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Senate Hearing Testimonial

Every individual has a unique set of challenges as they attempt to reach success; persons with disabilities face many common systemic as well as societal barriers in an attempt to reach their own success. For persons with disabilities, aspects relating to their disabilities may have already predisposed them to a higher chance of terminating in poverty and limited self sufficiency. Such barriers include institutional barriers in the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and California Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) systems; these systems were intended as transitional tools to help students acclimate from school to work. However some of the policies are out of sink with the needs of contemporary society, diminishing the effectiveness of these programs. In addition, societal stigma and preconceived notions increases the difficulty for students with disabilities to acquire necessary work experience to be equipped for employment. This type of stigma also exists within DOR counselors; based on first-person observations, DOR counselors set low expectations and discourage students from pursuing their individualized success. In addition to better training for DOR staff, SSI case workers should also be well versed in their own regulations; even though the student exclusionary rule was designed with the intension of allowing college students to acquire work experience, the 22 year old age cap is out of sink with contemporary society, and many SSI case workers as well as persons with disabilities are unaware of this regulation. The student exclusionary rule's effectiveness is not maximized if such a valuable transition tool designed to help students, is not being utilized because students are unaware of it. As a result, these barriers that impede people with disabilities chances of achieving success should be deconstructed so they are given equal opportunity to find their individualized success; after all, people with disabilities also have a right to earn and become productive members of society.

My personal journey of attaining success is also filled with the systemic barriers and societal stigma stated above. In addition, my entire family's status as immigrants further increased my risk of limited self-sufficiency rather than attaining success. The first few years when we first moved to the United States were difficult. It was challenging for my parents to find work due to their lack of proficiency in English and level of educational attainment; they were only able to procure low-wage labor intensive jobs. Unlike my other peers, my parents were unable to assist me with homework nor afford the expensive college test preparation courses. Thus, in addition to school work, I had to advocate for myself. If academic educations were not provided, I had to meet with the school administrators and present my case; advocacy, on top of using braille which requires 200% time to complete school assignments, is extremely time consuming. This continued throughout my academic career at UC Berkeley, which I currently attends as a 4th year student. In Berkeley, basic accommodations were just the beginning. On several occasions, I had to petition and appeal decisions just to enroll in a course. To illustrate the emotionally taxing and time consuming nature of advocacy, I spent three semesters advocating with Berkeley

staff, the Disabled Students Program, as well as the Berkeley ADA compliance officer just to take the same Mandarin course with the same amount of units as my able bodied peers. My family's economic constraints, coupled with time limitations, means that DOR and SSI became is still are integral parts toward achieving my educational aspirations.

Due to my family's status, I have always viewed DOR as an integral system in my process of achieving success and to mitigate some of the effects of my disability. However, their emphasis on attaining employment, meant counselors only focused on encouraging and persuading students to acquire a job as soon as possible without consideration of their aspirations nor potential. During my senior year in high school, I was repeatedly discouraged to attend a four-year university despite the fact that I had performed well in high school and had been accepted by over five universities. My DOR counselor in Los Angeles would quote grim statistics of college completion by individuals with disabilities. Her plan for my future was to graduate high school, attend an independent living skills center, then a trait school or a community college; attending a university was seen as a "last resort." The ideal success she envisioned was for me to work at a call center or a factory that build boxes. She clearly stated if I did not adhere to this plan, DOR would not provide any financial nor equipment support.

In contemporary society merely attaining any type of job is not sufficient. The pay one earns from working at a call center or factory is insufficient if one decides to have a family and desires to be a contributing member of society. In addition the job market is increasingly more competitive to the point where a high school diploma is simply not enough; higher education and work experiences have become necessities in the process of attaining employment for American youth, but especially for young adults with disabilities. Employers already have low expectations and negative notions about individuals with disabilities and their ability to be effective and productive workers. Through personal experience, I came to the realization that a higher education degree coupled with a strong resume and prior work experience is indispensable in effacing some of these negative notions; work experience not just "tell" but rather "show" the employers of my ability to be a productive member. If DOR counselors continue to impose their own visions on young people with disabilities, this jeopardizes their ability to become the most effective and productive members of American society and increases the likelihood of poverty and limited self-sufficiency.

