

Testimony of Donna Littrel

Good morning Mr. Chairman. Thank you for inviting me to testify before the Committee today. My name is Donna Littrel, and I would like to share with you how Promise Jobs, Cornerstone, the Family Investment Program – otherwise known as “FIP” and other resources have helped my family. We have benefited so much from these programs that it is hard to think of where we would be right now without them.

In May I will celebrate my fourth anniversary at Aegon Insurance Company. Since starting there, I have obtained my Series 6 and 63 insurance licenses, a Life and Health insurance license, and am currently furthering my education by continuing to take classes and pass tests. I have a great position in the sales and conservation unit, where I help clients to make decisions about their investments. It is a great opportunity, but the road to where I am now was very bumpy indeed.

I met my husband, Anthony, seven years ago. During our first months together we lived in my camper at a little park south of Iowa City. With us were his three children who were between the ages of two and five years old at the time. We received assistance for food stamps to help get us by. We were homeless and down and out for quite a while.

The kids’ mother cared for the children long enough for us to get an apartment. In one month Anthony and I saved the money for a place to live while living in our car and working at a restaurant. A year later we had our first child together. In the fall of 1997, our baby was only a few months old, we found ourselves homeless again.

It was very hard for us, at the time we had nothing, it felt like there was no light at the end of the tunnel. Neither of us had family to turn to. I went to DHS and they were willing to give me money for rent. Additionally, they provided general assistance to help us on a down payment for a place to live.

During this time I hopped around from one restaurant job to another. We had the help of the FIP program, food stamps, and Medicaid to keep us going. Our family still suffered from it's own set of problems, other than the financial burdens we faced. We both drank quite a bit during this time. When I became pregnant again I stopped drinking and by the grace of God, Anthony became sober on April 14, 1998 and hasn't touched a drink since. For us, before things got better they got worse. Newly sober, life wasn't always that easy.

We were both unemployed and managed to live off the FIP program and food stamps alone. We were going through the Promise Jobs program at the time. Anthony and I were in a BASICs class that was to teach us to be self-sufficient.

I learned a lot from the class but the most helpful thing I received was a little flyer about a new program that was starting called the Customer Contact Training Program. This new program would be a gateway for people to obtain the skills needed to work in a call center. There were several businesses that were partnering to sponsor the program with hundreds of thousands of dollars coming from a grant provided by the state. The class was four hours a day, five days a week and lasted for three months. Promise Jobs not only provided this opportunity for me without cost, but also paid for my transportation to and from class and for the childcare my children received while I was there.

I used this class as my chance to prove to myself that I could be a good employee, which I failed at previously. I proved this by only missing one day of class and I graduating at the top of the class. I was very proud of my accomplishments. I had four job interviews; two of the companies offered me a position. Aegon hired me in May of 1999.

Becoming an Aegon employee was a turning point for my family and me. Our family still received assistance for our medical bills and some food stamps, but we no

longer had to rely on FIP to provide us an income. I had never imagined I would be working for such a wonderful company. It was a very liberating feeling.

Our family also received help from a program called Cornerstone for a couple of years. They helped us by providing a counselor who came to our house every other week. We attended the classes they offered and took our children to functions they supported. After a year of living in a singlewide mobile home, we moved into a larger home in the same community. .

In March of 2002 we had another baby. Because of illness, my husband is unable to work; he stays at home and cares for the children. I recently went to DHS to apply for food stamps. We have been approved to receive them, and having the extra help, we will be able to afford our expenses. Being a one-income household with six children, it is difficult to keep above water at times. But, with all the help that we have been provided, it has been possible. I enjoy my job and my family; we have come along way over the years. I hope that by sharing my experiences we will be able to help others some day. When things looked grim and hopeless, there was always someone watching out for us. Thank you for the opportunity to share with you.