

**Statement of Joan K. Evans, Director
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“Improving Employment Opportunities for People with Intellectual Disabilities”

**before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions
United States Senate
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Good morning.

Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important topic.

My name is Joan Evans, and I'm the Director of the Wyoming Department of Workforce Services. I am especially grateful to have the chance to share our experiences in Wyoming.

President Franklin Roosevelt said, "No country, however rich, can afford the waste of its human resources. Demoralization caused by vast unemployment is our greatest extravagance. Morally, it is the greatest menace to our social order."

We live in a time of high unemployment, and this is especially true for people with disabilities. While the overall employment rate hovers near 10 percent, it is much higher for people with disabilities. In fact, the unemployment rate for this segment of the population has remained virtually unchanged at 65 percent for two decades.

In Wyoming, our rate is slightly better, at 52.4 percent unemployment, as ranked by the University of Massachusetts at Boston Institute for Community Inclusion. However, we, too, still have a long way to go. Our rate of employment for persons with cognitive disabilities is also better than average with 37.1 percent employed in Wyoming versus 24.4% nationally.

Many people need long-term services or care specifically because of intellectual disabilities. The average lifetime cost for one person with intellectual disabilities is estimated to be \$1,014,000 (in 2003 dollars). It is estimated that the lifetime costs for all people with intellectual disabilities who were born in 2000 will total \$51.2 billion. These costs include both direct and indirect costs. Direct medical costs, such as doctor visits, prescription drugs and inpatient hospital stays make up 14 percent of these costs. Direct nonmedical expenses, such as home modifications and special education, make up 10 percent. Indirect costs, which include the value of lost wages when a person dies early, cannot work or is limited in the amount or type of work he or she can do make up 76 percent of the costs.

These estimates do not include other expenses such as hospital outpatient visits, emergency department visits, residential care, and family out-of-pocket expenses. The actual economic costs of intellectual disabilities are, therefore, even higher than what is reported.

I will not recite the many employment challenges facing people with disabilities, for we know that attitudinal barriers and negative stereotyping are among them, along with lack of accommodation. Although there are many challenges that persons with disabilities face as they look for work, there are also many effective programs and support services to assist them.

In Wyoming, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation falls under my agency. I would like to offer some examples of our successes.

WYOMING DIVISION OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

The public Vocational Rehabilitation Program continues to be one of the most cost-effective programs created by Congress. It enables individuals with disabilities to find gainful employment and become taxpaying citizens.

In fiscal year 2010, a total of 5,384 Wyoming citizens with disabilities received a broad array of services from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. More than a third of our clients have a psychiatric disorder, while one fourth possess orthopedic impairment, and 18 percent – the third-highest category – have an intellectual or cognitive disability.

The number served in 2010 represents a 30 percent increase from two years earlier. Of those, 1,372, or 26 percent, were referred to and received education and training from both in-state and out of state institutions.

On average, about 700 of these citizens each year successfully complete a training or rehabilitation program and enter the workforce with the enhanced skills provided. For every dollar spent on Vocational Rehabilitation services, a client earns \$11 in taxable income.

These individuals are able to secure, regain or retain employment with estimated annualized earnings in excess of \$13 million, and an estimated reduction in public assistance of more than a million dollars. Those savings might seem small compared to larger states, but in a state like Wyoming, with a population of only 563,000, these savings – and the number of people served and employed – is significant.

A variety of programs within this Division assist individuals with intellectual disabilities.

First, all eligible clients, regardless of their disability, have full access to a broad array of individualized services. To ensure that all disability groups have equal access to services, the Division has focused outreach efforts and staff training to provide services to individuals with Acquired Brain Injuries (ABI), individuals with Serious and Persistent Mental Illness (SPMI), veterans with disabilities, and students with disabilities in transition from school to the world of work or other post-secondary options.

The Division utilizes its Supported Employment State Grant to maximize the available services to consumers that are most significantly disabled. By utilizing these funds, the Division increases the level of support that the client receives during the process of locating employment and provides individualized support once employment is obtained.

A second success story is our Small Business Development Program. Sales from vending machines throughout Wyoming's state offices have allowed the Division to create a Small Business Development Fund which helps clients meet their small business start-up needs. This revenue is in addition to general Vocational Rehabilitation funding used to meet basic rehabilitation needs.

