

February 4, 2014

To: Representative Loudenbeck, Chair
Representative Petryk, Vice-Chair
Members, Assembly Committee on Workforce Development

From: Lisa Pugh, Public Policy Coordinator

Re: LRB 3988/2 – workforce training grants; services to enhance employment of people with disabilities

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to this committee on LRB 3988/2 – a bill to provide workforce training grants, including services to enhance employment of people with disabilities. In addition, thank you for this committee’s ongoing commitment to improving employment rates for people with disabilities, including the historic new funding for the state’s vocational rehabilitation program which was signed into law last December.

Our organization is very supportive of the Governor’s *Better Bottom Line* initiative, announced at the January 22 State of the State address, which is the foundation for this bill. The outline that the Governor put forward is a very positive step to address our poor employment participation rates for people with disabilities, which as you know, hover at just 18% while the general population is employed at a rate of 68%. Considering the fact that many people with disabilities also live in poverty (27%) and rely heavily on public benefits, investing in proven, effective employment supports is a smart decision that both improves quality of life and relieves stress on public systems.

The Governor’s bill that targets investments in DWD programs is a clear cut way to improve employment rates. DWD’s Division of Vocational Rehabilitation-DVR program which provides specialized supports to people with disabilities looking for employment has a proven track record of a 210% return on investment for public dollars spent.

Disability Rights Wisconsin has contacted many committee member offices about an idea for improvement to this bill. Specifically, we are looking for the initiative to go one step further to strengthen accountability to outcomes. Given the fact that the Legislature recently made a considerable investment in DWD’s DVR program, we would like this new investment to be coordinated to ensure **employment outcomes**. The fast track for this legislation in the special session means we did not have time to consult directly with DWD about accountability concerns as they worked with the Governor’s office to draft this legislation. Therefore, we are looking for any means achieve strong and transparent accountability toward employment outcomes with this new funding.

Our main concern is that the reports from grantees and the reports from DWD to the Legislature should not just include the numbers of people who participated in employment activities, but **must clearly demonstrate the actual improvement in employment rates** that the training activities are targeted to impact. A strong “employment outcome” definition exists in statute and is already tracked and required to be reported on by DVR. Alignment of these investments is critical to maximize results.

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We strongly advise that DWD use a concrete definition of “employment outcome” in their contracts and grant RFPs that clearly emphasizes a level of employment that would have the effect of reducing a person’s reliance on public benefits. DWD has provided us with assurances that this is their intent.

It is our experience that when these assurances do not exist, that we do not get the intended result. Wisconsin lags behind other states in their integrated, competitive employment rates for people with intellectual disabilities. Washington’s rate is 89%; Oklahoma is at 61%; Connecticut at 53% and New Hampshire at 51%. Wisconsin’s Integrated Employment rate is around 20%. These successful states have several core elements in common that should be components of the Governor’s initiative and a consideration in these newly funded grants and the work of DWD and other state agencies:

1. Clear, long-standing policy with committed state agency leadership to ensure disability employment policy remains priority over time.
2. Innovative funding strategies that create clear incentives to support people in integrated/supported employment, that tie funding levels to individual need, and that reward providers who produce the most/best outcomes.
3. Strong case management that actively encourages everyone toward integrated employment, monitors and stimulates progress over time, and ensures judicious use of funds.
4. High accountability of employment service providers to deliver outcomes in cost-effective manner and to actively participate in encouraging people to pursue integrated employment, and to sustain/build on initial outcomes achieved for individuals by increasing employment hours/earnings and actively supporting career advancement.

Through our work with individuals and families who participate in DVR, Project Search, the Walgreen’s REDI initiative and other DWD programs targeted toward improving employment of people with disabilities, we hear directly about both the good and the “needs improvement” parts of programs. We trust that when agencies and programs are held accountable to report real results – not just participation numbers – they will be motivated to fix problems and improve quality.

Thank you for taking this input into consideration.

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