

I am here today because my son, Michael, who is 16 years old will soon become an adult facing higher education, employment and independent living in our fast-paced global economy. I am sure, by now, most of you are aware that young adults and adults with the highest functioning form of autism – Asperger’s Syndrome- are often the highest group of unemployed or underemployed. By underemployed we mean jobs that are below what they are capable of say, working at landscaping, cleaning, bagging groceries or checking out library books – you get the idea. And while there is absolutely nothing wrong with an honest job and a hard day’s work (most of my family came from jobs just like these) we believe that our government urges all Americans to meet their full potential- except in the case of those with high functioning autism. They should settle. Not only is this a shame because admittedly these “lucky” employed individuals are unfulfilled, unhappy, and unable to support themselves independently – but it is a waste of valuable human resources as this population (who in my son’s case has a high average IQ) has been documented as the most honest, loyal, committed, and trustworthy. They can’t lie, they do what their told, they don’t mind repetition or sameness and in some cases absolutely thrive on routines that many would find boring over time, and they don’t quit – many will stay at a job forever; and this employment longevity saves companies hundreds of thousands of dollars on turnover. Even so, legislators and employers don’t seem to be getting the message. The statistics are staggering and deflating – the latest numbers show that 70% to 80% of young adults and adults like my son remain unemployed and underemployed. The situation is not improving, in fact – it’s getting worse. I am here because I know this committee can help us correct a problem that will only increase.

This is my third time testifying here in Hartford over the last ten years. In between my time here before you I have read hundreds of articles, books, blogs, and speeches about what is needed to properly prepare my son for post-secondary life. In many cases, my findings have shown me that the public school system where my son is in attendance – is in direct conflict with best practice. My husband and I have spent hundreds of thousands of hours and dollars advocating for needed educational, emotional, social and vocational training. I has been a lonely – often contentious and legal- road that, in the end, will pay off. We are lucky enough to have the education and resources to be such powerful advocates. And although there has been improvement in services for younger children with autism and Asperger’s syndrome, obtaining the needed supports and services for young adults and adults still requires navigation through a complex system of departments and services that have ten year waiting lists and are not uniformly accessible. The demand for longer-term services since my earlier testimonies has only increased and will continue to do so as this population begins to age out of the school system. We are at the point of crisis.

Because my son and many others like him are on the autism spectrum, many community services (like BRS for example) will brand him as “not competitively employable” simply because he will require an extended time period of support and coaching in the community and on the job. Those with autism take longer to learn, they need things broken down, and they must rehearse and practice until they get it right. Often, even after they have

mastered a concept, they will need a refresher to keep them moving in the right direction. It is not a lot – a reminder, a visit from a job coach, a mentor, or a meeting with the human resources department. Sometimes it may be the employer who needs training or support. It takes so little yet without the support, a life of dependency, isolation and stagnation is the result for adults like my son.

And so, if he applies for another community service like DDS who serves individuals who are considered “not gainfully employable” at the time of transition for high school – he would likely get rejected because his IQ is too high. This is where the waiver comes in – even if we were to apply (and likely get rejected the first time and approved upon a hearing) – acceptance means and being put on a waiting list of 8 to 10 years. Eight to ten years! It is wrong that these young adults and adults are falling through the cracks – being discriminated against because they do not have a low enough IQ yet they need too much of a long term commitment to be supported by other departments like BRS, while living an independent life. Essentially, they are “not disabled enough” to receive support from one agency, yet “too disabled” to qualify for support from the other! Does this sound plausible? It isn’t. This intelligent, deserving, vulnerable population has much to offer our industries and corporations. Yet they walk off of a cliff after high school and land in a vacuum.

Connecticut does not provide services for adults who have Autism Spectrum Disorders but do not have intellectual disabilities. Michael will be 21 in four short years. I am urging you to change the laws and increase funding for programs that address this underprepared, underserved population. Michael can live and work in the community as a productive member of society but not without the appropriate supports! Your help will allow for Michael and others like him to access these supports and live up to his fullest potential.

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Respectfully submitted,

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