

Labor and Public Employees Committee  
Public Hearing, February 27, 2014

Sen. Osten, Rep. Tercyak, members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee, thank you for the opportunity to comment on House Bill 5279.

I have worked in the field for 30 years both for the state and in the private sector where I have spent most of my career. I worked for STS from 1987-1991.

When I first started at STS I was a substitute teacher and worked at Roselle School. On one of my first days I saw a staff take apart some piece work that a woman in the group had just put together. I stopped the staff and asked what she was doing. She said she was taking it apart for another person to put together. I said that we will never do that, I didn't want anyone to take anyone's work apart. The staff complained that we would run out of activities and I said I would come up with more which I did. I bring this up because a self advocate that I met with recently brought up this practice as an example of why people with disabilities should only have real work and be paid no less than minimum wage.

I understand the push for real wages and jobs and I agreed with the self advocate that for the people who can compete with non-disabled workers and do the jobs they can do, even with some support and/or accommodation, they absolutely should be paid the same wage. However, I explained to her that I am worried that this movement will leave many people behind. Just as many women felt left behind by the woman's movement, many people with disabilities, who may not have the same capabilities as the self advocates, are being left behind.

I told her about two people who have worked in a workshop for years. Although many people didn't value the workshop, me included, they did. They were able to work at their own pace, doing what they could, without the pressure of having to meet industry standards which, for them, caused them great anxiety and made them feel badly about themselves. They felt proud of the work they did at the workshop and proud of their paycheck, even if it was small. Now they are in Community Experience programs where not only do they not have the opportunity to do any work, they have to spend money at their program for the community activities they do. Both of them are active in the community on the weekends with their housemates so to them, they have lost their jobs and now can't work. Neither one can take the stress of working in a competitive job and do not want that. They have expressed to me that they are very upset and they don't really understand why they had to lose their job.

I wholeheartedly agree that people with disabilities have not been given enough opportunities in the job market. I agree that we in the field haven't done enough and we should and can do more. Self determination is about choices. America is about choices. Though this bill is well intended, the way it is currently written may have the effect of taking choices and opportunities away from people. There are many people who for a variety of reasons, cannot compete with the general population and therefore are left out of the marketplace. We can be innovative and start cottage industries to help people but that pay may be less than minimum wage, as it takes many years to build up a small business.

If this bill passes, many people may end up sitting at home because their job opportunities have been taken away. Choice is what DDS advocates. Our system should be flexible enough that we can give choices and tailor jobs/programs to people's individual needs. This bill could prevent us from giving people choices. It may help some people and it may hurt many others. I encourage our field and our legislators to find a way to ensure that people are not being exploited but also ensuring that they are not left behind. I do not believe that HB 5279 as it is currently written, is that way.

Thank you for your time.

Patricia Richards  
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