

Testimony of Diedre Melson
Family member featured in *American Winter*
Portland, Oregon

Public hearing before U.S. Senate Banking Subcommittee on Economic Policy
“The State of the American Dream – Economic Policy and the Future of the Middle Class”
June 5, 2013

Chairman Merkley, Ranking Member Heller and Members of the Subcommittee:

Hello, my name is Diedre Melson. I am an Oregon resident and since participating in the film, *American Winter*, I have been hired as an employee at 211info, a nonprofit information and referral line people call when they need to learn where to go for help in their community. Every day at work I see firsthand how many people are struggling to make ends meet. I also live this reality as I struggle to raise four children with a paycheck that is never big enough to cover even just the basics.

Growing up I believed hard work would bring rewards. I started working at age 13 in my aunt's hair salon. When I turned 15 I got a job at the Burger King on west Burnside in Portland, OR. I worked there for the next three years until I graduated high school. I knew how to work hard but I also knew that education was the key to a good job, which is why I went to college right out of high school. When I was no longer able to afford college I didn't give up. After two and a half years of college I transferred to a career school and obtained certifications in the medical field.

Despite my continual efforts, getting ahead often feels just out of reach. Again, I have worked since I was 13 years old. The only gaps in my resume are due to layoffs, cut backs and permanent closures at the places I've worked. I was unemployed as a phlebotomist when the company was shut down and 1500 of us were laid off. I then was unemployed for two years before I was able to find work again. And when I did find work, it was for minimum wage. In the meantime I was on food stamps and housing assistance. But that assistance, although very much appreciated, was not enough to live on and cover rent and food. So I would go scrapping five or six days a week, to make \$25 to \$50 dollars a day. And scrapping, for those that don't know, is collecting scrap metal on the side of the road. But because that didn't provide much income I would also sell my plasma once or twice a week to put food on the table and to keep our family from being homeless.

Now that I work at 211 I make \$13 an hour. And I can relate to folks who call in for help. When the phone rings at work the person calling 211 often has no idea where to turn for help. The people who call 211 come from every type of household you can imagine: single parent families, two parent families and seniors. The people who call are not much different from me. We are the working poor. On a daily basis we go to work and work a full time schedule yet fall short on basic necessities. They, like me, believed that if they did everything right - worked hard, got an education, planed for the future – we would make it.

Just like me, so many people who call 211 have been caught off guard by their situation. My heart breaks for them and it's hard not to cry. I remember the mother who called me from work in tears. She had been making small payments in an effort to stay ahead of her water bill, but when the payment didn't arrive in time her water was shut off. Her 13-year-old daughter was at home and now the mom was going to have to leave work to get the water turned back on. She couldn't afford to pay the water bill and she couldn't afford to leave work but that was the reality she faced on that day.

The next call pulls me into the world of the immigrant worker who isn't making enough to cover her bills but fears asking for assistance because she doesn't know how it will affect her employment. She fears that if she asks for the help she so desperately needs she may lose the job she so desperately needs. Sometimes I have to take a break after a call because the sadness and emotion is just too much. That was certainly the case after talking to the 70 year old man who was surprised that the Social Security he has worked his entire life for wasn't enough to live on. He was shocked that the \$700 he gets is barely enough to pay the rent. Now he is left begging for a hand out. He is too ashamed to apply for food stamps and feels guilty to ask for a hand out with all the mothers and children that are going hungry.

I am raising four children of my own. I love all of my children dearly and they are all special in their own way. I am here to speak out for their future. Today I want to tell you about my son Jalean, an exceptional student athlete with a promising future.

He takes after me in many ways. He enjoys learning whether it is in the classroom or through life's experience. Standing six feet tall and weighing two hundred eighty pounds he is a heavy weight high school wrestler, and he is quite the eater. Even though I work fulltime I depend on SNAP to help feed my family - \$13 an hour simply isn't enough to support a family of five. I just found out that my SNAP benefits are going to be cut \$30 a month, now that I am making a little bit more. It was already hard to keep enough food in the house for Jalean and the rest of my children. I'm not sure how I'm going to make up for the \$30 reduction. It may not sound like a lot to someone who doesn't have to struggle, but for me \$30 is enough to buy three or four whole chickens or a few cuts of meat.

The constant worry is taking its toll on me, but what's worse is that I worry that it's my children who will suffer. Jalean has so much potential: a promising career as a wrestler or a football player and he excels academically. This past April Jalean took fifth place in the Reno Wrestling World Championships. The first year he was invited to go to the World Championship I had to tell him we couldn't afford to send him. We were able to get the money for him to go this year, his senior year, and now he's an all American Wrestler. That should be his ticket to a college education but it's not. Instead, because of cuts to education, and how expensive education has become, if he doesn't get a scholarship I worry that he won't get to go to college.

Without a college education his prospects are limited. He is an intelligent kid and has maintained good grades during his four years of high school. I always told him he had to work hard and get good grades in order to get into college and succeed in life. Do I now tell him that all of his hard work was in vein? How do I explain that I can't afford to send him to college and that there are fewer and fewer scholarships for kids like him?

It is my hope that together, as a nation, we can set aside our political differences and start thinking in terms of human beings. I would hope that we can stop thinking about mine and start thinking about ours - our children, our parents, our communities and our future. I dream of a future that says if one works a full time job five days a week, that on the weekend I can afford to take my family out to a movie, and that at the very least I can afford groceries for the month. I am working very hard and I simply cannot make ends meet. Let's invest in regular families like mine so that we all can hope for a better future. Thanks so much for listening.