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September 21, 2010  
*Welfare Reform: A New Conversation on Women and Poverty*

The United States Senate Committee on Finance

I would like to thank Chairman Baucus, Ranking Member Grassley, and the esteemed Members of the Committee for this invitation to testify today. The proper reauthorization of TANF is both an investment in the well-being of our nation's most vulnerable families, and a key component to our short- and long-term national standing and security. It means a great deal to me to add my voice to this urgent national dialogue.

In my recent book, *The Other Wes Moore*, I wrote about the ramifications of paying attention – or not -- to the needs of the underserved and disconnected. While I focused on two specific families, it is really the story of millions of hard working families around the country that desperately seek to raise healthy, happy, and productive children. I, like far too many young people, grew up without my father in the home. I, like far too many young people, grew up in a neighborhood that was undervalued and that forced me to understand adult realities far too early. Fortunately, I was blessed to have an extraordinarily creative and persevering mother who used the leverage of familial and community supports around her to help my journey into manhood.

But there's another Wes Moore, who used to live in the same neighborhood as me in Baltimore, who is around the same age, but who is spending the rest of his life in prison for the tragic murder of a police officer. Wes also grew up with a single mother, who loves her children deeply but was overwhelmed and overpowered by community influences and lack of connections to meaningful supports. This true story helps to highlight the importance of access to opportunities and productive pathways to self sufficiency. It also highlights the consequences of allowing poverty to go unchallenged and unabated.

To be sure, TANF has helped many low-income families move one step closer to taking care of themselves. It helps provide pathways out of poverty through job training and access to health services. But there are still too many families who are forced to fend for themselves. The TANF reauthorization is an opportunity to revisit the program's mission and help it achieve its original promise to help move our nation's families out of extreme poverty.

Moving forward, in order for TANF to properly support the families that are most in need, we need to have better insight into the actual conditions of families in need and not dis-incentivize people from claiming the benefits to which they are legally entitled. From 1996, when TANF was enacted, to 2008, the share of poor children receiving cash assistance fell by more than half, from 62 percent to 27 percent. That sounds great if it also mirrored a downward shift in need or a corresponding decrease in the disparity gap between the rich and the poor in our country. The problem is that it doesn't. The disparity gap is the highest it has been since the Great Depression.

Acknowledging and developing holistic strategies to counter the core causes of poverty are essential when thinking about policies going forward. Again, I draw upon my experiences and those of the other Wes Moore to recommend that TANF reauthorization include reducing fatherless households as a key element in developing more holistic, accountable, and sustainable approaches to poverty reduction.

My father died before my fourth birthday. The other Wes never knew his father and as he said, "Your father wasn't there because he couldn't be. My father wasn't there because he chose not

to be. Therefore, we are going to mourn their absence differently.” There are too many young people-- from all races and ethnic groups – who are mourning the loss of their fathers. According to the National Fatherhood Initiative, children who live in father-absent homes are five times more likely to be poor and more than a quarter of America’s children now live with one parent or grandparent.

Much to the credit of federal and state focus over the past decade, we have seen substantive improvements in this area. However, when we think about the ongoing correlation between poverty and single-parent households, it is obvious that sustainable progress cannot be made without designing strategies that factor in both in concert.

Along those lines, for too many families trapped in poverty, an incarcerated spouse is at the center of their dilemma. Annually, there are more than 650,000 formally incarcerated men and women who return to their communities every year. How we prepare them to come back into society and how we prepare society to welcome them back is also part of the poverty reduction equation. How coordinated are the objectives of TANF and the Second Chance Act? This reauthorization presents the opportunity to examine possible links that could lead to a broader and more effective poverty-reduction strategy that would also help to cut the recidivism rate and costs at the same time. Imagine. If Wes’ first contact with the judicial system had been his last, he would be paying taxes instead of using tax dollars.

This year alone, we will spend well over \$61,000 to clothe, house, feed, provide health care and health insurance to Wes. Assuming he lives to the national average of 78, that will be a total cost of close to four million dollars. That’s for him alone. This figure does not include the brain capital lost that could have been utilized to create not just better futures for his family, but for our country. I say this not to create sympathizers, cast revisionist history, or absolve personal responsibility from the equation. Wes’ fate is sealed and he will spend the rest of his life in prison for choices that he made. However, we the American people rely on you, the lawmakers to make sure that every child has opportunity to succeed. All environments are not equal, nor will they ever be, but you have within your power in the reauthorization of TANF to install a holistic pathway to poverty reduction that is supported by data and linked to achievable outcomes. In the richest country in the world, it is the least we can do.