



Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council

1902 Market Street Camp Hill, PA 17011

voice (717) 975-2004 or (888) 250-5175 tty (888) 559-2658 fax (888) 524-9282
email racucpca@parac.org www.parac.org

The mission of the Council is to inform and advise the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, the State Board of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Governor on the diverse issues affecting vocational rehabilitation.

Thank you Chairman Scavello, Chairman Keller, members of the House Labor and Industry Committee and Representative Murt, for taking time to learn about a very important issue – the need for employment opportunities, training and support for people with disabilities. I am Maureen Westcott and I share my thoughts today as a representative of the PA Rehabilitation Council (PaRC - of which I will refer to as “Council” in my testimony) which is an advisory committee to the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR); but also as the Executive Director of The Arc of Lancaster County and as a parent of three children, one of whom has an intellectual disability. All of my roles deal with the importance of employment of persons with a disability, and the issue of helping those transitioning from school based programs into the adult world.

According to the United States Department of Labor, Office of Employment Policy (ODEP) August 2014 statistics show the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities is 12.8% which is more than twice the rate of those without disabilities. The Labor Force Participation is at 19.8% for people with disabilities as opposed to 68.8% of those without disabilities. These statistics show why employment is a high priority in the disability advocacy world.

HB2405 addresses the needs of “students with disabilities graduating from high school”, trying to improve on the services and supports they receive which will help them obtain a job, rather than languishing at home or in a day program. Representative Murt, you are well known as a Champion for the Rights of those with disabilities. Thank you for introducing this bill, as it brings

awareness and discussion to a very serious issue and attempts to clarify the process and responsibilities of all parties involved.

The bill is on the right track by clarifying the role of OVR during the transition period of a student's life, and what is needed in order for young people leave the school system at age 21 ready for work. It is good to look at what can be done to strengthen this process. OVR is increasing their involvement of youth in schools with programs such as Early Reach, and I am sure they would be glad to give you an update on that program, as I am not here as a representative of OVR.

HB2405 addresses OVR working with the school age population, however OVR is an eligibility program that serves all people with disabilities who are of working age and meet the eligibility requirements to obtain, maintain or regain employment. Currently, OVR has instituted an Order of Selection policy to comply with Federal law which requires that OVR only serve individuals with the "Most Significant" disabilities because funding is not available to serve all the people with disabilities who could benefit from its services.

As a representative of the PA Rehabilitation Council, we ask that as the bill moves forward the following issues be addressed:

1. A fiscal note to fund the requirements be included with the bill. I have worked with others on Council to help Legislators understand the importance of adequately funding the line items in the State Budget under Labor and Industry (Transfer to Vocational Rehabilitation Fund and Supported Employment). These funds enable the supports needed by those utilizing OVR's services and have a 4 to 1 match from Federal Funds, making the return on investments one of the best. The Federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) has passed and

OVR is required to set aside 15% of its total State/Federal funds to work with students who have disabilities in transition.

2. Language such as “OVR shall be the lead agency”. Consider modifying to say “OVR to have more authority for developing connections” and give specifics regarding what OVR’s role is when developing connections and their authority to do so.
3. Modify the bill to include language stating that the legislation does not absolve the Department of Education of their leadership role under IDEA. It is important that conversations continue with the Department of Education on supports given to youth during school to prepare them for employment or post-secondary education. Assurances can be added that nothing in the bill undercuts the primary role of the Local Education Agency (LEA) in carrying out entitlements assured under IDEA through the Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
4. Enact an Employment First Legislation so that the focus of services and supports is first given to employment goals across all departments and disabilities. We would be glad to meet with you to provide examples of legislation passed in other states.
5. The name of the bill be changed to reflect “employment”. Although employment increases the base for services funded through state allocations, efforts of those providing employment supports are geared towards finding employment, not becoming taxpayers. A possible suggestion is “Increasing Employment for Persons with Disabilities Act”

Stakeholder involvement prior to implementation of legislation or regulations is so important. The fact that you have convened this informational hearing says that you understand this importance, too. Thank you for allowing me to share Council’s thoughts and concerns, with hopes that generations to come will not see such discrepancy in the number of people with disabilities employed.