Under this program, the Division employs a full-time small business consultant who works with clients to develop viable small businesses by completing a business plan and securing funding. The Small Business Development program has been able to help launch a number of businesses, from those that fill a small niche to full businesses that have grown to the point of needing to hire additional staff. The program also assists clients in determining if a product is eligible for patents.

A third area to spotlight is helping students with disabilities transition from school to work. The Division employs a full-time Transition Consultant who works to strengthen partnerships between Vocational Rehabilitation staff and counselors in our high schools. As a result, we have seen a steady increase in the number of transition individuals who have applied for services. We are working toward a more seamless transition between each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and the Division's Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) to prevent any of our clients from missing out on critical services or becoming lost while navigating between the two systems.

Despite our successes, the increasing costs for medical services and evaluations, retaining qualified personnel and maintaining consumer training present mounting challenges to our Vocational Rehabilitation program. While we have been able to maintain our current level of services without having to enter into an Order of Selection, we are aware that other states have done this to meet their funding needs.

Another concern is that we have a limited number of individuals available to assist persons with disabilities in navigating the various employment and disability programs. Many citizens are reticent to start employment or look for employment out of fear that doing so may jeopardize their disability benefits or affect their eligibility for other programs. The Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) Project provides valuable assistance in working with Social Security beneficiaries with disabilities on job placement, benefits planning, and career development. However, Wyoming has only one full-time employee and two part-time employees covering the entire state and trying to help more than 15,000 clients who may be eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation's work programs.

DISABILITY DETERMINATION SERVICES

Another area of success in Wyoming is our Disability Determination Services office, or DDS.

The Wyoming DDS adjudicated, or made a determination of benefits eligibility, for 4,973 Social Security disability claims during Federal Fiscal Year 2010. Of these, 3,755 were initial claims. This means that these individuals are at the first level of applying for Social Security disability

benefits. Out of the 3,755 initial claims adjudicated, 1,877 were determined eligible for Social Security Disability Insurance (Title II) and/or Supplemental Security Income (Title XVI). Therefore, these individuals received monetary benefits and medical benefits which include Medicare and/or Medicaid. The medical benefits allow these individuals to receive medical treatment for their impairments.

Intellectual disabilities --78 individuals with the diagnosis of intellectual disability were determined eligible for Social Security disability insurance and/or supplemental security income. Four individuals with the diagnosis of intellectual disability were denied. Thus, Wyoming DDS had an allowance rate of 95.1 percent for this diagnosis.

Autism or pervasive development disorder – 34 individuals with the diagnosis of autism or pervasive development disorder were determined eligible for Social Security disability insurance and/or supplemental security income. Ten individuals with this diagnosis were found ineligible for social security benefits. DDS had an allowance rate of 77.3 percent for this diagnosis.

Borderline intellectual functioning – 21 individuals with the diagnosis of borderline intellectual functioning were determined eligible for Social Security disability insurance and/or supplemental security income. Twenty-five individuals with this diagnosis were found ineligible for social security benefits. DDS had an allowance rate of 45.7 percent for this diagnosis.

Just recently, the Division received a Commissioner's Citation for superior customer service to disability applicants and implementing innovative approaches to improving the disability claims processing for Federal Fiscal Year 2009. The Division implemented the use of videoconferencing to conduct mental status examinations throughout the state, which was the first DDS in the nation to use videoconferencing for this specific purpose. The Commissioner's Citation is the highest award that the Social Security Administration can bestow on an individual, group of individuals, or an organization.

Wyoming DDS also managed to maintain the highest productivity per work year in the Denver region during FFY 2009.

WYOMING DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES DIVISION

The mission of this division is to provide funding and guidance responsive to the needs of people with disabilities to live, work, enjoy, and learn in Wyoming communities with their families, friends, and chosen support service and support providers.

This agency includes several programs:

The Adult DD, Child DD, and ABI Waivers and the State Respite program assist individuals and their families in obtaining both natural supports and paid providers to aid individuals in their communities through either self-directed or traditional service delivery methods.

The Early Intervention and Education Program provides assistance and oversight to the regional child development centers that serve young children from birth through 5 years of age with disabilities and their families across Wyoming.

