

Commerce Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-6121

AN ACT CONCERNING A WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PIPELINE FOR

Title: PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES.

Vote Date: 3/18/2021

Vote Action: Joint Favorable

PH Date: 2/16/2021

File No.: 622 (224)

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Commerce Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

HB. 6121 directs The Department of Economic and Community Development to develop a plan to establish a workforce development pipeline program for persons with disabilities.

Individuals with disabilities face many obstacles in finding gainful employment. One of the most significant barriers is the lack of job opportunities. These barriers have resulted in persons with disabilities making up 12.4% of Connecticut's population but account for 30% of those not in the labor force. Having an inclusive workforce is not only the right thing to do from an equity perspective, but it is also the right thing to do from an economic perspective. Businesses, and the economy as a whole, would benefit from persons with disabilities entering the workforce.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

1. **Kerri Villieres, Executive Director of the Office of Workforce Strategy, Vice Chair of the Governor's Workforce Council.** Submitted written testimony about this bill. Ms. Villieres testified about the work both organizations are already undertaking to include persons with disabilities into their overall workforce strategy plan. In particular, she highlighted the work of the Department of Aging and Disabilities Services and the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind. Additionally, Ms. Villieres points to Governor Lamont's proposed bill SB 881, which would establish a program called CareerConneCT and would focus on training programs that include those with physical and mental disabilities. She notes that depending on how this bill is drafted, there could be overlap with the previously mentioned programs.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

1. **Epilepsy Foundation of Connecticut:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. They testified about the importance of employment for individuals with epilepsy. Individuals without access to employer health insurance find it difficult to afford their medications. Their testimony provided statistics about how prevalent the unemployment and underemployment problem is for individuals with epilepsy. They urge the legislature to support the bill and improve access to employment opportunities for all vulnerable populations, including those with epilepsy.
2. **Paul Formica, State Senator, Connecticut Legislature:** Senator Formica expressed support for this bill in both written and public hearing testimony.
3. **Rabab Hussain Syed:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. As a mother of a child with a severe intellectual disability, she feels strongly that the state develop a system that allows individuals with disabilities a chance to find work.
4. **Jack Knall:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. In his testimony, Jack describes how difficult it was to find a job as a college student with autism. He stresses that there are many people like him, with a disability, that want to work. He notes that businesses need to understand the benefits of hiring people with disabilities.
5. **Tara McNeil:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. In her testimony, Tara describes her journey to employment as a person with a physical disability. She emphasizes that education and opportunity are keys to changing the way Connecticut sees disabled residents as part of the employed workforce.
6. **Amy Messinger:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. Ms. Messinger wrote about being the mom of four young children, two of whom receive special education support and services. In her testimony, she explains her worries about her children's future beyond their academic years. She also discusses the benefits of allowing every individual in the state the opportunity to be employed. Ms. Messinger advocates for a comprehensive policy that supports both businesses and individuals.
7. **Lisa N.:** Expressed support for this bill in written testimony.
8. **Abiah Ruel:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. Abiah's cousin is disabled has a job at a pizza shop. However, they note that this would not be possible without the support of the cousin's family and that many people with disabilities do not have the same sort of support system. Abiah discusses why the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities is detrimental to society as a whole. Abiah urges Connecticut to lead the way in disability inclusion in the workplace.
9. **Ben Shaiken, Manager of Advocacy & Public Policy, The Alliance:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. The Alliance is the statewide association of community nonprofits. They urge the legislature to include community providers in the final language of the bill. The Alliance looks forward to working with other stakeholders to create the program.

