

ILLINOIS COMMERCE COMMISSION

DOCKET NO.

PREPARED DIRECT TESTIMONY OF

SHARON L. DURBIN

CHIEF CLERK'S OFFICE

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ILLINOIS
COMMERCE COMMISSION

1 1. Q. Please state your name, business address, and present position.

2 A. Sharon L. Durbin, 500 S. 27th Street, Decatur, Illinois 62521. I am a
3 loaned executive from Illinois Power Company and I am the Executive
4 Director of A Hand Up, Inc.TM. I have been employed with Illinois Power
5 for 22 years.

6 2. Q. Please summarize your educational background and professional
7 experience.

8 A. In 1999, I received an Associate Degree in Business Administration and I
9 expect to receive a Bachelor of Science in Business Management this year.

10 3. Q. What is the purpose of your testimony?

11 A. The purpose of my testimony is to discuss A Hand Up, Inc. TM and explain
12 the benefits provided to utility customers in Illinois.

13 4. Q. What is A Hand Up, Inc.TM?

14 A. Illinois Power and interested citizens have worked together to form and
15 operate A Hand Up, Inc.TM, which is a unique work donation and
16 education program. It was incorporated in 1997 to provide a means for
17 low-income individuals to work to pay off delinquent utility bills.

18 5. Q. Briefly explain the impetus for the incorporation of A Hand Up, Inc. TM.

19 A. As a Customer Assistance Advisor for Illinois Power, I was responsible to
20 help low-income customers or other customers who were in the threat of
21 being disconnected to find resources within the community to help them
22 get their utility bill paid. While assisting customers, I noticed a pattern

23 which repeated itself each year. The customer who was in need of
24 assistance would go to the local Low Income Home Energy Assistance
25 Program (“LIHEAP”) which was run through our Community Action
26 Agency. Through that program, the eligible customer would receive
27 financial assistance by way of a \$750 pledge. The eligible customer was
28 not expected to give anything in return for the pledge. In exchange for the
29 pledged amount, Illinois Power would set up a traditional billing
30 agreement, reconnect the customer, only to watch that customer default
31 the billing agreement 30 days later. The customer would not submit
32 payment in a timely fashion and the customer was disconnected the next
33 April. This pattern developed for many low income customers. In an
34 effort to assist these customers, I developed a plan which provided a
35 means for low-income individuals to work to pay off delinquent utility
36 bills.

37 6. Q. What is the mission of A Hand Up, Inc.™?

38 A. Our mission is to inspire and enable people to improve their lives through
39 collaboration with communities, faith-based organizations, government,
40 and social services, by offering avenues of assistance that promote dignity
41 and self-sufficiency for a life changing experience. We simply want to
42 help people help themselves.

43 7. Q. Could you explain how A Hand Up, Inc.™ works in helping utility
44 customers?

45 A. Our program is uniquely designed to not only help the customer help
46 themselves, but our program also benefits the communities in which the
47 program is implemented. The utility customer who actually has a
48 delinquent bill completes an application with A Hand Up, Inc.TM. The
49 eligible customer becomes a volunteer to a local not-for-profit
50 organization. We have worked with food pantries, thrift shops, senior
51 centers and other community service agencies. As a volunteer, the eligible
52 customer provides labor for an organization. The eligible utility customer
53 also has the option to attend classes toward their General Education
54 Diploma (“GED”). Most recently, we have also incorporated the theory of
55 workshops where the eligible utility customer is able to attend workshops
56 in which speakers discuss issues such as money management and energy
57 conservation. A Hand Up, Inc.TM also offers education opportunities
58 through colleges and various speakers that might give that individual some
59 hope for a new avenue to step up and make a change in their life.

60 The eligible utility customers receive a credit toward the utility bill
61 balance at the rate of \$10.00 per hour for working, attending GED classes
62 or workshops. Upon completion of a certain number of hours,
63 volunteering or attending classes, A Hand Up, Inc. TM sends payment for
64 the delinquent utility bill. The maximum any eligible customer may
65 receive is \$750.00 per year.

66 8. Q. What resources has Illinois Power provided since 1991?

- 67 A. The company has given in excess of \$500,000.00, as well as in-kind
68 support from within the organization to support this program on an
69 ongoing basis. In addition, Illinois Power contributes my entire salary
70 each year.
- 71 9. Q. Are there other organizations who have contributed to A Hand Up, Inc.™?
- 72 A. Yes. The Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs has
73 contributed a significant amount of funding. We receive grants from them
74 to support our belief in people.
- 75 10. Q. Do you work with other utility companies in the State?
- 76 A. Yes. This fiscal year we are working with Central Illinois Light Company
77 and City Water, Light & Power
- 78 11. Q. A Hand Up, Inc.™ has been in existence since its incorporation in 1997,
79 could you briefly explain the success that you have had?
- 80 A. We have helped over 4,000 utility customers since the inception of the
81 program. Included within that figure, we have helped over 175
82 individuals obtain their General Education Diploma, 75 individuals obtain
83 full-time employment, and 60 individuals complete some type of
84 vocational training.
- 85 12. Q. What kind of public response have you received?
- 86 A. It has been very positive. We have been noted in *Business Week*,
87 September 20, 1999 and *The Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 1999. We
88 have also received a nomination from a local agency in Decatur called

89 Green Thumb. A Hand Up, Inc.TM hired one of their volunteers. We have
90 also been recognized on MSNBC and by Peter Jennings on ABC Nightly
91 News.

92 13. Q. Have you also received “congratulations” from other utilities?

93 A. Yes, we have. We have received letters as well as personal responses
94 from the utility companies with whom we are working.

95 14. Q. How does A Hand Up, Inc. TM communicate to the utility customers it
96 serves?

97 A. We provide a toll free number (1-866-242-6387 – 1-866-A HAND UP).
98 In addition, we provide a web site at ahandup.com to provide information
99 about the program. This site has an e-mail link to the Executive Director
100 for any questions or concerns about the program.

101 15. Q. Have you received inquiry on a national basis?

102 A. Yes. We have received interest from California, Canada, Tennessee, New
103 York and Florida. We also have sent a packet of information explaining A
104 Hand Up, Inc.TM to the White House. A copy of the information sent to
105 the White House is attached as Exhibit 2.1.

106 16. Q. Does this conclude your direct testimony?

107 A. Yes.