

Testimony  
before the  
**COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS**  
**Developing a Skilled Workforce for a Competitive Economy:  
Reauthorizing the Workforce Investment Act**

Thursday, June 20 2013

By  
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Thank you Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Alexander and members of the HELP Committee for the opportunity to share a few thoughts regarding the status and future of Vocational Rehabilitation. Thank you for the work you are doing to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act, including the Vocational Rehabilitation Act. This legislation is critically important and impacts the services and employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

I have had wonderful opportunities during the past thirty years to work in the vocational rehabilitation field. Experiences have included working as a job placement specialist with a sheltered workshop/community rehabilitation provider, with a community college working with students with disabilities, as a rehabilitation counselor in the public state rehabilitation system, performing private rehabilitation work in the areas of worker compensation, long-term disability and contracting with veterans who have service connected disabilities, as well as management positions with a private, non-profit rehabilitation community provider, and for the past thirteen years have been in management positions with the state rehabilitation program in Iowa, currently serving as the administrator of the state program.

Thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (first passed in 1975), youth with disabilities today have experienced a life of opportunity and possibility. The National Governor's Association has their key focal point for this past year as, "A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities". The Office of Disability and Employment Policy at the US Department of Labor has provided financial support and technical assistance to the States, including Iowa, to help us develop employment initiatives designed to help young people with the most significant disabilities to achieve success in competitive employment while they are in school and after they leave school. State vocational rehabilitation agencies across the country have networked together forming a National Employment Team for a single point of contact across multiple states partnering with our business customers to help them develop and implement multi-state strategies around recruitment of workers with disabilities. The work on the reauthorization of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act within the Workforce Investment Act should leverage and carry the momentum of these

activities and provide a framework to further expand employment for individuals with disabilities.

Employment and work is good for everyone, but especially for people with disabilities. Social networks are formed, quality of life contacts are initiated, economic gains occur both for the individual and for our economy, business needs are met through the hiring of qualified applicants, and there is a definite return on investment, both financially for the economy and for the individual. Studies have demonstrated health and life satisfaction improves through employment. Vocational Rehabilitation is good business.

Our mission is employment for individuals with disabilities. The focus is on competitive, integrated community-based employment settings. We do this through delivery of vocational rehabilitation services that are individualized, person centered and provided through an eligibility process, not an entitlement program. We also provide these services with qualified staff that can bridge the gap between ability and disability. I want to attempt to briefly discuss a few thoughts regarding the future of Vocational Rehabilitation, which I am quite excited about. There is increasing recognition of the importance of the work rehabilitation providers perform and the impact that work and the outcomes have on our economy, our service delivery system, the lives of the individuals with disabilities we work with and our business partners. The visibility, the conversation and the attention provides an opportunity for us to make a positive difference. This is our time to continue the momentum.

Transition: I note that the bipartisan staff discussion draft that you circulated for the Vocational Rehabilitation Act title of WIA in 2011 and again earlier this week has a strong emphasis on improving outcomes for young people with disabilities, something that I believe is critical for our country. Despite numerous efforts, disincentives occur when an individual does not enter into the labor market and instead relies on public benefits. The early provision of service can help change the employment results for the positive, especially when the services are delivered while young people are still in school.

Iowa has several initiatives occurring which attempts to partner with our schools, community providers and businesses to change the cycle of results. During the last three years, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services has spent an average of 58% of our case service expenditures on transition students. Primarily, this is in the area of post-secondary training. Integrating a direct service model, there has been an ongoing attempt to provide a seamless transition experience. We are not there yet. Keys to our effort is a recognition that work experiences (paid and non-paid) prior to graduation equals employment as an adult. Successful efforts have included: Bridging the gaps between the Individual Education Program (IEP) and the Individual Plan of Employment (IPE); Introducing self-determination strategies to improve student's accountability and ownership of planning activities; and improved connections to business that provide opportunities to partner with our secondary and post-secondary education programs to meet the workforce demands of the future.