The Wyoming Life Resource Center is a state-owned facility that provides state-of-the-art care, learning and job opportunities for Wyoming residents with significant intellectual and developmental disabilities, brain injuries and long-term medical and therapeutic needs.

In addition to these functions, the Developmental Disabilities Division is working with the Alliance for Full Participation to form a state team that will seek to improve the number of good-paying jobs for people with disabilities. The Alliance for Full Participation is a formal partnership of leading organizations serving the developmental disabilities field that share a common vision to help create a better and more fulfilling quality of life for people with developmental disabilities.

This new State Employment Team is formed specifically in response to the Alliance's challenge to double employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Wyoming will join 31 other state teams at a national employment summit this fall.

TYLER – A SUCCESS STORY IN NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM

Understanding the variety and complexities of programs that aim to help individuals with intellectual disabilities can be a challenge. Tyler, who has an intellectual disability, struggled to find steady income and a positive work environment.

“There were frustrations with paid services early on, and agencies were not very helpful,” his mother, Jeanie Hede, said. “The services and systems were fragmented. They deterred progress. People on caseloads seemed to be just a number, a case.”

After a few unsuccessful job placements, Tyler and his parents turned to a family friend for help. The mother of a friend of Tyler's worked at the state Department of Health's Wyoming Life Resource Center, which is Wyoming's only intermediate care facility for people with intellectual disabilities. Through his friend, Tyler landed a part-time job at the Resource Center performing janitorial duties and helping some residents with aquatic therapy. He proved his skills as a hardworking direct-care worker with the residents and he was made a permanent part-time employee. He was put through training and was eventually offered a full-time position.

The family was excited for Tyler to become a full-time employee but concerned that he would lose his Social Security income, Medicaid health insurance and the supported living services through the Adult Developmental Disabilities waiver that helped him live independently in his own apartment. After learning about the Medicaid Buy-in options, known as Employed Individuals with Disabilities, or EID in Wyoming, the family decided that Tyler should accept the full-time position, enroll in EID and pay the premium to keep Medicaid and waiver services for some support in the home.

Today, Tyler continues to succeed at his job and in his long-term life goals. He recently received his five-year employee service award from the Wyoming Department of Health. He loves his job and looks forward to work each day because “it makes me feel good to help other people,” he says.

According to his mother, Jeanie, “Success didn’t come through an agency for Tyler.” He needed an advocate to be a “mover and shaker ... to explore connections and make the search personal.”

“The personal approach with a possible employer made an enormous difference,” she said. She believes that all people with ID searching for employment need an advocate, someone to use a personal approach to create “more buy-in from the potential employer.”

Tyler got married last summer and moved from his apartment into a house with a big back yard. He wants to start a side business making leather gun holsters to earn a little extra income for the family.

With support and guidance from his mother and his wife, Tyler decided to quit the Adult DD Waiver and EID program in the summer of 2010 and accept the health insurance and benefits that come with his job at the Resource Center. He is no longer using any federal or state programs to help him with routine life activities and models a strong work ethic that the Center wants to instill in other employees. When he needs help with day-to-day activities such as budgeting, paying bills or arranging his benefits or insurance, he now turns to his wife and his mother for some assistance.

“But mostly,” he says cheerfully, “I am doing everything on my own.”

WYOMING BUSINESS LEADERSHIP NETWORK

A number of our clients are now entering employment through a state affiliate of a national disability organization known as the US Business Leadership Network, which represents more than 5,000 employers. The USBLN recognizes and supports best practices in the employment and advancement of people with disabilities and preparing youth and students with disabilities for the workplace.

The Wyoming Business Leadership Network is affiliated with the national BLN. In 2009 and 2010, it won two national awards from the US Business Leadership Network for development of its statewide network. For the past 15 years, the Wyoming BLN and the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation have partnered to help employers navigate the myriad of traditional service provider systems, which often operate in silos. Employers often give up because they don’t understand the bureaucratic maze of systems and various uses of terminology. The BLN engages business in a non-threatening way and provides disability expertise for them, which is something the business world generally perceives as difficult to understand. The BLN is partially funded through contracts with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and private fund-raising.