In addition to the DOR system, I view SSI as another imperative transitional tool in altering my destiny of poverty. However, some of the regulations around SSI is out of date. In the summer of 2014, I was afforded the opportunity to intern at the Department of Defense Education Activity; however due to the fact I recently turned 22 in June, I no longer qualified under the SSI student exclusionary rule. Although my internship was paid, the income was only enough to cover my rent, which was \$4,000 for ten weeks; many internships opportunities however are non-paid. In addition, SSI only allows individuals to have \$2,000 quite savings in their bank account at one time, however I had to pay my rent all at once before I moved in. How could I pay \$4,000 in one installment when I have less than \$2,000 in my bank account? I was privileged enough to have parents who were willing to lend me a portion of their money to pay the \$4,000 installment until I could repay them with my salary. Internship opportunities and summer work experiences are vital to professional development and possibility of future employment, especially for individuals with disabilities; society has preconceived stigma about my inability to be as productive as an able bodied individual. Thus, I strongly believe that the best way to dispel these preconceived notions

is to have work experience to "show not tell" potential employers of my ability to be a productive and contributing member of their workforce. If students with disabilities, such as myself, cannot save money to cover the cost of internships, nor be allowed to have enough money to pay for housing or down-payment for renting, this places us at a significant disadvantage. In addition, students with disabilities, such as myself, spend most of our time during the semester advocating for academic accommodations. I did not have time to acquire work experiences, like some of my peers, thus I rely on the summer months as time to gain valuable work experience. In addition, the current 22 year old age cap of the student exclusionary rule should be changed. In contemporary society, many student take an average of five years to complete university education; since many students with disabilities have to balance the negative affects of their conditions, many tend to take a reduced course load, further extending the time we are in school from the average of five to six or even seven years. As a result, instead of graduating at 22, it is not uncommon to see students with disabilities that are 25 years old. Since I was over 22 and did not qualify under the student exclusionary rule, my internship salary allowed me to afford housing, but not food and transportation costs; and my SSI checks were interrupted because my income deducted the entirety of my SSI checks. Once calculations are done, I was in a deficit after the internship since my entire salary paid for housing and had no money left for transportation and food costs.

My prior experiences at Berkeley and my summer internship coupled with my personal observations further solidified my believe that if policies meant to aid individuals with disabilities transition are not amended to reflect the the needs of contemporary society, the correlation between disability and poverty will further grow. Instead of discouraging students from pursuing higher education, DOR counselors should be supportive. In lieu of breaking down my self-esteem with statistics, I should be empowered with the knowledge and opportunities to realize my full potential. The fear that I will not make progress toward my employment goal should not justify DOR counselor's rights to diminish my self-esteem with grim statistics. I clearly remember that my DOR counselor stated her restrictions of my attendance to a university is an act of protection; she did not wish for me to fail and squander my time. This is clearly a paternalistic and demeaning view of students with disabilities. If the progress of students is of concern, DOR should implement a manddated goal directed information and support program to disseminate employment knowledge and help students strategize their path of employment to keep students accountable and on track for their individual plan of employment (IPE) completion. DOR manddates preliminary assessments for equipment recommendations, thus I believe it is logical to have a structured manddated employment educational program for its clients. Persons with disabilities should not be told "you will conform to negative statistics and drop out of college" before they are giving the opportunity and resources toward their aspirations. DOR counselors should help students with the progression and achievement of their IPE using these employment knowledge programs which provides a supportive environment conducive to the forming of well informed confident workers rather than the the college drop-outs with disabilities that were once envisioned. I also recommend the SSI system be altered to match the meeds of contemporary society. Since the average college completion is around five years, and students with disabilities may take a reduced course load which further extends this, the 22 year-old age cap on the resource of the student exclusionary rule is not maximized to aid students. The age restriction should be raised, and further surveys as well as research should be conducted in order to determine the new age restriction. In addition, SSI should have regulations that allow for individuals to save and

maintain over \$2,000 in *ow* bank account for certain situations. Many situations in life, such as leaving down-payment for an apartment and acquiring an internship, require savings which exceed \$2,000 restriction. Thus, if individuals are able to provide evidence the purposes of their savings are to be used to increase their chances of attaining successful employment such as acquiring shelter to live, further their education to increase employment opportunities, or money to be used during internships to build up their resumes, exceeding the \$2,000 cap is justified. The above recommendations should be strongly considered; making such amendments to existing transitional programs can maximize its intent and effectiveness, yielding more persons with disabilities to reaching their aspirations and interrupting the perpetuation of disability and limited self-sufficiency.