Vocational Rehabilitation cannot do this alone. We can't be an island, but have to be an active, collaborative partner providing our expertise to leverage resources and build capacity. An example of success in this area is with our Transition Alliance Programs (TAP). This is a program where VR partners with the local school district and shares funding and staffing to provide specific work-based, competency-based skill training to build work skills, independent living skills and social competency skills for successful transition into competitive, integrated employment settings. It is an individual approach which complements the secondary academic programming with specific individual employment planning with a goal of competitive employment.

Dual customers: I also noted that your staff discussion draft has provisions designed to emphasize the importance of employers as a critical stakeholder for the public vocational rehabilitation program. We are only effective in vocational rehabilitation if we are meeting the needs of our job candidates and our business partners. It has to be a dual approach. Companies like Walgreens, Lowes, Microsoft, Hyatt and Marriot have seen the advantages and are sharing their stories and experiences so we can learn from them in better meeting their needs. Iowa VR is exploring opportunities to place vocational counselors in business and industry settings where business culture can be learned and shared. Knowledge will be gained on career entry and career pathways that will help the business in not only recruiting, but also maintaining a qualified workforce.

Work immersion: Employment experiences are the foundation of developing and implementing one's preferences, interests and skills. Community experiences cannot be replicated in the classroom or virtually. Successes are being demonstrated in programs such as Project Search, which involves direct, hands-on work rotations occurring at the business site over a nine-month time period. Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation has developed customized training opportunities that occur on the job site allowing increased numbers of individuals with disabilities access to meaningful work experiences that provide a work foundation. Iowa is developing these opportunities at an increased rate and seeing success.

Individual person-centered planning: Just as each business has a specific employment need they require or expect to be met, so does each individual job candidate. This places a crucial component on the ability to address a service delivery process that provides value to each individual served in meeting their individual choices and needs with a planning process that can include the supports and individual accountability to help them move forward. The individual, person-centered planning is essential to the vocational rehabilitation process.

Collaboration and partnering: Resources, both financial and staff capacity, are limited. We have to be able to leverage available resources and staff to provide work effectiveness, be accountable and to maximize limited staff capacities. Examples in Iowa include our work with the Veterans Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the Iowa Department for the Blind, where we operate a collaborative Self-Employment Program providing opportunities for entrepreneurs to build successful businesses. Iowa had 39 successful business start-ups in 2012. This also occurs with our Transition Alliance Programs and has been a key success with our Employment First efforts during the past two years, where eight key state department programs have come together

with a common vision of supporting competitive, community-based integrated employment and meet regularly to discuss minimizing duplication and maximizing resources.

The Skilled Iowa Program is another example of collaboration and partnering between state agencies in Iowa. Fifty-six percent of the jobs are middle skill, but only 33% of Iowa's workforce fits into that category. Thirty-eight percent of Iowa's workforce is low-skill and are competing for 18% of the jobs in the state. Skilled Iowa is a way for employers to find a skilled workforce and be able to depend on a skilled workforce for the future. Training is provided through the National Career Readiness Certification Program, which will be implemented in all of Iowa's 348 high schools. We are assessing and teaching skills used in business. A focus is on a labor force that has proficiencies in applied mathematics, reading for content and locating information. Individual job candidates have free access to the National Career Readiness Certification Program. Community Colleges and Regent Schools have joined the Initiative. There is an effort to build this training into our unemployment and welfare programs to develop skills. Skilled Iowa also has an internship program that matches an unemployed person with an employer for up to eight weeks of on-the-job training. The internships are unpaid, but the individual continues receiving their unemployment benefits as long as up to 24 hours a week are spent on training at the job along with 16 hours of weekly certification training. Our Iowa Workforce Centers are working with all individuals to promote skill development and employment opportunities and are partnering with the Iowa Department of Education and Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services to ensure all individuals are served.