The BLN also operates a youth mentoring program aimed at engaging businesses in eight school districts in Wyoming. Youths with disabilities are a particularly fragile group – among the most at-risk of the at-risk groups. A 2004 Harris survey reports that students with disabilities are twice as likely to drop out of school compared to their non-disabled counterparts. The Wyoming Department of Education reports that 50 percent of the incarcerated youth have a disability.

Years ago a business executive in Wyoming challenged our BLN to make sure that we were giving youth with disabilities exposure and connections to the real world of work. As a result of this employer challenge, the Wyoming BLN developed a program called MentorABILITY. This program solely uses employers from our state network to teach soft skills and mentor Wyoming's youth with disabilities to prepare them for the world of work once they graduate from high school. Since this is a hands-on experience, it engages youth and helps them to see the benefits of finishing their high school education, thus addressing those who might have initially dropped out of school. The MentorABILITY program bridges the business-education gap by directly involving businesses in the classroom.

PARTNERSHIP WITH LOWE'S

This past year another innovative practice of Wyoming's Business Leadership Network has been a joint project between the Lowe's Distribution Center in Cheyenne and the Wyoming Department of Workforce Services, which offered a state grant to launch a paid Corporate Training Program for individuals with disabilities. This Pre-hire Economic Employment grant is part of a state-funded training program and was used for the first time to train people with disabilities.

This project takes people with the motivation to work in the warehousing industry and provides a training program to get them up and running at the same production standards as their non-disabled counterparts. The training was customized to the specific needs of Lowe's. Twelve individuals are currently being trained to work at a starting wage of \$12.50 per hour with benefits including health insurance, which is a major concern for people with disabilities. Another unique feature is the train-the-trainer model for management that will build capacity at Lowe's to provide a long-term diversity program within their company. Lowe's has a commitment to this program with the hopes that these interns will land long-term careers within their company.

ROBBIE MAGILL – A LOWE'S SUCCESS STORY

Robbie Magill is a 34-year-old man with Down Syndrome who receives services through the Wyoming Adult Disabilities Waiver program. His mother, Diane Magill, reports that when Robbie graduated from high school even she was unable to see how he could contribute in the workplace. Both Diane and her daughter, Brenda Oswald, have been disability advocates in the state of Wyoming for years. Despite their knowledge and experience in the field, they were unsatisfied with the traditional routes to employment for Robbie. In 2001, they embarked on beginning an entrepreneurial business with Robbie through a grant from the National Down Syndrome Society to start his own video business.

Robbie has an amazing ability to work with electronic equipment and is forever assisting others with their TVs, computers and the like. Brenda and Diane hired a trainer for Robbie to assist him in learning the video production business. In short time he was filming, editing and producing videos for various organizations in Wyoming. Unfortunately, the economy slowed down and they realized that Robbie's business would have to call it quits.

Five years later, after closing his business and trying a couple of different professions, Robbie applied for a position with the newly formed Lowe's project through the Business Leadership Network last fall and was hired as an intern at \$12.50 per hour. Robbie began his work on December 1, 2010, and started working in the Appliances Department. He then found an opening in a different department at Lowe's, where he trained at Induction (Bulk) delivery. On March 1 Robbie will have finished his probationary period and will become a permanent Lowe's employee.

In his short time at Lowe's, he has gone from a 40 percent production rate to 63 percent in just three short months. He has learned complex tasks like recording off-standard time. His accuracy is excellent as well. One issue has been how slowly he walks to his station. The Lowe's Distribution Center is a huge facility, so Robbie and his trainer have been working on transportation issues within the warehouse.

Robbie is a charming man and was quickly adopted into the Lowe's family. He has plenty of friends on the floor and he has helped to make a positive difference in the workplace culture at Lowe's. The company is quickly discovering the benefits of including people with disabilities in their diversity initiative.

Robbie can't believe how motivated he is to come to work each day and how different his attitude is. The fact that he is engaged in real work, for a real wage and in a place where he feels accepted is spilling over into other areas of his life. Robbie recently became engaged and is looking forward to starting his own family. He and his fiancé are saving up for a honeymoon in Hawaii. It is interesting that he has the same dreams and aspirations that his non-disabled co-workers have.

Since then, Robbie has told his mother that if she doesn't like her job she could always come and join the Lowe's family. That's what we call success in Wyoming.

