

Testimony Before House Commerce and Economic Development Committee 3/2/2017

First of all, I would like to thank Chairman Botzow for affording me the opportunity to testify, on behalf of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) and Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL), on this critical issue of major funding losses to the Vermont Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program and resulting potential devastating, Draconian reductions in services.

VR endured the unanticipated loss of \$4.4 M in Federal re-allotment funds in FY 2017. To cover this unexpected loss, AHS agreed to “backfill” the shortfall, on a one-time only basis for SFY ’17, using Global Commitment funds. These funds are validly being used to support the JOBS program for youth with mental illness and DS supported employment. For SFY ’18, VR needed to develop a budget which cuts about \$5 M, a 25% reduction in funding.

This potential reduction will mean a very real and profoundly hurtful diminution in services and programs for people with disabilities who rely on such services to enter/re-enter the workforce. Without these services, a significant percentage of the potential workforce would remain unemployed, further straining the social support system.

The overall decline in Vermont’s workforce is well-documented. Programs and services VR offers enhance the workforce with reliable workers with appropriate training and skills. For example, Creative Workforce Solutions (CWS) maintains strong connections with local businesses and employers, assuring directed training for jobs that are in demand. In addition, the progressive employment program assists persons with limited employment histories to begin employment while being assessed by employers. VR also emphasizes training for certification in high-demand fields, allowing for upward mobility and rewarding career paths.

In addition, VR has and continues to emphasize services for transition-age youth for purposes of precluding a life of entitlements and poverty and, conversely, assuring a productive career and life.

The key point is that VR programs and services BOTH assist people with disabilities seeking employment AND the State economy as a whole. We cannot let funding be significantly cut, for example, for Business Account Managers (BAM’s), employment consultants, industry-recognized training programs and progressive employment. Such a reduction in funding will be counterproductive.

If the one-time FY ’17 solution were made permanent, this would significantly mitigate the harmful effects of the unexpected Federal cuts (and other Federal cuts which may result from further re-allotment reductions and reinstated sequestration). This partial solution would retain funding and stability for the vital JOBS and DS supported employment programs and would free VR to utilize the approx.. \$2.5 M commitment to these programs for other vital services that have been reduced or eliminated in the currently discussed FY’18 budget.

I will be glad to entertain questions and/or comments and try to respond. Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to testify on this critical issue.

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