

**New Choices Career Development Program  
Testimony for Representative Joe Hackett  
August 20, 2012**

**Introduction:**

Good morning, my name is Dianna Armstrong. I am the newly elected Chair of the New Choices Career Development Program advisory board. In addition to New Choices, my full time career has been as a Market Manager for Citadel Credit Union for the past 14 years in Springfield, Delaware County.

I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you today about New Choices. We are a successful career development program which debuted at the state level in 1980. Our Delaware County campus opened in 1982 at Delaware County Community College and has been housed there since.

We are committed to promoting economic independence, self-reliance, and career success for single parents, displaced homemakers and unemployed individuals. Our program is rich in diversity. I am excited to be part of this forum to discuss the New Choices program. For thirty years New Choices has offered solutions for many of Pennsylvania's unemployed and transitioning workforce.

New Choices primary role in the 1980's was to service the needs of a woman re-entering the job market as a result of divorce, separation, death or unemployment of a spouse. New Choices continues to maintain our original goal of supporting economic self-sufficiency for that population, but we've expanded to include the needs of today's job-seekers, many of whom have experienced a lay-off or job loss. We customize solutions and personalize every interaction for each client that walks through our door. There is no cookie cutter solution for someone who has recently lost their job, no matter what the circumstances.

Our client base is no longer serving just the displaced homemaker re-entering the work force. Our program still serves primarily woman although men are also served. What makes New Choices unique is our ability to motivate and empower those who possess the desire to work hard to find a way to create their own success. They are willing to do the work necessary to develop a viable career path and find employment.

**Why does New Choices Matter in Workforce Development?**

The critical function that New Choices plays in job creation is the *creation of workers* who can meet the demands of today's employers: self-motivated, effective, adaptable, and confident professionals with a commitment to lifelong learning.

We're all bombarded with the media culture and quick-fix solutions in this new economic world. Job search techniques and career management skills have changed over the last several years and now require a new set of skills and competencies to be successful. These changes disproportionately affected older workers, many of whom find they are ill prepared for this new economic reality. As professions and industries are reorganizing, relocating or closing all together, long-term employees are facing new and unexpected challenges.

It's our mission at New Choices to help our students navigate the overwhelming changes that have taken place in the job market over the last several years. How refreshing is it to have a program that provides personalized, interactive, supportive guidance; and we offer all of this to our students at no cost to those who are facing incredibly difficult financial struggles.

New Choices **REQUIRES** a strong commitment from every student attending the program – it's hard work and you have to really want it to succeed. But the discipline and commitment required to be

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successful in New Choices is designed to reinforce the expectations of employers in the community. The skills learned in our program are thought provoking and life changing and prepare individuals for the workplace.

Our student's economic, demographic, and personal backgrounds are diverse and often challenging. We act as compass guiding each student on his or her journey. Every job or position, no matter by whom, has created a professional footprint that is unique. We support our clients in utilizing their own professional footprint as a jumping off point in creating new possibilities within their professional careers.

The paradigm shift that occurs in our clients over a seven week period is an evolving process. They move from "I wish I could" to "I know I can, and I have a plan to get there".

It's wonderful to see the graduates on graduation day with a renewed sense of hope in what seems like hopeless times.

**Future of New Choices: Closed and /or Diminished Programs?**

Twelve years ago New Choices had a statewide budget of \$3.7 million and served more than 5,000 individuals. Funding has declined every year since then and in the 2011-12 state budget, funding for the program fell to \$500,000 statewide. In the 2012-13 state budgets, New Choices remained at \$500,000. With reduced funding, services have been severely limited both in number of clients served and locations served.

Statewide, only thirteen New Choices programs are in operation - in 1999, there were 36. We're fortunate that New Choices still exists in southeastern Pennsylvania. Temple University in Philadelphia still houses a New Choices program, but they have a waiting list of forty -five students. North Hampton College in Lehigh County has decreased staff and services over the last several years. Last year Montgomery County Community College closed its twenty- five year program. Bucks County Community College closed its two locations in 2007.

Delaware County Community College has worked tirelessly to retain this valuable program that serves a population that often has few other viable resources. But the DCCC program has not escaped the ramifications of the significant budget cuts over the last several years. Services are only able to be offered at one location, making accessibility for some of the most vulnerable populations a challenge. An evening program that served many individuals in entry-level or "dead-end" positions was not able to be sustained within the current budget limitations. And most regrettably, the number of individuals able to be served has been reduced by more than half, with just over 110 individuals receiving service in 2011-12.

**Call to Action:**

The most vulnerable adults often need an opportunity to create their own success. The critical statewide investment in New Choices provides just such an opportunity. It's a leg-up, not a hand-out. It invests in the potential of Pennsylvania residents and allows individuals to learn skills and strategies that will help them move forward in job attainment, career growth and self-sufficiency, all necessary ingredients for a thriving local and state economy.

But New Choices doesn't do this alone. Employer partners are essential to the on-going success of the program. Citadel, Wawa, Penn Medicine, Comfort Keepers, US Air, and State Farm Insurance are just a

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few of the many employers that partner with New Choices to send representatives to events such as Mock Interviews and Employer Panels to assist clients in understanding the needs of today's employers. Local employers give their time to provide information about interviewing, job search, networking, resume-writing, business etiquette and attire, necessary computer skills, not to mention as channels for job search and networking.

Our employer partners see the value of the program and donate time and resources to support the mission. Many, many have hired graduates of the program. But we need more corporate sponsors who are willing to offer expertise in various fields.

**In Closing:**

New Choice plays a vital role in supporting local job creation efforts. We provide a "BIG bang for the tax payer buck", as a result of individuals going back to work and weaning off of unemployment compensation and welfare services. In fact, last year in 2011-12, when the state's total investment in New Choices was \$500,000 statewide, \$1,546,479 were returned to the state through reductions in those services. As you can see, New Choices more than pays for itself. The majority of our graduates continue their education, find jobs, increase self-sufficiency, and contribute to the local economy through payroll taxes.

I am passionate about New Choices and what we have to offer, but there is much work to be done. Our current economic struggles both nationally and at the state level have forced us all to think differently about how we will continue to serve the very real needs of individuals facing challenges in our respective communities. New Choices has a role to play as we move forward in southeastern Pennsylvania.

**And By the Way...**

I am not just representing New Choices as Advisory Board Chair; I am also representing New Choices as a proud graduate of the May 1999 evening class. I am gainfully employed at Citadel Credit Union, College educated, owner of a home in Newtown Square, with two Teenagers in college. New Choices was my life line.

Thank you for convening this hearing. I appreciate the opportunity of sharing this information about New Choices with you today. We are committed to being part of your solution.