the past, utilize the knowledge of the present, and change the future for all people. This is not solely about economics, but it is largely about the condition of our hearts.

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