Support for the Governor’s Proposal in the House Version of the Omnibus Bill

*To Phase Out Disability-Based Subminimum Wages*

To Chair Hoffman, Chair Noor, and Human Services Conference Committee Members:

Thank you very much for considering the Governor’s proposal in the House version of the omnibus bill to phase out disability-based subminimum wages. I strongly support these provisions. Currently, I serve as a research assistant at the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion at the University of Vermont (UVM). I testify on my own behalf, not representing UVM. I am a blind person, and I have personal experience with subminimum-wage sheltered workshops. These are dehumanizing environments designed to break and control disabled people, and I am grateful that I escaped. I cannot simply forget about all those people who are, in many ways, just like me, but who are still stuck in subminimum-wage jobs. I came to the University of Vermont because Vermont was the first state to eliminate the payment of subminimum wages over 20 years ago, and Dr. Bryan Dague wrote his dissertation about the closure of the last sheltered workshop in Vermont. I will offer some comments on some major themes in this discussion in hopes that you will vote in favor of equal rights for disabled workers.

**Vermont Does Not Miss Subminimum Wages**

Vermont eliminated disability-based subminimum wages in 2002. Many disability professionals in Vermont today have no experience with subminimum wages. I will offer a story to illustrate. In my first semester of my doctoral program, I took a course where we designed interview-based research studies. The professor assigned students (all educators ourselves) into pairs based on our professional expertise, and she matched me with a special education transition coordinator for a local school district because my work on subminimum wages related to transition. My classmate and I swapped papers. When it was time to give each other feedback, my classmate told me that she had never heard of subminimum wages or sheltered workshops before, and it blew her mind that both were legal in the United States of America. It blew my mind that she could be a special education transition professional, helping students transition from the K-12 system, and not know about subminimum wages. Vermont has moved on. We should educate teachers about subminimum wages, but we don’t miss subminimum wages.

**Rural vs. Urban Communities**

Vermont is such a small state that we have only one person representing us in the United States House of Representatives. I live in Burlington, the biggest population center, a town of about 43,000 people. Vermont is overwhelmingly rural, and I grew up in a typical, depressed New England Appalachian mill town of 5,000 people. Young people, regardless of disability, learn from an early age that seeking gainful employment opportunities requires getting out of town. Rural communities have our struggles, but we are often tired of being held up as the excuse when urban employers want to avoid paying their workers. The jobs we want pay real wages, not subminimum wages.

**Subminimum-Wage Employers Will Not Be Forced to Close**

Instead of “if you cannot afford to live on the wages, buy fewer lattes,” consider “If you cannot afford to pay your employees, buy fewer yachts.” If an employer decides to close after a policy change, that is their decision, not an automatic consequence of the policy change. This is an ordinary scare tactic used over and over by those employers who do not want to pay their workers. Consistently, the trend is that these employers do not close down after being forced to pay a higher wage.

**Disabled People Will Not Lose Necessary Services**

This is a common threat, but it does not happen. If a sheltered workshop is in the business of providing disability-related services to its employees, it can continue to offer those services. Even if they cease to work in the workshop, they can go spend part of their day working somewhere out in the community and then return to their former place of employment for those services for the other part of the day. The possibilities are endless, and people will choose the combinations of work, leisure, therapy, and other services that are right for them.

**Working Hours May Go Down**

If someone’s working hours go down, this does not imply a reduction in quality of life. A disabled person may choose to spend some of the week working, some of the week taking an exercise class at the local YMCA, some of the week receiving Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) under Medicaid waivers, or really doing whatever it is that is right for them. They are free to choose what is right for them.

**Economic Arguments**

If wages go up, then there becomes an increased incentive for the employers to make those workers productive. Frequently, in current subminimum wage jobs, workers are being trained for one task until they get good at it, then switched to being trained for another task, and the cycle repeats. It keeps the workers perpetually in training. The purpose of a sheltered workshop is not really to make workers productive; if it were, the workshops would not continuously rotate their workers so that they avoid displaying their productive potential. If the employer needs to pay the workers a minimum wage, then the employer is incentivized to promote worker productivity.

Frequently, workers are matched with jobs that showcase how disabled they are, not how competent they are. In real jobs in the competitive market, this is not the trend because employers have an economic incentive to use the employees’ strengths to achieve productivity. For example, someone in my family with cerebral palsy was forced to strip and wax floors for 65 cents per hour, which required a lot of muscle that he could not control. On a computer, he is very productive, but manual labor does not match his strengths. This is obvious, but the workshop was not designed to make him productive.

Many sheltered workshops are currently operating like corporate welfare queens. Many of them gobble up government grants, private foundation grants, tax breaks, and government contracts; at the same time, they do not have to pay for the costs of keeping their labor alive. If a worker is making 7 cents per hour, they are not living on that wage. Therefore, someone else is picking up the tab to keep that labor alive, and it is frequently the government. Workshops can also get paid just to be giving disabled people a place to go during the day. These are incentives to keep disabled people in the sheltered workshop even if they could otherwise transition to competitive integrated employment. Subminimum-wage employers are parasites on public budgets.

**The False Promise of Safety in the Workshop**

Many families are under the illusion that their disabled family members are safer in a sheltered workshop than in competitive integrated employment, which is part of why they are often afraid of what will happen if workshops close. The workshops won’t need to close, but let me help dismantle the fear in that threat. Instead of thinking that the workers are safer in the workshops, consider the idea that the workers are actually more vulnerable in the workshops than they are in integrated settings. In subminimum-wage sheltered workshops, there is a hierarchy where the people on the bottom are disabled people. The lower someone is paid, the less power they have. Disabled workers in a workshop have no voice and very little ability to fight back if someone is abusing them. These work facilities are separated from the rest of society, often in settings like Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory, where “nobody ever goes in, and nobody ever comes out.” In many ways, we are like the Oompa Loompas in these subminimum wage facilities. We are paid in peanuts. If anyone ever does come in to visit, we are expected to put on a nice happy show, and the visitors are told that we “would never be able to survive outside the workshop on our own.” Frequently, these workshops are staffed by people with backgrounds in the criminal justice system, so the key skill set is controlling people. Often, the nondisabled supervisors have no meaningful skill sets for supporting disabled people. Workshops sometimes get dumped on by nursing homes; if they get fired by a nursing home for being abusive, the sheltered workshop will take them. They might be fresh out of jail; I’ve seen that a lot. It is an opportunity for them to be a supervisor when they otherwise would never become one. For those who seek power and control over others, working as a nondisabled supervisor at a subminimum-wage sheltered workshop is a delectable opportunity. If something happens, nobody will ever believe the disabled person over their “caretakers,” a term often used for bosses.

I encourage the Committee to support these provisions to phase out disability-based subminimum wages without fearing the closure of these workshops. It’s not likely, and it also wouldn’t be much of a loss. We don’t miss subminimum wages in Vermont. The rest of the country is watching to see what Minnesota values.

Thank you,

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