

## ***Increasing Access and Opportunity through Disability Inclusion***

### **SF4030 and HF4075**

#### The Problem:

People with disabilities want to, and should be able to, access our communities; however, not all community spaces and places are ready for people with disabilities.

Our society is responsible for disabling people. If spaces were set up and constructed in an accessible way for people with disabilities, those individuals would not be restricted from full participation in our communities.

According to a 2022 NIH study, “People with disabilities were significantly more likely than their non-disabled peers to report loneliness, low social support and social isolation and to report exposure to low social connectedness on more than one indicator.” They are 3 times as likely to feel as though they have low social support, and 4 times as likely to feel that they are not supported in their community.

People with disabilities represent the largest minority group in Minnesota and remain the only minority group that anyone can join at any point in their lives. Nearly 12% of Minnesotans have a disability and 22% of those citizens have intersectional identities and 42% are 65 or older that further compound the common barriers to access and opportunity. Barriers including language, transportation, economic stability, cultural and racial bias, and social isolation have prevented full participation in community and resulted in people with disabilities with intersectional identities being left behind by the disability benefit system.

Instances of exclusion are far too common. Groups of Lifeworks clients have been turned away from community centers and questioned when they are at coffee shops. People with disabilities have been terminated from their jobs due to the lack of accommodations. Individuals have been openly mocked by coworkers because of their disability. These real-life examples have a common thread: individuals, communities, and businesses are not educated on disability inclusion.

#### Why Disability Inclusion?

- Most spaces, places, and systems are not created for people with disabilities.
- People with disabilities must have equitable access to workplaces, communities, and services.
- Through disability inclusion trainings, we are helping build communities, workplaces, and systems that are radically inclusive of people with disabilities.

#### The Solution

Evidence shows that disability inclusion trainings are catalysts for real change and make the world more welcoming to people with disabilities. Lifeworks has seen firsthand how education

on disability inclusion can unlock opportunities for people with disabilities that were previously unattainable.

In three months, Lifeworks trained over 300 people and one business began hiring people with disabilities as soon as two weeks after their education session. Collectively participants reported 54% growth in their comfort level in supporting colleagues or neighbors with disabilities and 31% increase in their knowledge of disability inclusion. The results are promising, but to achieve an inclusive Minnesota for all people with disabilities Minnesota needs to invest in these efforts.

With \$3,000,000 in legislative support, we will launch a 3-year statewide disability inclusion initiative to:

- Train and educate people with disabilities to increase knowledge of available resources and so they can advocate for access and opportunities.
- Bring disability inclusion training to parents, guardians, and families of people with disabilities so they understand the disability service system and are better equipped with the tools to see beyond preconceived barriers.
- Provide education to current and prospective employers of people with disabilities because workplaces that fully include people with disabilities see two times more economic profit and higher productivity than businesses that do not engage in disability inclusion.
- Build capacity for culturally specific services and support led by rural, immigrant, and BIPOC entrepreneurs and business owners, honoring people with disabilities and older adults with intersectional identities who have historically been left behind by existing systems.
- Launch a statewide “disability inclusive” assessment and associated technology solution for businesses and other community spaces so citizens with disabilities know that they will be welcomed, physical spaces will be accessible, and interactions will be free from discrimination.

Lifeworks will use funds to build out our disability inclusion division, including coaches and trainers to connect with thousands of people with disabilities, families, businesses, and community organizations statewide. We will invest in community outreach staff who are culturally affirming to begin conversations around disability and start people on a path toward the services and resources available across Minnesota.

Additionally, we would develop an innovative web-based or mobile tool that allows people with disabilities to choose “disability friendly” businesses in their communities – from coffee shops to concert venues to ride share services to employers to doctor offices. This assessment tool will go beyond current ADA standards and include aspects of disability that are not currently considered.

With this ambitious work, Minnesota will see more people with disabilities and older adults access the services for which they qualify and decrease the bias and stigma that creates barriers across all our communities.

Uponor North America, Inc.  
Erica Amévo, Vice President of Human Resources  
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March 18, 2024

Chair Fischer and Members of the Committee on Human Services Policy  
Minnesota House of Representatives  
State Office Building  
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. Room 200  
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Fischer and Members of the Committee on Human Services Policy:

My name is Erica Amévo, the Vice President of Human Resources at Uponor North America, Inc. based in Apple Valley, MN. I am writing to you in support of HF 4075.

As a Human Resources professional for two decades, I know how important it is to create inclusive workplaces for all employees and how inclusion work goes beyond our businesses and permeates our neighborhoods, community groups, and families. That is why I support the passing of HF 4075 and the statewide investment in Lifeworks Services, Inc.

Uponor has been a partner and supporter of Lifeworks for more than a decade and is an employer of people with disabilities. Last fall, Uponor hired Lifeworks to provide an inclusive workplaces training as a part of our commitment to advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Staff from our Apple Valley, MN headquarters joined the training in person as well as employees from across the globe via video call.

The Lifeworks team did an outstanding job engaging our employees on the topic of disability inclusion. Accessibility and disability inclusion have been part of our Human Resources strategies at Uponor, but we knew we needed the education and tools from an industry expert like Lifeworks to help support the strategies. In total, 134 Uponor staff members participated in the training and reported their confidence in supporting a coworker with a disability increased by 56% after the training.

The inclusive workplaces training included a panel discussion that featured the lived experiences of people within or connected to the disability community, including one of our own employees. Having their voices at the forefront of the discussion was impactful for attendees and sparked thoughtful conversation on how we can all advocate for disability inclusion in our workplaces and communities.

