

Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Services
March 20, 2013

Co-Chairs Nathanson and Bates, Members of the Committee:

My name is Liz Graham and I have worked for Vocational Rehabilitation Services since 1977.

I work with people from all walks of life – from those who dropped out of school in the 8th grade, to people with college degrees. But they all have things in common – they are Oregonians, they have disabilities, and they WANT TO WORK. But they need the support of vocational rehabilitation counselors to help them understand their disabilities, accept how their disabilities may prevent them from working, identify their limitations, and more importantly, appreciate their strengths. Rather than focusing on what they can't do, we help re-focus on what they can do.

A typical Vocational Rehabilitation counselor is currently working with 70 to 80 clients at any given time. Given the multitude of disabilities that many clients have, and the lack of resources available in the community to address their varying needs, I often feel like a traffic cop directing clients, rather than being able to give them the quality time they need and deserve. Clients do wait, they wait to get into orientation, they wait to get an intake appointment, and they wait for evaluations and assessments so they can be found eligible. And while they wait, they continue to lose hope. The better quality of attention I can give to a client, the better will be their quality in terms of outcome.

Unemployment alone has a negative impact on physical and mental health. Recent statistics indicate that the jobless rate jumped to 13.7 percent in January 2013 for people with disabilities, a steep rise over the 11.7 percent unemployment rate reported for December 2012. But these people with disabilities, these Vocational Rehabilitation clients, with our assistance, can become gainfully employed and will be enriching Oregon's economy, as exemplified by a couple of success stories.

"Chris" came to VR with a multitude of disabilities, including head trauma, as a result of a motor vehicle accident. Through the support of our agency, along with Financial Aid, she was able to attend Chemeketa Community College, identify her dream job, and now works developing programs for senior citizens in a large local retirement facility. She is continuing to pursue her Bachelor's degree on her own at Western Oregon University.

"Mike" came to VR with a history of alcohol abuse and mental health issues, and was living at the Union Gospel Mission. Through vocational guidance and support, he also was able to attend community college and is now mentoring troubled teens, so they will make better choices than he did in his past.

As VR counselors we all struggle to make ends meet, to work 60 hours into a 40 hour work week. We are all giving 110% to make successful outcomes a reality. Giving 110% every day is hard, and it is tiring. We keep going, and while we could use an increase to our workforce, we dread any consideration that there could or would be additional cuts to our already streamlined staffing.