



Testimony for the Education & Labor Committee

Hearing on Sub-Minimum Wage to People with Disabilities and the Transformation to Competitive, Integrated Employment Act (HR2373)

Presented by

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Chairman Scott, Chairwoman Adams, Chairwoman Bonamici, Ranking Member Foxx, Ranking Member Fulcher, Ranking Member Keller and Members of the Education & Labor Committee and Subcommittees on Civil Rights & Human Services and Workforce Protections, thank you for the invitation to speak to you today.

When I was born, there were no laws regarding integrated classrooms. Even though expectations for individuals with Down syndrome or other intellectual and developmental disabilities were very low, my parents believed that I could do more with the right support and education. Their goals for me were very high.

They entered me into a Montessori pre-school program and then had to fight to get me into elementary school classes which were not all special education. Chapter 766 had just started and teachers were trying to figure out how to mainstream those of us who needed extra help.

When I was growing up, I felt segregated and devalued and found it hard to use my voice to speak up. I felt invisible, not respected and not listened to when I spoke. My parents had no idea I felt this way.

It helped being involved in Special Olympics, Boy Scouts, hunting and fishing with my dad, and many other community activities.

In high school, I went to Essex Agricultural School and graduated in 1986. After that, I did a variety of food service jobs which were not good for my diet, I can tell you that!!

Then I attended a local workshop where they had us doing jobs such as packaging items to be shipped out, and piece work

It was very boring and unsatisfying for me. My friends would be sitting around playing cards, watching videos, and just hanging out with nothing to work on. In addition, we got paid very little for the work we did do.

It was not a good atmosphere to be in because it did not encourage us to do our best and see the results of our efforts.

The agency applied for and received a waiver to pay us less than minimum wage.

I went to my supervisor and said that I was not satisfied with what was happening and wanted to do more. He told me they did not have anything else and I quit!!

After connecting with the local Arc, I learned how to dress professionally and develop a Self-Advocacy presentation. I wanted to have a job where I could wear a suit and tie, carry a briefcase, and be a professional, like my Dad who was a teacher.

The Arc sparked my interest in joining with other advocates across the state to make things happen.

After becoming Chair-person with Mass Advocates Standing Strong regionally, I went on to be Chairperson of the state-wide organization.

It is all about respect and dignity as a citizen for me and not being stigmatized by labels-which belong on jars, not people!!

We would like to have “Nothing About Us Without Us.”

I soon realized that I had to be at the State House to make things happen with laws which affect all of us.

I was hired by the Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress to be their legislative specialist. In that role, which I still serve in today, I get paid above minimum wage for my services, I advocate for legislation that supports and protects the rights of all people with Down syndrome.

Along with many other self-advocates, I come to Washington DC for the National Down Syndrome Society Buddy Walk(r) on Washington Advocacy Day each year to advocate for policies to ensure all people with Down syndrome have access to meaningful jobs, healthcare and other important resources.

The NDSS also hooked me up with a 5-week internship with Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers from Washington State, who has a son with Down syndrome and is the co-lead on the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act.

I’m proud to be here today to represent both of these organizations – the MDSC and the NDSS.

Also, one of the jobs that I have enjoyed most over my career was working at the State House as the Legislative Intern for Representative

Tom Sannicandro. While there, I reviewed bills, did research on current budget issues, and attended rallies to reinstate funding for families and individuals with disabilities.

When Representative Sannicandro left, I moved on to work with Senator Barbara L'Italian. I was with her for several years and then she ran for the Senate and also moved on.

Over the years, I have learned that the voices of self-advocates such as myself really does make a difference, so I appreciate the opportunity today to voice my opinion.

Advocating is about respect and dignity and working together. There is a great saying that I think says it all -- T-E-A-M Together Everyone Achieves More (TEAM).

For many years people told me I could not do what I wanted, but I persisted. My parents were even surprised at how high my goals were.

Look at me now!!

It is important to have a social life. I am very active in my church, do volunteer work, and go out to dinner with friends. I am also going to the Northpoint Bible College in Bradford, working toward my goal of being a minister someday.

I live in a 5-room apartment with the L'Arche Boston North community and attend many things with other core members.

I'm not the only one who was very unhappy working in a sheltered workshop. I have talked to many friends who have had experiences like mine.

Like me, they wanted to work, but had to work on the same boring task year after year. Or they would end up playing bingo or cards while job

coaches were on their phones. One of my friends said she worked in a workshop all week for \$1.25. She was told she couldn't make more money. Another said she was paid \$10 a week for cleaning bathrooms. Another friend said the workshop felt like a babysitting location.

The fact is that people with disabilities need REAL jobs with REAL pay.

We passed the Real Lives Bill in Massachusetts and with this bill, we have more control over our funding which we receive from the MA Department of Developmental Services.

There are 3 funding models.

Traditional Services have the funds come from DDS to the Provider (such as The Arc) and then on to the individual.

Of course, there is an administrative cost to this. The Agency hires the staff for me. I do not have a choice in who they hire and I am not in control of my money.

If I choose Agency with choice, DDS gives the money to the provider who gives it to the individual. The agency finds staff and the individual can choose their supports. However, I still would not have control over my budget.

If I choose Participant-Directed or Self- Direction, which is in fact what I have chosen, DDS funding is administered through Public Partnership Limited, where invoices are submitted for staffing and other needs.

With this option, I oversee my budget, and have a voice in all the supports I need. I also find my own staff. Some families choose not to have this responsibility.

But for me, self-direction gives me more self-esteem, choice and control over my life.

In summary, I would like to address these sub-minimum wages which are currently legal. It is an asset to companies but a huge drawback to those of us who need to make a living and be a respected, valued employee in the community. We have to pay for rent, food, utilities, clothing and other expenses like everyone else, as well as wanting to be able to afford transportation and have a social life. We cannot live a full life on a sub-minimum wage check.

I urge the Members of this Committee to support the phase out of Section 14c and the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act (HR2373).

Martin Luther King, Jr. inspires me and like Reverend King, I feel strongly about human rights. Like him, I have a dream.

“I dream that people will be able to afford to live independently or with supports if needed, work at a fair wage, and be happy in their communities.”

I respectfully ask the Education & Labor Committee and everyone here today to do everything in their power to ensure people with disabilities receive the full wages they truly deserve so that they can live a meaningful fulfilling life.

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