

Testimony to the National Commission on Hunger
El Paso, Texas
July 26, 2015

Good afternoon. I am Janet Bono, Workforce Services Program Administrator with Workforce Solutions Borderplex. We are honored that Workforce Solutions Borderplex was invited to provide testimony to the National Commission on Hunger.

We thank you for choosing El Paso as one of the cities in which to hear testimony. I would like to highlight a few facts about the region we serve. The counties Workforce Solutions Borderplex serves are Brewster, Culberson, El Paso, Hudspeth, Jeff Davis, and Presidio, with the majority of the region's population residing in El Paso County. To put it into perspective, according to the U.S. Census Quick Facts for 2014, there were 857,317 individuals residing in the six county region with 833,487 of those individuals residing in El Paso County. El Paso is largest city along the U.S./Mexico border and also neighbors New Mexico. The employment landscape continues to improve for the El Paso MSA. In May 2015, the unemployment rate for El Paso MSA was 5.0%, lower than the national unemployment of 5.3%, but lagged behind the State of Texas unemployment rate of 4.1%.

Workforce Solutions Borderplex is one of 28 local workforce boards in Texas. We provide integrated workforce employment and training services throughout a six-county region of Southwest Texas. Our funding is primarily federal funding from the U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Health and Human Services, and U.S. Department of Agriculture that comes to us through the Texas Workforce Commission.

Workforce Solutions Borderplex is guided by a volunteer Board of Directors with the majority of the Board composed of representation from the private sector, and includes representation from community-based organizations, economic development, education and literacy, and the public sector. Board staff administers the workforce programs with direct delivery of services provided by its workforce service contractors. The delivery of services are provided to help customers obtain employment. Services may include assistance that helps customers obtain the education and skills needed to secure employment that leads to economic stability that includes meeting their basic needs such as housing and nutrition.

Workforce Solutions Borderplex offers integrated employment and training services through its Career Centers. We also operate a mobile unit which contains 10 computers with satellite connection that can be used to access WorkinTexas.com, register for work, send resumes, and access online courses. Satellite capability for the computers is vital since some areas of the region have no wiring for Internet access. Workforce Center staff maintain an established schedule with the mobile unit visiting the rural counties without a brick and mortar Career Center in order to bring our services to those counties.

We partner with business and industry to identify employment opportunities, the skills needed to fill those positions, and then match job seekers with those job openings. Targeted industry fairs are held quarterly to connect job seekers with employers, and hiring fairs are also held in our Career Centers on a weekly basis. This summer, we have partnered with businesses to provide summer employment to 200 youth through our Workforce Investment Act/Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Youth program.

The average weekly wages for the Workforce Solutions Borderplex area lags behind the State of Texas. For example, during the third quarter of 2014 our region's average weekly wage was \$707.84 compared with Texas' average weekly wage of \$1,071.20. This is one of the reasons we partner with economic development entities to market our workforce and our employer services in order to expand business and recruit new business with higher wage jobs to the area.

We offer job readiness workshops on resume writing, interviewing tips and practice, financial literacy, dressing for success, and registering in WorkinTexas.com; the Texas Workforce Commission's statewide job matching system. Computers, fax and copy machines, and telephones are available in our Career Centers. Customers may use these to aid in their employment search. Job matching and referral services are available through our Employment Services staff.

Numerous reports have identified the connection between educational achievement and employment earnings. We are committed to developing a skilled workforce that meet the needs of business so job seekers have the opportunity to obtain employment in higher wage occupations. Education and training are vital to this end. In El Paso County, 16.1% of the population aged 25 years and older has less than a 9th grade level of education. To help address this, Workforce Solutions Borderplex assists individuals seeking to complete secondary education by providing tutoring/basic skills services and referral to educational institutions. We provide GED testing fee payments for eligible customers. We also work closely with our public schools to have a regular presence at specific schools that are working with an at-risk student population. Workforce Solutions Borderplex is invested in providing services to keep youth connected to education and

reconnecting those who have dropped out of school by providing education and employment activities.

