

Testimony

Joyce Bender

March 5, 2009

Esteemed members of Congress, I would like to thank you for not only giving me the opportunity to speak today, but also for your care and concern for quality of life and equality of opportunity for all Americans with disabilities.

My name is Joyce Bender; I am the CEO and founder of Bender Consulting Services, a company that focuses on competitive employment for Americans with disabilities. I am a person who is living with epilepsy and a hearing loss and am the chair-elect of the national Epilepsy Foundation's board of directors.

Twenty four years ago, in the midst of my career in executive search, I had an almost fatal accident. One evening, my husband and I went to see Amadeus, and at the intermission, I had a seizure at the concession stand, fractured my skull and broke all of the bones in my right ear – all of this happened, due to a misdiagnosis of epilepsy. After having brain surgery and spending two-months in rehabilitation, I started thinking about what happens with people with disabilities. For the next 10 years of my life, in addition to getting back to work in executive search, I also did volunteer work, trying to find competitive employment for Americans with significant disabilities. I learned that people with the most significant disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities couldn't get good jobs. I also didn't understand why many had sub-minimum wage jobs.

Due to this experience, I decided to focus on this effort and founded Bender Consulting in 1995, a for profit company that aligns talented people with disabilities with great career opportunities in information technology, finance/accounting, human resources and other general business areas. Today, Bender Consulting operates in 18 states, and in 2 provinces in Canada, through Bender of Canada. We have hired over 400 people with significant disabilities and have paid them competitive wages, including family benefits coverage. The primary reason for Bender Consulting's success is due to the outstanding performance and efforts of my employees, people with significant disabilities, who go to work every day, early, with a great attitude.

Many employers believe that people with disabilities are inferior and not able to do the job at the same level as their non-disabled counterpart. We know that is not true. I work in partnership with great corporations such as Highmark, Inc., Bayer Corporation, CSC, WellPoint, MGM MIRAGE and federal agencies including the NSA, the FAA, and the Naval Supply Systems Command. These are companies and government agencies that look at talent as the only discriminator, and provide competitive jobs with competitive wages. In reference to MGM MIRAGE, I just returned from Las Vegas. On Saturday, 52 people with disabilities were interviewed by CityCenter managers through our Bender partnership.

Although I have many examples of success, I would like to share with you the career success stories of Jamie and Justin, both of whom were aligned with freedom through competitive employment because of my partnership with Highmark, Inc.

Jamie is a young man who has cerebral palsy that is so significant that he uses a wheelchair, keeps his arms behind his back, due to the spasticity, types with a stick in his mouth and is very difficult to understand so he uses augmentative communication. When I met Jamie at a job fair, his resume indicated that he had a master's degree in rehabilitation science and technology and would accept \$12,000 a year due to his significant disability. Through the Bender/Highmark partnership, Jamie landed a job as a computer programmer. Within two months on the job, his manager called me to tell me that Jamie was "out-programming" his non-disabled colleagues. Jamie is seen frequently on evenings and weekends attending sporting events, concerts and cultural activities. He has worked at Highmark for over 7 years, has recently been promoted, and is paid competitively.

Justin, another individual who Highmark hired through our partnership is a young man who has an intellectual disability, Down Syndrome. Justin works for Highmark in the mail service operations area. He has a full-time job and is competitively compensated with a great benefits package. More important, Justin has become one of the top employees, among those who have disabilities and not, and is used to train new employees that Highmark hires in his area. Every time he sees me, he reminds me that having a competitive salary and a career has changed his life. When Justin was first referred to me by a person in social services, I was told he could only be successful in a lawn mowing or maintenance job. I often think how different his life would be today, if he had been referred to another company who took the advice of that social services person, who lowered the bar for Justin. He may not be living the way he is living today – purchasing good and services, paying taxes and making a difference for Highmark.

When I chose the corporate motto for Bender Consulting, I did not choose "jobs mean freedom", I chose "competitive jobs mean freedom". Without competitive employment and pay, people with disabilities will never, ever be free in this country.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.