10. **Bob Shea & Rose Shea:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. Bob and Rose's son Jeremiah has severe autism. They wrote about how they are trying to help their son be in a position to work for a business and how this bill would support that effort. They also noted that society and businesses would benefit too.
11. **Noreen Simmons:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. Ms. Simmons wrote about the experience of her son Weller, who has autism and an intellectual disability. She notes that what Weller will need most in the future is an opportunity to work for the right employer. She supports this bill because it offers businesses incentives to provide employment opportunities to citizens like her son. She believes that employment will give her son, and many Connecticut residents, the chance to live to their fullest potential.
12. **Lisa Souza:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. Ms. Souza wrote about the experience of her twenty-five-year-old son with Autism Spectrum Disorder. In particular, she recounted the incredibly frustrating experience they had with the CT Department of Rehabilitative Services, that in her view, did a poor job of supporting her son. For the past five years, he has been unable to find a job, even though he is willing to work. She notes that this is just one story of someone who wants to work and earn money to be independent; all he needs is the opportunity. Ms. Souza believes that this bill will be instrumental in providing that opportunity to people like her son.
13. **M. Jeffry Spahr, Esq., Chairman of the Legislative Committee, State Advisory Council for Special Education:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. While they are supportive of the bill, there are many areas in which they need more details for how the program would be administered. In particular, they pointed to how the program would work in conjunction with existing ones, how the incentive program will work, how candidate training will be provided, and the employment set-aside provision.
14. **Shawn Wooden, Treasurer, State of Connecticut:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. Treasurer Wooden supports the sponsor's efforts to encourage companies to hire individuals with disabilities and move the ball forward in building inclusive workplaces for all. He also highlighted the steps the treasurer's office has undertaken to encourage companies to invest in inclusive workplaces.
15. **Kim Morrison/Noelle Alix, Business Owners, BeanZ and Company:** Two years ago, Kim and Noelle started a for-profit business with a mission to be an inclusive setting with expanded opportunities for individuals with IDD. They underscored how being an inclusive workplace has helped their business's bottom line. In particular, they pointed out that younger generations of customers expect and reward corporate social responsibility. They urged action because, in the end, it would benefit all Connecticut residents.
16. **Win Evart, Executive Director, The Arc of Connecticut:** Provided written and public hearing testimony in support of this bill. The Arc Connecticut is the state's oldest and largest advocacy organization advocating on behalf of individuals with IDD and their families. Mr. Evart testified about the potential benefits to the state of

Connecticut if the bill passes, including; increase workforce diversity, a more skilled pool of labor, and more inclusive communities.

17. **Shannon Knall:** Provided written and public hearing testimony in support of the bill. Ms. Knall wrote about the experience of her almost 20-year-old with Autism Spectrum Disorder. In particular, she wrote about their painful experience with the Connecticut Department of Rehabilitative Services. Only after intense advocacy and multiple meetings with different individuals was her son finally able to secure a job opportunity, which unfortunately never happened due to COVID-19. She stressed that it was just one unsuccessful employment story that involved a state agency. She believes that this bill will be instrumental in providing job opportunities to people like her son.
18. **Andrew Kormarow:** Provided written and public hearing testimony in support of this bill. Mr. Kormarow serves on the Connecticut ASD Advisory and Council and is the founder of Planning Across the Spectrum, a special needs financial planning firm. Mr. Kormarow believes that this bill only solved part of the bill. He testified about how the fear of losing benefits scares people with disabilities from seeking employment. The suggests that the bill requires additional incentives for individuals with disabilities themselves and includes an education component that will explain to people how working will affect their benefits. For this program to be successful, Mr. Kormarow believes that outcomes be tracked so improvement can be made to it.
19. **Nick Sinacori:** Submitted written and public hearing testimony in support of the bill. Nick talks about his experience as a twenty-six-year-old that has autism and is intellectually disabled. For the past two years, he has worked at BeanZ and Company. In his testimony, he talked about what it has been like to a part of their team. Nick believes that everyone deserves to work and feel valued.
20. **Stephen Morris, Executive Director, The Arc of the Farmington Valley:** Provided public hearing testimony in support of this bill. He discussed the unemployment rates and the reasons behind them. According to Mr. Morris, the most significant barrier is the lack of willing employers. He states that this is due to a lack of understanding about the capabilities of those with IDD. He cites the inability of his organization to talk with decision-makers within companies as a major hurdle. He believes that if this bill helps providers get to the decision-makers within companies and encourages employers to give it a chance, it will mitigate all the other barriers, including lack of transportation and fear of losing benefits.
21. **Clare Nesoralla:** Submitted written testimony in support of this bill. Ms. Nesoralla talks about her thirteen-year-old daughter with an intellectual disability, whose abilities far outweigh her disabilities. However, Ms. Nesoralla fears for her future success in the workplace. She believes that everyone can succeed if given the support and the chance to participate. As parents, they worry that their daughter will become isolated without fulfilling employment and won't become a contributing member of society. She believes that the bill will help not only her daughter but it will also help companies become stronger and more productive.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None Expressed

Reported by: Peter B. Andrews

Date: 3-22-21