For individuals in need of occupational skills building, training assistance is available. Eligible customers may choose from a list of targeted occupations in which to train, and up to \$8,500 in tuition assistance will be provided by Workforce Solutions Borderplex. Support services are available to remove barriers for customers who are engaging in employment and training services. These ancillary services include, but are not limited to: transportation assistance in the form of bus or gas cards so customers can commute to and from workforce activities, child care assistance where families receive child care subsidies to offset the cost of child care, clothing assistance for work purposes, purchase of work tools, and limited emergency assistance with housing and utilities expenses.

Our workforce programs are available to individuals who meet program eligibility, with income eligibility being a criterion for many of the programs. Our programs include Workforce Investment Act Adult, Dislocated Worker and Youth; Trade Adjustment Assistance; TANF/Choices; Noncustodial Parent Choices; SNAP E&T, Employment Services; and NEG. To best meet the needs of the individual customers, individuals may be enrolled into more than one program. For example, an individual participating in the Choices program (which is the employment and training program for individuals receiving TANF benefits) and whom enrolls in occupational training may also be enrolled in the Workforce Investment Act program as a means of ensuring that training is not interrupted if the participant loses TANF benefits. Between October 1, 2013 and June 18, 2015, 4,119 individuals receiving Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits were provided with services through Workforce Solutions Borderplex.

They received 12,552 services. Services included, but were not limited to: employment planning (1,435); occupational training (367); GED (261); high school (316); transportation (1,948) and child care (590) assistance; and job search assistance (1,587). During this period, 1,560 individuals were connected to some type of employment activity whether subsidized employment to gain work experience, on-the-job training to earn while learning, or unsubsidized employment.

During 2014, 38,254 job seekers in the Workforce Solutions Borderplex region became employed. Of those, 2,597 were individuals who had been receiving public assistance. Employment entry may have resulted through accessing job matching services through WorkInTexas.com, through Employment Services, following a job readiness workshop or through workforce program assistance. For our board contract year 2014, the average hourly wage for all workforce program participants was \$12.42.

I would like to briefly touch on the Child Care Services program. In 2014, Workforce Solutions Borderplex provided Child Care Services to 10,635 children. As Laurie Biscoe of the Texas Workforce Commission stated, the Child Care Services program is a critical support for income eligible families to be able to work and it is an avenue for exposing families to the numerous services available through Workforce Solutions. This program has an added benefit for children who may be experiencing food instability. Children receiving Child Care Services through child care facilities are provided with nutritious meals and snacks while in care.

One other program I would like to highlight is the Noncustodial Parent Choices program (NCP) that is a collaboration between the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), Workforce Solutions,

the Office of Attorney General (OAG), and the Title IV-D Court. Program funding is primarily through TWC TANF funds and the OAG provides additional funding. In 2013, eligibility for the NCP program was expanded to serve low income nonpublic assistance cases and establishment cases as well as public assistance cases. Participants are court-ordered to participate in the NCP Choices program. This program assists noncustodial parents with an open child support case who are behind in their child support payments with finding employment. The participants are unemployed or underemployed and may have children who are receiving public assistance or who are at risk of receiving public assistance. By connecting the participants to employment, they are better positioned to make child support payments which can help move their children to greater financial stability. Collections, excluding the federal offset, for El Paso were \$2.17 million in FY 13; \$2.5 million in FY14 ; and the most recent figures for FY15 (September 2014-January 2015) were \$1.3 million.

Workforce Solutions Borderplex continues to explore and engage in opportunities to get out the word about our available employment and training services. We continue to look for innovative ways to address the needs of individuals to connect them with employment and a career pathway because it is through employment that individuals and families become economically stable.

We echo the recommendation from the Texas Workforce Commission, to include the delivery of workforce services in any discussion about addressing hunger. Workforce services such as WIOA, TANF/Choices, NCP Choices, and SNAP Employment and Training provide means for individuals and families to achieve economic stability which also supports food stability. Child Care Services is a critical support for income eligible families to be able to work (as well as attend

school or training) and the program also addresses hunger through the provision of nutritious meals and snacks. Therefore, we believe it is important to include Child Care Services in any discussion that addresses food instability. We further recommend that any discussion to alleviate hunger includes discussion on how other areas across the nation might replicate the successful Texas NCP Choices program.