

March 18th, 2015

Testimony Before House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development

First of all, I would like to thank the Committee and Chairman Botzow for giving me this opportunity to address the very important topic of employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Although national trends have recently shown promise, the employment rate for people with disabilities is abysmal – well below the overall employment rate. People with disabilities comprise a small fraction of the workforce, despite the desire and the ability of this population to enter the labor market. As a long-time disability advocate, former Chair of the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) and the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) and Vice-President of the Board of Directors of Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL), I think we need to address this situation even at a time of fiscal restraint.

The State of Vermont can take concrete steps toward that end, steps which indeed incorporate fiscal prudence. One is establishing tax-free ABLE (Assuring a Better Living Environment) accounts for people with disabilities to better handle disability-related expenses for such purposes, among others, as acquiring and maintaining employment. These accounts, as per pending Federal regulations, would be an invaluable resource for such purposes, a resource which would not be a taxpayer funded entitlement as such. I urge the Committee to begin the process of establishing ABLE Act accounts in the State of Vermont.

Another concrete step would be enhancing work incentives within the State of Vermont's Medicaid for Working Persons with Disabilities (MWPDP) program. H.333, introduced by Chairman Botzow and currently assigned to House Human Services, is another example of a constructive attempt at workforce development highlighting the abilities of people with disabilities. We realize the challenging budgetary scenario; however, such modifications to the program, with assumed minimal administrative expenditures, should prove itself an example of a positive cost-benefit ratio. More people will be employed, while retaining Medicaid for a time, and people will be employed to a greater extent. More revenue will be generated – without raising tax rates – and greater consumer spending will serve as an economic stimulus. Perhaps, such a reasonable, widely, supported, multi-partisan initiative can be incorporated into an appropriate larger vehicle?

A continuous theme throughout would be evidence-based assessments that people who are employed are generally healthier with associated lower overall health care costs. Why not further encourage people with disabilities to be self-sufficient and live independently, while, at the same time, enhancing their well-deserved dignity and self-respect?

I appreciate the interest of the Committee and will be glad to attempt to answer any questions.

Respectfully submitted,

Sam Liss

On behalf of VCDR (Vermont Coalition of Disability Rights); VCIL (Vermont Center for Independent Living)