Opportunities for Too Few? Oversight of Federal Employment Programs for Persons with Disabilities
Bill Number:
Hearing Date: October 20, 2005, 2:00 pm
Location: SD106
Witness:
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Testimony

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon. I am pleased to be here today to discuss the issue of pervasive segregation within federally-funded employment programs for people with disabilities. My nine-year-old son, Jess, has Down syndrome. I hope my testimony will result in Jess and other young people with disabilities having regular, integrated jobs when they grow up. My career providing employment services to people with severe disabilities has spanned three decades. Between 1976 and 1996 I managed sheltered workshop programs in both Ohio and Colorado. Over the past ten years I have served as Executive Director of an employment agency which works with businesses throughout the Denver metro area to employ people with severe disabilities.

Sheltered employment refers to a range of segregated programs including sheltered workshops, adult activity centers, work activity centers, and day treatment centers. These kinds of programs have expanded over the last few decades because it was previously assumed that employers would not hire people with severe disabilities without intensive pre-employment training. Sheltered workshops congregate and segregate people within production and/or warehouse-like facilities to complete sub-contract work. Pay is typically based on a piece rate which allows for low compensation, far below the federal minimum wage. When the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) studied sheltered workshops it was found that these programs did little to assist people in learning the skills needed for placement into real work. In fact, this data showed that a person entering a sheltered workshop upon high school graduation would get their first job at age sixty-five or later. It is estimated that more than one million people with severe disabilities languish in these kinds of segregated day services in the U.S. today.

In the late seventies and early eighties, professionals developed a process for employing people with very significant disabilities within the regular workforce. This process has been refined over the past 25 years and is referred to as “supported employment” which is defined as integrated paid work, within businesses and industry, with ongoing support. Presently it is estimated that nearly 200,000 people with severe disabilities are employed within our business communities through supported employment and similar strategies such as supported self-employment and customized employment. There is a significant body of evidence supporting the enhanced benefit to people with disabilities of these efforts, including increased compensation, social inclusion, marketable work skills, and the dignity that comes from being a contributing community member. This is especially

true for individual job placement, as opposed to congregate group placements. Research has also shown that people with severe disabilities prefer community employment to segregation in the workplace. People with disabilities and their families are often told by well-meaning professionals that sheltered employment is the best or only option open to them. This is simply not true.

Evidence-based research completed over the last twenty-five years shows that employment programs placing people into business and industry represent a good tax-payer investment. When one public dollar is spent on supported employment service costs, tax-payers earn more than a dollar in benefits through increased taxes paid, decreased government subsidies, and foregone program costs. Further, this positive cost-benefit relationship for community employment holds true for people with the most significant disabilities and is stronger when people are employed individually as opposed to within group models of employment. On the other hand, segregated employment does not use public dollars efficiently, always running at a deficit year after year.

Over the past fifteen years I have assisted agencies serving urban and rural areas within approximately twenty states to convert their services from segregated sheltered employment programs to programs providing community employment outcomes. It is currently estimated that 275 agencies around the U.S. have changed their missions and are engaged in change-over efforts, with as many as 15% of them completing this activity. It is my experience that once an agency begins this process to change it does not decide to go back to the segregated employment model because the people they serve experience a better quality of life and those people and their families express higher levels of satisfaction with the service. The change-over process and successful examples of agency conversion are well documented within the professional literature.

In summary, we know how to assist people with disabilities to achieve individualized job outcomes within the business community. People with disabilities clearly prefer to work alongside non-disabled co-workers when given choice and individualized support. When public dollars are used for employment programs that place one person at a time within local businesses, those dollars are used more cost effectively then with the dominant segregated program model. And yet, it has been very difficult to break the hold congregate programs have on public funding. We know in 1999 that 75% of the public funding available for on-going employment supports was used instead for segregated programs. There is little evidence that this trend is changing, and this fact leaves very few resources available for individualized integrated employment options. Federal law, federal policy and the present administration support integrated employment and we now have experience in changing the current service system, agency by agency and state by state. We exist at a time when federal policy could be implemented to correct the national shame of our ongoing segregation of workers who experience a severe disability.
Mr. Chairman, I commend this Committee for exploring these issues and thank you for the opportunity to share my perspectives with you today. I hope your leadership will result in real change due to the large number of individuals who have been waiting for far too long to take their place in the workforce.