

To: Senator Jacque, Chair, and Senator Bernier, Vice-Chair and Members of the Senate Committee on Local Government, Small Business, Tourism, and Workforce Development

From: Disability Rights Wisconsin, Sally Flaschberger, Lead Advocacy Specialist, Sallyf@drwi.org or 414-292-2737

Re: SB344- Family Navigator

Date: September 3, 2019

Recommendation: For Information Only

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on SB 344. Disability Rights Wisconsin is Wisconsin's Protection and Advocacy system for people with disabilities. A significant focus of our work both individually and systemically across the state focuses on transition services for youth, services for people with disabilities available through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and employment discrimination. SB 344 provides valuable resources to youth and families to increase the likelihood of securing competitive integrated employment.

Over the last five years, the Wisconsin Division of Vocation Rehabilitation has been part of a demonstration grant, The Promise Grant, from the Social Security Administration. The purpose of the grant was to test different strategies to increase competitive integrated employment for low-income youth (ages 14-21) and their families. In Wisconsin, there are approximately 16,000 youth statewide who are in this age group and are considered transition-age who are potentially eligible for Supplemental Security Income. These are youth who would be served by this program. with the goal of reducing the youth and families' reliance on public benefits.

The Family Navigators were a critical part of the Promise Grant to assist both youth and their family members to become employed. Youth with Family Navigators had two times as many jobs and increased their weekly earning compared to youth who didn't have a Family Navigator assigned to their family. The navigators were charged with connecting youth and their families with services, supports, and strategies that increased education, employment, and financial self-sufficiency.

The DVR grant demonstrated positive results of 507 obtaining at least one new job, and 306 family members starting at least one new job. Youth were projected to work an average of 26 hours per week, earning an average of \$12.94 per hour, or \$16,822 annually. Youth with disabilities are more likely to be successful in future employment and post-secondary education if they have held a job while in high school. ¹ In addition to these employment results, family

¹ *Predictors of Successful Transition from School to Employment for Youth with Disabilities*, (Wehman P1, 2015)

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navigators identified family needs that were possible barriers for youth and overall family employment. Navigators also connected them to existing services and systems (e.g., school, children's long-term supports, housing programs, financial literacy, future planning, vocational rehabilitation).

The state currently funds 11 Family Navigators through the PROMISE project. These positions will be eliminated if this legislation is not passed. SB 344 would fund 12 full-time positions located in each of the Workforce Development Regions with two in the Milwaukee area. The navigators would continue to support families of DVR-eligible youth ages 14-21 who are receiving Supplemental Security Income. The Family Navigators are comprised of people who have lived experience advocating for a family member and knowledge of existing Wisconsin programs and resources. SB 344 would also fund a Project Coordinator to provide support, coaching, and ongoing training of navigators in addition to continually evaluating outcomes of the project.

The total cost of \$2 million GPR would include the costs of \$80,000 GPR annually per Family Navigator position, \$25,000 GPR annually for training and evaluation of the project, travel costs for navigators and \$100,000 GPR annually for the hiring of a statewide project coordinator. Youth with disabilities and their families would benefit from the continuation of the Family Navigator program started under the Promise Grant to help obtain competitive employment and reduce these family's reliance on public benefits over their lifetime.

Based on DRW's work with transition aged youth and providing advocacy assistance to people with disabilities on employment concerns, SB 344 would continue the Family Navigator program which has proven to be a valuable tool for youth and families to increase the likelihood of securing competitive integrated employment, future independence and personal sustainability.
