

3/16/15 Testimony before the Senate Workforce Development Committee

Chairman Dembrow, Vice Chair Thatcher, Senator Gelser, Senator Knopp, and Senator Diane Rosenbaum,

Thank you for your interest in employment for people with disabilities. This testimony is on behalf of Oregon APSE. The Association of Persons Supporting Employment First (APSE) is the only national organization that focuses exclusively on the employment of individuals with disabilities.

Problem Statement

Nationally approximately 17.6% of people with disabilities are employed compared to 64% of people without disabilities. In a December 2014 report, the Oregon Employment Department reported that the Office of Economic Analysis expected to see a healthy growth in the next few years with job gains in particular industries. Unfortunately, the vast majority of working age adults with disabilities still face structural and attitudinal barriers that block their access to steady employment and economic security. Although research has shown that individuals with disabilities are capable of work and can be valuable employees, only a small percentage are receiving funding for employment services.

Including individuals with disabilities into the workforce means employers gain a new resource, while these citizens decrease their dependence on government, pay taxes, and most importantly, increase self-esteem and independence.

Background and Context

To clarify Oregon APSE's position, we put forth the following definition for integrated employment

"Integrated individual employment is defined as a job that meets the needs of the business community, pays competitive wages, provides comparable benefits and opportunities to fully engage with non-disabled co-workers and for most people is at least 20 hrs/wk."

This definition is in line with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) for competitive integrated employment.

One arena where Oregon has been a leader is in community-based services for individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, I/DD. With the closure of the last state training center in 2009, Oregon joined a handful of states that had closed their state institutions for this population. It is admirable that people are living in the community, however; many individuals desiring to reach their full potential are limited by a system that continues to separate their daily lives from the general population by hiding them away in segregated, sheltered workshops and day services. These services are paid for by federal Medicaid dollars that are matched with state dollars at a ratio of 63 federal/37 state. These same funds could be shifted to a different approach to services called "supported employment". In this model, jobs are developed in typical local businesses and the person with disabilities in that job and the employer receive support and consultation by an individual or organization hired for the purpose of assuring the success of the employee and the employer. Supported employment is not just for individuals with intellectual disabilities, it is a proven approach for those with mental health challenges, traumatic brain injury and other physical and neurological disabilities.

According to a review of the literature in 2012, individuals with disabilities receiving supported employment services have increased wages over those in sheltered workshops, and supported employment appears to be more cost-effective than sheltered workshops with a return net-benefit to tax payers. Survey analysis of companies that employ people with disabilities found that they hire them for business reasons and are awarded with benefits such as the addition of highly motivated employees, demonstrating a diverse culture that is attractive to critical talent pools, and improving customer satisfaction.

What can the workforce system do?

Provisions in the Work Force and Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) emphasize and increase the requirements for the general workforce development system and One-stop Career Centers to meet the needs of job seekers with disabilities. The following recommendations would support this effort:

- State and local workforce development boards include community organizations that provide or support competitive integrated employment.
- Local workforce development boards join with Employment First Teams to ensure that there are sufficient service providers in a local area with expertise in assisting individuals with disabilities with their career and training needs.
- Local workforce development boards assign a committee that serves as a forum to influence the ability of the workforce system to meet the needs of job seekers with significant disabilities.
- State and local workforce development boards assure that youth with disabilities are served.
- Set aside funds from the general workforce development statewide employment and training activities fund that can be used to improve employment and training activities with programs for individuals with disabilities.

In addition to implementation of WIOA, it is important that the workforce system be included as an important partner in supporting the revised Governor's Executive Order 15-01 Providing Employment Services to Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities by focusing on successful job outcomes and the cost effectiveness of strategies to achieve those outcomes.

Just as students with disabilities are included in the mainstream of schools, working age adults with disabilities can be included in the mainstream of the workforce through the application of proven innovative strategies such as supported employment and collaborative partnerships with the workforce system. By supporting innovation, and welcoming the contributions of individuals with disabilities, employers and the workforce system can assure that all Oregonians participate in the state's economic recovery.

Respectfully,

Tara M. Asai
Oregon APSE President