



Testimony to the Labor and Public Employees Committee

Helen Bosch, CEO Vista Vocational & Life Skills Center

107 Bradley Road

Madison, CT 06443

860 399 8080

hbosch@vistavocational.org

I am Helen Bosch, CEO, Vista Vocational & Life Skills Center. Our mission is to provide services and resources to individuals with disabilities to allow them to achieve personal success. Success is defined as living with dignity and as independently as possible and to be as productive as desired. Vista receives fee for service funding for many of our members through State of Connecticut agencies such as Department of Developmental Services – regular and autism waiver program, Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Young Adult Service Division, Acquired Brain Injury funds and local Boards of Education. For the majority of our students and members, employment is a most important goal. At Vista, we have found that in order to help our members fulfill this dream; we must be creative and innovative in our approach.

I wish to be put on record as opposing raised HB 5279 – AN ACT TO ELIMINATE THE MINIMUM FAIR WAGE EXCEPTION FOR CERTAIN CITIZENS OF CT.

We agree with our partners in the disability community in stating unequivocally that individuals with disabilities should have a fair and equal chance to employment and productivity as any member of our society. We also believe that in order to do so, we need to continue to work to shift the attitudes of society as to the significant benefits of hiring an adult with disabilities. Currently, in the United States, according to the U.S. Census Bureau 2013 American Community Survey, 32.7% of individuals aged 18-64 were employed. CT is slightly better, being the 8th in employment in the nation with 39.7% of individuals with disabilities being employed. We as a nation are concerned when we hear figures such as a 10% unemployment rate yet individuals with disabilities live each day with averages hovering around 60% unemployment. Yes, we agree that something needs to be done to address this significant and shameful problem in our society.

The answer to this dilemma is not, however, to cut off one of the important options to employment, that when done well is a very effective method of employing, training and encouraging career growth amongst individuals in this large unemployment pool. The subminimum wage programs at the state and

federal level have been quite successful in providing meaningful and engaging employment for individuals who otherwise would join the ranks of that 60% unemployed number.

There is consensus amongst us in the industry that, if given the proper supports of coaches and professionals, many more individuals could be competitively employed. Likewise, there is agreement that there must be an aggressive approach to education and awareness building amongst our communities to encourage employers to hire and engage individuals with disabilities in their workforces. These are wonderful and powerful actions that can be taken and may in the future result in individuals with disabilities maintaining productivity and being paid at a minimum or prevailing wage. This, in theory, seems like a sensible solution. But, in 2014, as we move out of recession and into slow economic growth, and as employers are faced with consolidating positions and eliminating any waste within their workforce, an individual who may not be fully up to speed will not make it. That is the simple, hard but true fact.

At Vista, we have an 83% employment rate. How do we beat the odds and do what is not being done elsewhere? We are creative. We use supports when we have them. We use enlightened employers, lots of education and awareness raising. In special circumstances, we use our Subminimum Wage Certificate which is authorized by Section 14C of the US Department of Labor Fair Labor Standards Act. This certificate is carefully maintained and scrutinized. It is a wonderful and empowering option for those individuals who are not ready or cannot work at a competitive pace. It allows them to be productive, engaged in a workforce, and find meaning in their lives. They have a career. They are working. They are useful member of society. They get paid fairly and for the work they produce. They are not abused, mistreated nor is our business profiting from this situation. Instead, it is giving an individual who might not otherwise have a chance to be included in the workforce.

I ask that you do not remove this as an option without understanding more about this subminimum wage process. It is a carefully controlled and regulated process that can offer hope and opportunity, not dead ends. The bill to remove subminimum wage as an option will have unintended consequences. It will not increase the ranks of those individuals making minimum wage or more. It will eliminate those individuals from the workforce. Without it, many currently employed will join the 60% that are unemployed.

Instead of approving this bill in a reactionary manner, I would ask that you use your efforts to examining this employment issue and discover what are the true causes of this situation.