I am confident that the disability inclusion education and training provided by Lifeworks will make a difference in Uponor's workplace and with our employees. We are more

knowledgeable, aware, and prepared to have a workplace that is wholly inclusive of employees with disabilities – which is something all workplaces and communities should strive toward.

Beyond training, I am excited that Lifeworks will work alongside people with disabilities and businesses to create an inclusion assessment that will provide people with disabilities insights as to which of our community spaces are inclusive or disability friendly.

Lifeworks goes above and beyond as a disability services provider by bringing solutions that show us the way to a radically inclusive world. Not only through disability inclusion training and education, but also by partnering with people with disabilities to navigate the system and gain access to the services and supports they choose.

Uponor fully supports the disability inclusion work Lifeworks is doing statewide. With the investment from the state through HF 4075, Minnesota will be known as the most inclusive state for people with disabilities.

Chair Fischer and Members of the Human Services Policy Committee, I want to sincerely thank you for your time and the work you do at the legislature.

Sincerely,

Erica Amévo  
Vice President of Human Resources  
Uponor North America, Inc.

BestPrep  
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March 18, 2024

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Minnesota House of Representatives  
State Office Building  
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. Room 200  
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Fischer and Members of the Committee on Human Services Policy,

My name is Stephanie Musgrove, the Director of Training at BestPrep based in Brooklyn Park, MN. I am writing to you in support of HF 4075.

As a nonprofit organization working with students in Minnesota, it is critical for our staff and team of 5,800 volunteers to recognize and understand how young people are more open with their identities, including disability, today. That is why I support the passing of HF 4075 and the statewide investment in Lifeworks Services, Inc.

We connected with Lifeworks Services, Inc. to lead a training on inclusive workplaces for our staff. The training helped our staff feel better equipped to support and advocate for colleagues with a disability. It gave us good perspective on the variety of ways inclusivity can become part of our everyday work environment. Additionally, we quickly understood how the takeaways from the trainings could be applied to our service delivery with students and teachers as well.

BestPrep is well connected in the communities we serve, and knows there is more we can do to be fully inclusive and create disability friendly spaces and programs. Lifeworks is the reason we started the conversation on disability inclusion at this moment. The training with Lifeworks was just the first part of our work to be more inclusive, and we know that other nonprofits, companies, and organizations would have a similar experience given the opportunity to connect with Lifeworks.

*The Disability Inclusion in the Workplace training offered by Lifeworks was a great resource for our small, non-profit team. They worked with us closely to better understand the type of training that would be best suited for our team and made sure the agenda and flow were well-planned ahead of time. They did a great job of level setting, sharing examples and scenarios that we could discuss and reflect on, inviting questions*

*and conversation, and providing us with resources we can continue to refer back to. Overall, the team felt much better equipped to support and advocate for colleagues with a disability after this training. It gave us good perspective on the variety of ways inclusivity can become part of our everyday work environment. Thank you for the partnership, Lifeworks!*

BestPrep fully supports the disability inclusion work Lifeworks is doing statewide. With the investment from the state through HF 4075, Minnesota will be known as the most inclusive state for people with disabilities.

Chair Fischer and Members of the Human Services Policy Committee I want to sincerely thank you for your time and the work you do at the legislature.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Musgrove  
Director of Training  
BestPrep

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March 18, 2024

Chair Fischer and Members of the Committee on Human Services Policy  
Minnesota House of Representatives  
State Office Building  
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. Room 200  
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Fischer and Members of the Committee on Human Services Policy,

My name is Sumukha Terakanambi, I am 25 years old, and I am from Lakeville, Minnesota. I am also a person with a physical disability and a self-advocate. I want to thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to provide my testimony. I am writing in support of HF 4075 which would provide funding for a statewide disability inclusion initiative. This initiative will educate people with disabilities and their families about resources and the disability services that are available, increase self-advocacy, encourage employers to hire more people with disabilities, and build capacity for culturally specific services. It would also create a certification program for businesses and community spaces so people with disabilities know which places are welcoming, fully accessible, and free from discrimination.

This legislation is important to me because people with disabilities continue to face significant barriers including workplace discrimination, inaccessibility of the community, and a lack of information about available services and supports. These barriers prevent the full inclusion of people with disabilities in our community.

Personally, there were many instances where I was unable to make informed choices and missed out on beneficial programs due to inadequate information about services. It was incredibly frustrating and stressful to navigate a complex system alone and feel like I had no support. I was even under the assumption that if I sought meaningful employment opportunities, I would lose my waiver benefits. Having the knowledge of resources and the many services to help people work while maintaining benefits would have made all the difference.

Unfortunately, I have also experienced a lot of inaccessibility in my community. For example, when I was in college, I had to advocate for myself repeatedly to secure reasonable accommodations and to address areas of campus that were not accessible. This included inaccessible restrooms, buildings with no elevator, entrances with no

automatic door openers, and classrooms with limited space. I also struggled to go out to restaurants or other places in the community because of physical barriers. These barriers made me feel as though people with disabilities were an afterthought.

While I have not personally experienced employment discrimination, I am aware of the challenges people with disabilities face in securing reasonable accommodations. Employers continue to give in to the stereotypes that people with disabilities cannot be productive and that accommodations cost a lot of money. This blatant discrimination denies important opportunities for people with disabilities.

That is why funding the disability inclusion initiative is extremely important and would greatly benefit the state of Minnesota. It would equip people with disabilities and their families with resources to improve self-advocacy and increase knowledge of disability services. From my experience, having more knowledge of programs and how they work has increased my confidence tremendously as a self-advocate. Additionally, it would help businesses see the value of not only employing people with disabilities but also making spaces fully accessible.

It is for the reasons explained above that I urge your support of HF 4075. Thank you so much for the opportunity to share my testimony.