



BOOST4FAMILIES
CASS/MILLS/MONTGOMERY

Testimony of
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Chairman Grassley, and distinguished members of the Finance Committee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Welfare Reform. My name is Sonja Marquez; I am the coordinator of the Community Empowerment Initiative in a three county area in southwest Iowa. During the 1998 Iowa legislative session, the Iowa Community Empowerment Initiative was adopted. This bipartisan effort encouraged partnerships between communities and state government with an initial emphasis to improve the well-being of families with young children. I am here today to talk to you about how community efforts focused on children and families can have an impact on the success of Welfare to Work.

Boost4Families is the name of the three-county collaborative in southwest Iowa serving the counties of Cass, Mills and Montgomery - the total population in the three counties is just over 41,000. When Iowa's legislature created the Empowerment Initiative, Boost4Families chose to add this to its areas of focus. Boost4Families has been effectively working together since 1995 on issues impacting children and families, and continues to identify needs and blend various funding sources to provide both early education and prevention programs to our communities. Boost4Families' success in bringing together citizens, government, and local agencies was recognized in 1999 by the National Partnership for Re-Inventing Government by being designated a "Boost4Kids" site, and 2002 by the Metropolitan Area Planning Agency with the Regional Service Award.

Boost4Families relies on many community lay participants, as well as public and private agencies to help achieve our goals. We firmly believe that strong families are Iowa's future. Boost4Families has been successful at implementing locally identified programs to promote school readiness, early childhood education and improve the quality of child care offered in our three county area. My perspective during this discussion will be based on my experience of community challenges and opportunities that rural Iowa faces when addressing child care, transportation and other supports for children and families.

Iowa ranks second in the country in the number of working parents with young children and first in the country in the number of working parents with school-age kids. The Iowa State Child Care Administration reports that approximately 85% of families in Iowa need child care. Here is a great example:

Frances was a divorced mother of two, living in the small rural community of Villisca Iowa. She worked long hours in a factory in Clarinda, which was located about 20 miles away. One of her children attended special classes for children diagnosed with Behavior Disorders in Lenox, approximately 30 miles away. This situation left her young daughter at home alone before school and after school. Once Villisca established a before and after school program, Frances enrolled her

daughter and feels assured that she is provided breakfast and taken care of when she is at work.

In rural areas, it is not unusual for work, school, and home to be located in three different communities, often in opposite directions. The Villisca Community School District, a district with a high proportion of low-income households, identified many families in their community facing this problem. The district pursued development of a before- and after-school program for students in kindergarten through 5th grade; their vision was for a program that also included opportunities for parental learning. School officials and community members were aware of a significant number of Villisca-area children who are routinely left without supervision while parents fulfill work responsibilities.

Villisca's innovative family support program includes on-site before- and after-school academic and enrichment activities for children, plus a number of parent-child learning activities, including nutrition; health; fire safety; substance abuse; domestic violence; first aid; asset building; and a mentoring program which includes service learning, intergenerational mentoring, and academic encouragement. Students from the Villisca before and after school program spend time at a nearby nursing home, often sharing snack-time, one-on-one time, and recreational activities with the home's residents. Older youth and senior citizens in the Villisca community act as volunteer tutors and mentors for the younger students. Parents do not simply leave their children to be cared for at the site – they commit to taking an active role, making donations of board games, volunteer time, career skills, puzzles and other indoor activities. This program has over 100 students enrolled - this is from a district in which the K-5th grade population is 176 students. When state child welfare funding was no longer available for this project, fundraisers, local grants, and community support continued to sustain it for the community. The need was there, the solution was explored and an opportunity was created to solve the problem. Local ownership of the solution has made a big difference for the families in Villisca.

Each community faces challenges to support children and families. The direction this program took is a great example of how communities can develop solutions to local issues. Our government – both state and federal - can play an important role in the implementation and support of these programs. Incentives should be available to employers in rural Iowa to establish child care for our youngest children. Federal assistance could be developed to assist local rural school districts in developing before and after school care for children. The 21st Century Learning Centers grants represent a great beginning for the state of Iowa, but many school districts - not just those in low income areas - need these opportunities. Iowa and our Federal Government cannot turn a blind eye to the dilemmas created by the rural nature of our communities and the high number of working parents.

Although the Welfare to Work legislation had good intentions, it left a gap for working mothers in rural areas. Child care and transportation are areas that need additional resources in order to ensure that these families' needs are being met and that each of them can be assured of a safe and secure place for their children.

The Villisca stories that I shared with you today provide an example of "what works" for families. I would encourage you when considering the Welfare to Work initiative, to give strong consideration to the lessons we have learned in Iowa's rural communities. Working parents can be successful when given the critical supports of child care and transportation.