Progress is possible. It just takes a coordinated effort across agencies and the private sector, utilizing people who can assist others in navigating the system.

HEALTHY FAMILIES SUCCEED/JOB ASSIST

Another effort that is showing very promising results is a project that uses data to identify and help individuals who face employment issues and are using multiple public service programs. Until the formation of a public-private partnership in our state in 2003, this group of individuals was very difficult to find and hard to serve because they were often customers of several different agencies – agencies that weren't aware that they were dealing with the same clients. It

was an inefficient use of public dollars and not adequately helping these individuals with their needs and moving them off public assistance.

The project, known as Healthy Families Succeed, was led by the Governor's Office, seven state agencies and HCMS Group Inc., a health information company. Healthy Families Succeed began with the creation of an integrated database called the Wyoming Health Information Network (WHIN). The directors of the seven agencies (including myself) contribute de-identified data to the database, guide the analytics produced, and oversee implementation of the program. Healthy Families Succeed was designed in response to the data finding that 3 percent of the individuals were using 42 percent of state and federal assistance resources. It was clear that a concentrated effort to help this particular group could make a significant difference both in improving their quality of life and reducing use of public resources.

It was further determined there were four critical needs within our system that hindered this effort, including the need for:

- Better coordination of state and federal services to fit family specific needs;
- Access to job training and education;
- Better coordination of primary medical/mental health care, and
- Affordable and accessible health insurance for working adults.

The goal was to help these families create personal plans to move toward self-sufficiency, addressing the issues tailored to the family needs.

Healthy Families Succeed was built with a phased approach, as we learned the important factors in the lives of Wyoming residents who are receiving assistance. The first phase, known as HealthAssist, focused on the health of the individuals. The second phase, known as JobAssist, focused on developing job skills while coordinating housing, transportation, education and other support services. The third phase (named Wyoming Healthy Frontiers) began late last year with the creation of a state legislated pilot project providing health insurance coverage to the uninsured.

Once potential participants were identified through WHIN (those who were using two or more state services), 298 families in two counties were asked if they wanted to volunteer for a pilot program in which they would receive free assistance from job coordinators, advanced practice nurse and pharmacist clinicians who would provide intensive counseling to them and their families. As it turned out, 20 percent were also using Vocational Rehabilitation services – so there was a strong component involving individuals with disabilities.

Initial results from Healthy Families Succeed are encouraging. The pilot group of families, after 24 months, had improved stability, health and self-sufficiency, and the costs to the public decreased by \$1,943 per person. Additionally, 80 percent of the volunteer families re-enrolled in the program. More than 50 clients are now enrolled in advanced education and job certificated programs.

Here are some other findings:

- The rate of employment increased from 33 percent at enrollment to 55 percent after one year.
- The rate of education completion increased from 24 percent to 44 percent.
- The rate of those who were either employed or undertaking education went from 43 percent at enrollment to 73 percent one year after enrollment.
- Self-reported self-sufficiency increased by 38.5 percent.
- Household earnings increased by 26.6 percent and take-home earnings increased by 52.5 percent.

Healthy Families Succeed won an Innovations in Government award in 2009 from the Council of State Governments.

The next steps currently under way are to expand Healthy Families Succeed statewide and implement the Wyoming Healthy Frontiers pilot project.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can point to some programs, projects and initiatives that are working. These include:

- 1) Collaboration of Effort – which may be easier in Wyoming because of our small population
- 2) Leveraging our Resources - Business Leadership Network, public-private partnerships, state-funded training programs (Lowe's)
- 3) Benefit Assessment - Social Security Disability

Future efforts by our agency will include:

- 1) Involvement on the State Employment Team's work with the Alliance for Full Participation
- 2) Explore information on the Disability Employment Initiative through the U.S. Department of Labor to improve access for individuals receiving Social Security at our one-stop centers
- 3) Creating additional partnerships with businesses, the Wyoming Business Leadership Network and Vocational Rehabilitation using state training dollars
- 4) Continue development of youth School-to-Work transition
- 5) Continued awareness education, including a focus on people with disabilities at our annual Governor's Summit on Workforce Solutions

We hope our success stories provide a framework for building on a national discussion of ways we can help those Americans who are facing more than ordinary challenges in a most extraordinary economy.