

## Testimony for House Committee on Human Services

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It was the summer of 2006, when, unbeknownst to me, my life would change forever. I sat down for an interview for a job opportunity at a summer camp in Indiana for people with disabilities. I was so scared. I knew nothing of how to work with people with disabilities. Would I be any good? Would I have fun? Would I feel overwhelmed? I had no experience whatsoever. The extent of my knowledge of people with disabilities was with the old ladies at church who needed a wheelchair or cane to get around. I became the evening program coordinator and, turns out I was very skilled at this work and had the time of my life. I learned so much and was inspired to continue to help people of all abilities push their limits, find self-confidence and realize they were people with dignity and skill. Then, WHAM! It was back to the real world. The camp bubble was so nice. It was comfortable, hopeful, inspiring, safe, supportive, and everyone was treated with dignity; nobody was stared at, nobody asked "what's wrong with her?", and most of all, people there were treated as people first, not disability first.

Confused as to why the "real world" held such a different experience for people with disabilities, I confidently interviewed for a job at a residential facility for kids and adults with developmental disabilities and autism. Here, I learned how to do physical restraints, pass out meds, get nine kids with autism ready for the day all by myself, and use skittles or M&M's to motivate them to do their school work. Community time and even home visits had to be earned by good behavior. The expectations of these kids were that they would have maladaptive behaviors. They lived up to these expectations. Here I learned great examples of how to treat people as if they had no dignity. I was so discouraged. I also worked with adults, none of whom had jobs or any real meaningful community interactions. This was what it was like for a person with a disability living in Indiana. Looking for a new perspective, I moved to Vermont.

My first job in Vermont was as an investigator for the Department for Children and Families (DCF). It was here that I learned I had the power to help vulnerable people be heard; to help them find their voice, to help them gain some sense of control in their lives. I valued this work tremendously, but felt called to return to working with people with disabilities; to help them find their voice, to be heard, to be treated with dignity, to gain control over their lives. I took a huge paycut to come work for Champlain Community Services (CCS). I've been with CCS since 2013.

Hi, my name is Tamara Ulman and I am a community inclusion facilitator (CIF) at CCS. I support four different individuals throughout the week. The following names are pseudonyms. Jane. Jane is quite charming and very social, a bit distracted at times, and very active. Nancy. Nancy is fiercely independent, consequently stubborn at times, and her empathy and kindness

toward others is often underestimated or overlooked. Christopher. Christopher cares very deeply for the well-being of all people, is over excitable at times, and has an infectious positive attitude. Perry. Perry is a strong self-advocate, a bit dramatic at times, and values connections within his community.

"Champlain Community Services provides essential supports to people with intellectual disabilities and autism, building a community where everyone participates and belongs." This is the mission of CCS. Champlain Community Services is completely dedicated to and focused on community, whereas at the residential facility in Indiana, you had to earn community time. Being a part of your community is a right, not a privilege! We do not strive for people with disabilities to be independent, rather interdependent; to make connections in the community to help them be successful.

The most challenging part of my job as a community inclusion facilitator is educating the community. Sometimes it's direct communication. "What's wrong with her?" "Nothing", I reply. Sometimes it's in the form of allowing natural interactions between community member and the individual I'm supporting. I hold high expectations for people in the community, and when you hold high expectations for people, they usually do quite well. Each day, I try to emphasize that people with disabilities should always be treated their age, and that everybody should hold high expectations for them and communicate that to them. This is how people grow. Just like everybody else, people with disabilities should be expected to wait their turn in line, push in their chairs, use manners, treat people with respect, communicate confidently, pay for goods and services, show up for work on time, communicate schedule changes with their boss, and so on. Just as you would treat them their age first, then adapt from there, so too do you hold equal expectations for them as everyone else, then adapt from there. Always assume competence! I am so passionate about this that I led a staff meeting at CCS on the importance of setting expectations for community members and the folks we serve, while still allowing for self-expression. The ultimate goal is for the individuals we serve to advocate these points themselves.

The work I do is incredibly meaningful, not just to me, but to the folks we support and to the community, as they are enriched as well. Since I began working for CCS in October of 2013, I have seen 50 fellow CIF's leave. Fifty! Many leave because they cannot make ends meet. Most do not want to leave, but must in order to provide for themselves or their family. Some see this as just a temporary job; something they can put on their resume as a stepping stone of experience in order to get a higher paying job. I myself work two other jobs, including this one, just to make ends meet. If I had to get another job and cut my sleep down to just a few hours a night just to be able to continue working for CCS, I would. That is how important I feel this work is. I do not see this as a temporary job. I see this as a career, and if we were paid as such, I feel others would see this as a career as well and staff turnover rate would drop dramatically. Having three jobs is a disservice to the folks that I support each day. They are not always getting my best, and that is not fair to them or the community.

An unfortunate common conversation I have with the folks I support is that they should always be prepared for change; that staff come and go and this is the nature of this work. While

this is a good skill to learn, and can transfer to being successful in the community and in their lives in general, this is a really crappy way to teach that skill. It is incredibly difficult for the folks we serve to be able to continue to make progress on their goals when their staff and schedule keep changing, when there is no consistency.

I hate seeing so many staff come and go. We have had some truly exceptional staff! The management team at CCS does an incredible job creating an environment where our work feels valued. They work endless hours to create the best opportunities for the folks we serve and to support staff in making community inclusion possible. I not only value this work, I value CCS. I value the staff here, and I value their endless commitment toward creating a community where everyone participate and belongs.

I ask that you support this incredibly essential work. I ask that you passionately advocate for people with disabilities. I ask that you fight for adequate compensation for folks like me who support them, so that this work would be seen as a career, not just another underpaid job. Thank you so much for your extended attention and consideration. Thank you for hearing my story, my perspective. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,  
Tamara M. Ulman