

Do We Really Need To Discourage Giving?

Wendy is a 23 year old mother of two young children. She grew up in poverty and had her first child when she was 15. The children's father, quite a few years older than her, worked as a security guard. For awhile, they had enough money to get by. Then he got involved with drugs and lost his job. Wendy couldn't deal with the drug abuse and the harm it might cause her children. She made him leave until he got clean.

He didn't get clean. Wendy, armed with few skills, could not make enough to maintain the family. She became destitute. Nobody in her family could afford to help her. With no other options, she applied for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. She received \$340 a month for her and her two small children.

Wendy swore that she was going to raise her babies differently than she was raised. She enrolled in WV Works, as people who get cash assistance must do. WV Works aims to help economically dependent families become self-supporting. That is a very important part of the safety net because, since the mid-90s, no adult can receive cash assistance from welfare for more than 5 years in their entire lifetime. During this crucial period, WV Department of Health and Human Resources staff work hard to get families to a point of self-sufficiency. They match the mother or father's capabilities with professions that will maximize their earning potential. They then arrange training for professions where there are actual job openings.

Wendy worked hard and got her GED. An Education Specialist assessed her and recommended that she become a Licensed Practical Nurse. Success was within her grasp, but she had no way to get to her training center. There was no public transportation, and she had to take her youngest child to daycare while she was in training.

As she faced this dilemma, a Charleston family's' last child was graduating from college, getting a job and buying a new car. His college car, a 2001 Plymouth, needed some work but was in pretty good shape. His parents heard at their church about a car donation program that helps people get to work. They wanted to help, so they donated the Plymouth to the Good News Mountaineer Garage. The Garage fixed the car and made sure it was safe and dependable. Wendy was referred to the Garage by her caseworker at the WV Department of Health and Human Resources. She got the Plymouth.

As a result, Wendy got her training, her certificate and a decent paying job in a field that needs trained workers. She got off welfare and became a tax paying West Virginian. She moved to a safer neighborhood. Her kids participate in afterschool activities, she shops at a nearby grocery store and takes her kids to the doctor when they need to go. She is currently studying part time to become a Registered Nurse. Her life, her children lives, their futures, turned around because a kind, middle-income Charleston couple decided to donate their son's car.

Wendy wrote a thank you note to this couple that she did not know. She told them about her children and her aspirations for their future. The couple keeps that

thank you note on their refrigerator. Every day, it tells them their act of kindness made a huge difference in the lives of three fellow West Virginians.

Could this couple have afforded to donate their old car rather than sell it if they could not get a reduction on their taxes? They tithe money to their church, but could they afford to give more out of their pockets? Maybe, but likely not.

Fortunately, they did not have to make this choice. They reduced their taxes because they could deduct the fair market value of their car from their federal taxes. They also received WV Neighbor Investment Program state tax credits for their donation. They were able to afford this generous gift, between the two benefits which are meant to encourage people to be a good neighbor.

Don't we want to be the kind of country which encourages our private citizens and businesses to help others by giving? The charitable tax deduction provision which allows that couple to donate their car is threatened by current negotiations in Washington. If that tax deduction provision disappears, I am almost certain the Good News Mountaineer Garage will close its doors. Many of our donors give regardless of the tax benefits, but most cannot afford to give away their used car if they can't get some financial return for it, no matter how much they would like to do so.

Since 2001, the Garage has provided approximately 2,500 vehicles to low-income families and people with disabilities who want to work but can't because they do not have transportation. It is a huge life-changer that reduces people's dependence on public assistance. It improves the quality of their lives and gives them a chance to become hardworking, taxpaying people who support themselves and their children.

Our program success has received national recognition. But here's the bottom line: We could not have gotten the program off the ground without the kindness of our neighbors. People often ask us how this program can work in West Virginia, one of the poorest states in the country. It works because of our state Neighborhood Investment Program, and it works because we are aware of the poverty around us.

People give because they care, but many will not be able to afford to do so if they can't get a break on their taxes. They simply will no longer be able to afford it.

Do we really need to discourage giving? Of course not. As we face cuts in federal support of many programs, we need to do the opposite and pull together. Doing away with charitable donation deduction is, in my opinion, contrary to everything most people - Democrats and Republicans -- want this nation to be.

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