



UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS

FIELD HEARING

The Americans with Disabilities Act at 22: A New Generation of Iowans Approaches the Labor Force with High Expectations

July 13, 2012

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, my name is Richard Shults. I am the Administrator for Mental Health and Disability Services in the Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS). I appreciate the opportunity to celebrate 22 years of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and to share some thoughts about how we can all work together to help meet the high expectations of the new generation of Iowans as they enter the labor force.

The ADA has had and continues to have significant positive effects on the lives of persons with a wide variety of disabilities in many different aspects of their lives. It is impossible, in this short time, to recount all of the many positive aspects of the ADA. While in my role, I am concerned about the success of all Iowans with disabilities, today I will focus my remarks on youth with a serious mental illness (SMI) and the important role integrated, competitive employment plays in their mental health recovery.

The American Psychological Association reports that 12 percent of youth between the ages of 18 and 25 have an SMI. These youth have a threefold likelihood of becoming involved with the criminal justice system. Sixty percent of them do not complete high school. Without adequate supports and treatment, people with an SMI live less healthy lives, are less financially secure, have higher rates of chronic illness, and are vulnerable to unemployment, homelessness, and substance abuse. Without adequate support and treatment an SMI can become a personal, family, and societal tragedy.

However, recovery from mental illness is possible. With the help of adequate supports and services Iowans with mental illness can and do live safe, healthy, productive, successful, self-determined lives in their homes and communities. The hope of recovery is real.

Recovery is supported by many things: effective evidenced based treatment; full involvement of the person, family, and friends in the person's treatment; and full integration into society. Full integration into society includes competitive employment. Employment provides a meaningful activity that gives youth with an SMI a positive identity, a sense of purpose, and value. Employment is key to the recovery process.

We can and must do more to ensure the justifiably high employment expectations of Iowa's next generation are met. In Iowa, we are undertaking that effort. Iowa has embraced the principles established through the Olmstead ruling. In fact, as we speak Iowa's Olmstead Consumer Task Force is meeting and discussing progress being made in meeting these principles and identifying additional steps to improve progress toward a full life in the community for persons with disabilities.

Last year, following directions provided by the Legislature, Iowa engaged a series of workgroups to recommend a redesign of the Mental Health and Disabilities (MHDS) system. Over 200 Iowans participated in these workgroups and over 1,000 attended "Listening Post" meetings across the state. The resulting workgroup reports included recommendations consistent with the principles of the Olmstead decision. A bipartisan group of legislators used the workgroups' recommendations as the basis for the recently passed MHDS Redesign Act.

One aspect of the MHDS Redesign Act is to ensure that basic core services are accessible in every region of the state. One of the core service domains that regions will be required to provide is support for employment. This means that persons with disabilities in every region in the state will have access to services that support their goal for seeking and keeping employment.

The MHDS Redesign Act also requires that services and supports be evidenced based thereby ensuring services are both accessible and effective. Supported employment has evolved into an evidenced-based practice for finding and keeping persons with an SMI employed. Evidenced based supported employment focuses on individual placement of the person's choice in competitive, integrated employment. It minimizes the use of screening for employability, transitional employment, or prevocational training. Instead, the goal of supported employment evidenced based practice is to find a natural "fit" between the person's strengths and experiences and jobs in the community.

Without evidenced based support, employment rates of youth with an SMI are 20 percent or lower. Research shows that evidence based interventions raise this to an average of 58 percent. We have known these approaches are successful for many years. In preparing for this testimony I reviewed research from the early 1990s that confirmed the effectiveness of these approaches in helping people with an SMI get and keep jobs. But we do not use these evidenced approaches frequently enough and the employment rate for persons with an SMI remains unacceptably low. Clearly much more improvement is needed.

To help monitor and motivate this change the MHDS Redesign Act requires that performance based outcome measures be established, measured, and published. One critical outcome is the extent to which persons with disabilities, including youth with an SMI, are competitively employed in integrated settings. Such measures not only keep us all accountable for the effectiveness of the supports and services we provide, but identify pockets of excellence that we can learn from. As the adage says, "We do what we measure." Regular publishing of outcome dashboard indicators, including the extent to which people are competitively employed, will help focus our attention on this important goal.

In addition, Iowa is taking advantage of tools made available by the federal government to help achieve employment and other recovery goals. Iowa has recently been approved for the Balancing Incentive Payment Program (BIPP) designed to bring balance to the amount Iowa pays for institutional services compared with community-based services, like competitive employment. The BIPP provides additional federal Medicaid matching funds that can be used to assist with expanding the availability and effectiveness of community-based services.

Iowa is also a member of the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN). SELN brings together state Developmental Disability agencies for sharing, educating and providing guidance on practices and policies around employment of persons with disabilities. National SELN staff, some of which are housed in our MHDS offices, are currently evaluating what more DHS could do to ensure employment support services are successful. DHS' somewhat unique administrative structure allows the practices and approaches learned through SELN to be used to support persons with many different disabilities, including youth with an SMI.

It is critical that all agencies charged with similar goals work in concert and collaboration with one another to better achieve the goals. In Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation, the Iowa Medicaid Enterprise, the Iowa Behavioral Health Plan, the state Developmental Disability Council, and Mental Health Disability Services have a shared vision of employment for people with disabilities and have developed a close working relationship. Our staffs talk regularly in an effort to coordinate our activities to the best effect for the people we support.

The most important aspect of living up to the expectations of the new generation of Iowans is to ensure they are involved and empowered. When services are not accessible or effective, it is not our lives we are affecting, but those with disabilities, their family, and friends. It is important people are empowered to hold us accountable for achieving the expectation of competitive work. In Iowa we are doing this through the establishment of the Office of Consumer Affairs, participation in local listening posts, involvement of persons served in policy advising workgroups and regional governance boards, and the expansion of peer support services. Through these and other consumer driven efforts, we will be more responsive in ensuring the employment expectations of the new generation of Iowans is met.

I would be happy to take any questions you may have.