



Meet Laura. Anyone who knows her is always impressed with her ability to communicate her needs and advocate for her rights. Unfortunately, a lot of people who create legislation on her behalf aren't always listening. Sometimes people project what they feel is best for themselves onto others. Laura is asking for you to listen to her point of view.

She was born 3 months prematurely with multiple handicaps, including autism, OCD, vision and hearing disabilities, and other limiting conditions. Although her memory is fantastic, Laura struggles with anxiety, social situations, and processing information. She is prone to unpredictable, impulsive behaviors that are more frequent in settings that are not adapted to the pace and predictability that allow her to feel safe and comfortable. She was fully mainstreamed through public school with a 1:1 para, but never had a single friend or felt included as part of a group.

Laura is a good reader and has some filing skills. It is possible (provided funding is available to pay TWO people) that she could have a 1:1 job coach follow her for a few hours a week into a competitive job if one were available in the small, rural town where we live. However, the choices are extremely limited and for the most part, not well suited to her special needs.

Fortunately, we live in Hubbard county in rural Minnesota, where a beautifully functioning county operated DT&H program has been developed through years of good management and planning. This program provides a wide array of working options for the developmentally disabled and mentally ill population in this area, from simply providing transportation to and from fully independent competitive employment to fully supported sheltered work. In addition to supported work, the program incorporates choices for day activities, fitness, arts activities, and other developmentally appropriate options. They operate a downtown gift shop; a surplus thrift store (next to Walmart and behind AmericInn) that sells furniture, appliances, and other larger items; an adorable downtown thrift store, and a traditional Developmental Achievement Center, where people who choose to work do a variety of person-centered tasks that fit their interest and ability level: from making rugs and birdhouses, to cutting tags, filing office supplies, or manufacturing piece work. Each of these work centers employs primarily disabled people, with a few nondisabled work supervisors. Because these vibrant working communities are operated by a county DT&H program and employ a majority of people who have disabilities, they are labeled by the state as not being "in the community" and not "fully integrated."

Here is where Laura’s point of view becomes most important to hear. She does not WANT to be a minority in a nondisabled population. Her favorite time of year is when she can spend a week at Camp Hand-in-Hand, fully segregated with other autistic people in a setting that accommodates for the special needs and interests of other people who share her condition. She does not WANT to work in an overstimulating or isolated workplace in the competitive job market for a few hours each week. She prefers having the choice to work among like-minded people with similar abilities, where she feels a strong sense of belonging and community. For the first time in her life, she has real friends and feels like she is a productive member of an adult community. Segregation should be a CHOICE. Seniors choose this option all the time when they choose to leave their private homes in mixed age neighborhoods to live in Senior Living complexes, gated communities, and nursing homes. Young adults choose this option when they decide to live in apartment complexes or neighborhoods with lots of people who share their age or stage of life. Yet, we systematically deny the developmentally disabled population this choice every time we claim they are better off being “fully integrated”. Denial of choice is discriminatory and quite possibly unconstitutional.

Laura absolutely LOVES her jobs pricing and shelving items at the thrift store and working at the DAC filing, cutting tags, or working on the rug-making team. The support staff is knowledgeable and compassionate, and able to appropriately manage her unpredictable behaviors. Laura knows and accepts that she would not be successful or safe as an employee without support. She also knows that she works for less than minimum wage for some of her jobs, but is unconcerned because her living expenses are already covered. Her wages are based on productivity, which is measured at periodic intervals as part of the 14C provisions of the law. This law allows businesses and nonprofit organizations enough profit to continue to hire people with significant disabilities. It also protects people from exploitation by requiring periodic evaluations, which are not required in the competitive work force. If 14C provisions are eliminated, people who are not able to successfully work in the competitive job market will no longer be able to work at all. Capitalism is basically an all-or-none system: either you can do a job at a minimum level of competency or you aren’t employable. Period.

So, next time you hear the media try to tell you subminimum wages are discriminatory or that the choice to work in a segregated, supported environment is inappropriate, please think of Laura. As she would tell you loudly and clearly: Handicapped People Count! Their voices, choices, and interests should be heard. **Please continue to support 14C provisions for special wages and supported work opportunities. Remember that ability-based, commensurate “subminimum” wage is a CHOICE, not a mandate. Elimination of this choice will rip away the ONLY job opportunities and workplaces available to thousands of happily employed Minnesotans like Laura.**