Integrated, competitive employment: I noted that your staff discussion draft has a strong emphasis on the importance of high expectations and the promotion of competitive, integrated employment as the core mission of vocational rehabilitation. Our goals are to assist the business to hire the best qualified job candidate. As we present qualified job candidates who happen to have disabilities and begin developing a trusting partnership with our business customers, we will see expanded opportunities for individuals with disabilities to compete for available positions. This is not charity, it is business. Individuals with disabilities, just like all individuals, bring a unique set of experiences, interests and abilities to a job setting and present opportunities for an expanded, diverse work background. We need to increase the labor market participation rate for individuals with disabilities and demonstrate expanded employment opportunities. Concerns occur when select or targeted groups of individuals with certain types of disabilities are hired and segregated into special sections of a business and are grouped together in situations where they are treated differently from all other employees.

Imagine a situation where a small business owner operates a bookstore. The owner happens to have a back injury, the accountant has diabetes, and three sale clerks happen to have epilepsy, a learning disability and an amputated left leg. The coffee shop in the book store has an individual with a mental impairment, an individual in a wheelchair, an individual with an intellectual disability and one who has asthma. All individuals are performing with the necessary supports they need to meet the essential functions of their positions in a manner that fosters the mission and services of the

business. Successful employment in integrated community settings does not depend upon a percentage of individuals, but on the purpose and working conditions of those individuals and earning commensurate wages for work performed in the competitive environment.

**Informed choice:** The importance of informed choice is central to the vocational rehabilitation process. This means an array of options is provided to the job candidate, along with the parameters of the vocational rehabilitation process, comparable benefits and services available in the community and vocational recommendations that can be supported to facilitate the employment journey. Vocational counseling with a thorough knowledge of the business and employment culture is an essential ingredient for success.

Discussion is occurring today on the role of sheltered workshops and the impact of informed choice options. Families, parents and job candidates desire and need a safe environment that provides growth opportunities. I believe in the role of a continuum of services. I have no doubt that current service delivery has shown success when community, integrated work opportunities are provided with the appropriate employment supports to meet the needs of the job candidate. Employment is a journey with forward and reverse steps. Problems occur when options like community employment work supports are not explored or provided or the setting is considered a final destination place.

**Priority of Order of Selection:** Employment results can be positively impacted by considering revisions of the Vocational Rehabilitation Order of Selection for states that have waiting lists. Individuals who require services while employed because they are at risk of losing their job can receive post-employment services if they had successfully received rehabilitation services leading to that employment outcome. These services provide a direct benefit to employment outcomes and retaining employment. As VR staff provide consultation and technical assistance to our business partners, other employees with disabilities are identified that are at risk of losing their employment unless appropriate intervention occurs. There is an urgency required to address these situations to meet the business need, potentially salvage the work situation and avoid having individuals lose employment and enter the adult service delivery system. By allowing service to individuals who would otherwise be eligible, but are at risk of losing their employment unless they receive vocational rehabilitation services, efficiencies to the business, the individual and to the service delivery system will be found.

The public vocational rehabilitation program is a key ingredient for continued improvement and success in employment for individuals with disabilities. This is seen through innovative programming occurring today with our business partners, with occupational skills training that occurs at work sites, with collaborative partnering occurring with our education partners at the secondary and post-secondary levels, and with partnering occurring in Iowa with our Skilled Iowa Initiative Program involving unique service partnering with our Workforce Development agency, Department of Education and Vocational Rehabilitation addressing the mid-skill gap businesses have identified as being a problem.

We continue to have opportunities today and tomorrow and the work you are doing and the legislation that is being drafted has tremendous possibilities based upon an individual, person centered approach. This approach needs to include high expectations, employment for all with support and opportunity, a recognition that work and job experiences at an early age equals employment as an adult, and that there is a need for ongoing support and collaboration among all systems of labor exchange that focus on competitive, integrated, community employment.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.