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David Berthiaume

Advisory Committee on Increasing Competitive Integrated Employment for  
Individuals with Disabilities

U.S. Department of Labor, Suite S-1303, 200 Constitution Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20210

Thank you to the Advisory Committee for this opportunity to comment and highlight some of the efforts we are working on in Pennsylvania to increase employment for high school students who want to work as they transition to adulthood. These solutions have potential, in large part, due to the amended section 461 of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which includes the higher probability that high school students with disabilities will be able and encouraged to work, just like their typical peers.

At the present, that's rarely possible. Vocational Rehabilitation services, as well as Medicaid funded services, as they apply to employment, are typically reserved for people who have graduated, or are just about to graduate. In Pennsylvania, students who will matriculate and move onto college do get the connections made in time to make that bridge, but not those who could (with appropriate support) go on to work. While a few high school programs in Pennsylvania offer stellar transition-to-employment programs, many are 'fake' skill-building or short-term visits to different employment settings, some with the opportunity to try actual work, others not. One of the more disappointing results of these experiences is that when the young adult actually identifies the job as something they'd like to try—and could be successful at --- no one makes the connection to a real job. There are great pilot programs funded with state and national funding in Pennsylvania, but they are isolated to a few counties/regions and typically focus on single employers rather than employment that 'follows the person' model of choice approach.

The statistics are grim and well known: In Pennsylvania, nearly half of young adults with disabilities ages 20-24 are neither in school or working. Current census data reveals that 65% of these young adults are currently unemployed. Consequently, nearly 28% of individuals with disabilities live in poverty, resulting in the highest poverty rate among all identified groups. Specific to Allegheny County (Pittsburgh) approximately 40% of youth with disabilities exit high school with no employment, no post-secondary options, and no plan to access either one. We need a continuous system and better pipeline because there are a lot of youth who will need and want help to successfully make the leap to employment. Each year in Allegheny County alone, an estimated 1,000 youth with disabilities graduate from the educational system.

We believe that while well intentioned, many school districts do not have the personnel and expertise to become job developers and act as job coaches. As you know, if the school does not provide job coaching and travel training, etc. the job of finding employment for high school graduates all too often is left in the hands of parents/guardians. Parents --- who have by now become experts in education—often do not also have the tools needed to advocate effectively for employment.

In Pennsylvania, under an initiative called “21 and Able” sponsored by the United Way of Allegheny County, we began a pilot project just 18 months ago with a local retailer to support young adults with disabilities to ‘bridge the gap’ between high school and adult life by embedding a full time vocational rehabilitation counselor inside of the retailer. She helps school district transition counselors identify young adults interested in working nights and weekends. This project has exceeded expectations, and as of today, 32 young adults continue to work for the company, and more are being hired. The national Kessler Foundation is generously funding an expansion of this grant to as many as five more companies in the next two years. The concept is simple: give the employer --- who pays for the program --- the professional and the tools they need to be successful, connecting young adults to the individual supports they need to make their

corporate systems, managers and team members better equipped to work with one another.

One of the biggest challenges remains: who will fund the job coaches necessary to ensure successful employment? Even for work during school time, if that option is available, very few districts put forward their resources to help the individual succeed. Our regional Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) was willing to work with students in their last year of school (during out of school time), but all of their paperwork and process needed to be ready for employment—and few students have gotten through the process. Pennsylvania now features an Early Reach pilot program which will educate more families on how to prepare, starting at age 14, but this program does not yet have the resources to provide funding until the high school student's last semester, or later.

We'd like to ensure that every young adult who wants a job, gets one—simply because they (like anyone else): a) want to work and earn b) need the experience of work and the soft skills gained and c) need a 'bridge' to adulthood before they leave high school.

**As a result, we teamed up with The Campaign For What Works on a statewide initiative called #IWantToWork.** Young adults with disabilities are leading the campaign, paired up with successful professionals in policy, media, social media and coalition building. The campaign is focused on getting high school students jobs through two parallel bills in the Pennsylvania House and Senate: *The Work Experience for High School Students with Disabilities Act*. The legislation, if enacted, will begin to fund OVR to support young adults to gain work experience while they are still in high school. This involves opening cases earlier and getting students ready to work before or upon graduation.

In #IWantToWork, all across Pennsylvania, young adults promote themselves, in and out of their employment program and trainings. They pose for 'selfies' with their local legislators to declare #IWantToWork and to talk about the ways in

which they are ready. This messaging is key and critical to the effort, as parents, teachers, employers and our state leaders begin to embrace the key ideas: young adults want to work, can work and just need the opportunity (and support) to work.

More evidence shows that individuals with disabilities who look for the jobs that they are interested in personally (and not because of a program) are successful; that people with very significant disabilities can work given the right job for them and the support to do those jobs; and that young adults with disabilities who work before they leave high school are 2.5 times more likely to work after high school.

The Workforce Investment Opportunity Act is the beginning of turning the tide on unemployment. Young adults and their parents, not yet familiar (or beaten down) with the term 'unemployable', those who have been included from the very start in all aspects of life, have incredibly high potential for employment. Given the massive resources we spend in education, the return on this investment—as it is with all children—should be gainful, community based and integrated employment at competitive wages.

Mary Hartley

Campaign For What Works

21 and Able, United Way of Allegheny County