

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:

Mr. Michael Nelson

Greeley, CO

Former sheltered workshop employee, Current Hollywood Video employee

Testimony

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Hello and thank you for the invitation to share my story with the committee. My name is Mike Nelson and I live in Greeley, Colorado and attended a segregated school just for students with disabilities as I lived with my family. I moved out of our home in the late 80's when I was 27 years old. I am a very independent kind of a person and very proud of it. I'm too independent to be told what to do and can handle most situations on my own. People underestimate me all the time because I use this scooter to get around. Currently I am very happy to be employed at Hollywood Video for 10.5 hours a week and earn \$5.85 an hour.

My first sheltered workshop job started around 1976 when I was bussed from a segregated school in the mornings to the workshop every afternoon. The school bus would pick me up at the workshop at the end of the day and take me back home too. I have worked about 15 years in one workshop or another. The kinds of work we did at the workshops included putting fish hooks in bags for Eagle Claw company, cleaning headphones for United Airlines, running heavy machinery to staple bags together, and putting together recycled computer fans for IBM. None of these jobs were really training for work in the community, but just wasted time. I thought I was supposed to get training to move from the workshop into a real job. It was called 'pre-vocational' training, but the 'pre' part often means never.

Why would you want to retire from a sheltered workshop at 65 after preparing for a community job all your life?

All of the pay for these jobs was piece rate, not by the hour, but at the beginning I thought I was being paid by the hour. Piece rate is allowed so that people with disabilities don't get paid minimum wage, but by the piece of work they perform. If IBM had to return a job to be corrected, there would not be any pay to redo the job. None of my paychecks were the same amount because we were paid piece rate. My check was about \$44 for most months' work. It was not worth the transportation costs, staff time, or my time. I was not being trained for anything.

After I moved to Greeley case managers from the D.D. system promised that I could get a community job as I had requested for four years at each planning meeting. The job never came about, so they said that the sheltered workshop was always there and it was all they could find for me. We had an individual planning meeting each year that was always the

same – They always said: “If you want to work; it has to be the workshop.”

I continued to request a real job, but nothing ever happened until I met some new friends in leadership training on public policy. The people there introduced me to a person at the University of Northern Colorado and I then worked on a grant there and earned \$7.00 an hour. Case managers kept saying that I would fail at the job, that I would have to be at the workshop, and it would not last. Well, the grant did run out, but luckily I have found a job at Hollywood Video and hope to never hear another staff person question my skills or recommend that I work at t workshop the rest of my life.

I now work at Hollywood Video and enjoy meeting other workers and customers who live in the neighborhood. The pay as well as the job is much better that any of the many workshops I spent time in. I get minimum wage and work for ten hours a week and couldn't be happier with the job. If I have questions on the job, I get it from other people who work there. My supervisor treats me like I would expect to be treated at work – with respect and high expectations.

I appreciate the time from your committee and hope that you are able to make some huge changes in the way the system works. People with disabilities need to be able to have real jobs with a decent wage and benefits. I would like to earn enough money to not depend on social security and Medicaid. I would like to distribute a copy of my story for all of you and hope you enjoy it. Thanks again.