

**Written testimony from Senator Becky Massey
for the Senate Committee on Health, Education Labor and Pension Committee.
Overcoming Persistent Barriers to Economic Self-Sufficiency for People with Disabilities.**

I want to thank you for asking me to testify before the HELP Committee on Thursday, September 18th. As my role of Executive Director of Sertoma Center and being a disability provider for over 21 years, coupled with my role in the State Senate of Tennessee, I can bring a unique perspective to the hearings.

I will be reporting on the following:

- Tennessee initiatives
- Current barriers
- Suggestions for solutions.

First we need to address the challenge of addressing policy changes for individuals with disabilities. While there is a lot of conversation about people first policy, you cannot put individuals into a nice, neat box. Individuals with disabilities range a wide spectrum from physical to intellectual to mental disabilities. And there is a wide spectrum within each of these types of disabilities with factors of age, IQ and functioning abilities.

Recently through an information gathering process, it was learned that while 75.2% of people in Tennessee without disabilities are employed, only 28.2% of people with any type of disability find work. Likewise, citizens with mental illness or substance use disorders have substantial difficulty finding and maintaining employment.

Tennessee Initiatives

There are a lot of good things happening in Tennessee in working to improve employment opportunities and percentages of individuals with disabilities. In June 2013, Governor Bill Haslam signed an Executive Order establishing the Tennessee Employment First Initiative to expand community employment opportunities for Tennesseans with disabilities.

Employment First is a concept to facilitate the full inclusion of people with the most significant disabilities in the workplace and community. Under the Employment First approach, community-based, integrated employment is the first option for employment services for youth and adults with significant disabilities. Integrated employment refers to jobs held by people with disabilities in typical workplace settings where the majority of persons employed are not persons with disabilities, they earn at least minimum wage and they are paid directly by the employer.

The Task Force was asked to identify state policies and procedures that create barriers to employment, to make recommendations to eliminate those barriers, to forge effective partnerships among the related state agencies and other stakeholders and to identify best practices to increase opportunities for “integrated employment.” The Employment First Task Force concluded its first year on August 1, 2014 and issued a report to Governor Haslam Tuesday of this week. I am including parts of their report in this document.

Tennessee Programs that are working

The Department of Labor and Workforce Development

In 2011, the Department of Labor and Workforce Development was awarded a three-year Disability Employment Initiative Grant to increase the capacity of the America's Job Centers and local workforce investment areas to meet the needs of Tennesseans with disabilities by training Disability Resource Coordinators and Integrated Resource Teams to leverage available funding and resources to help Tennesseans with disabilities get hired.

The Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

In 2012, Tennessee was selected as one of three states to participate in the Office of Disability Employment Policy's Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program. The Department was awarded the grant that provided funding as well as consultation from experts in converting sheltered workshops to integrated employment.

Vanderbilt Kennedy Center

Later in 2012, Tennessee was awarded a Partnerships in Employment systems and policy change grant for transitioning youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, funded by the U.S. Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Under the leadership of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, this five-year grant has helped to formalize the statewide employment consortium, the TennesseeWorks Partnership, around the three federal grants now operating in Tennessee. This partnership is the unifying structure within which all of the grants collaborate and all public and private stakeholders come together to pursue the goal of increasing employment of Tennesseans with disabilities. Tennessee is only one of two states to receive all three national employment grants available of the past three years.

The Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

TDMHSAS recently worked in partnership with the Tennessee Division of Rehabilitation Services to increase the number of individuals with serious mental illness and co-occurring mental and substance use disorders to obtain and retain integrated employment. In less than a year through this program, 154 individuals have been served, with 62 job placements in a variety of jobs and an average hourly wage of \$8.07.

The Division of Rehabilitation Services, Department of Human Services

The Vocational Rehabilitation program, which provides services to help working-age individuals with physical and/or mental disabilities enter or return to employment, closed 1,966 cases with individuals in successful employment in the last federal fiscal year, and has closed 1,440 cases in this federal fiscal year.

Other

The Tennessee General Assembly has passed and helped fund scholarships for the four post-secondary programs for individuals with disabilities. These education programs are a two-year course of study which empowers students to achieve gainful employment in the community. They help young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities make a successful transition from high school to adult life by providing them with career counseling and developing their academic, vocational, and decision making skills. It is a comprehensive transition program for unique learners, highly motivated young adults whose

disability is characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. Upon successful completion of the program, students receive a vocational certificate. These students are eligible to apply for Federal Financial Aid for tuition assistance and are recognized by Vocational Rehabilitation as being tied to employment outcomes.

There has been a dedicated effort to provide a voice to people with disabilities regarding their experiences with long-term support programs in Tennessee by emphasizing Stakeholder feedback in the policy and planning processes. TennesseeWorks has six community meetings with families and individuals with disabilities across the state and also collected 2,200 Family Expectation Surveys.

Current Barriers

- A lack of coordination among state and federal agencies that administer funding and programs for individuals with disabilities.
- A lack of adequate funding to support employment efforts for all those who need assistance in finding and retaining a job, including services such as job coaches, customized employment, and individualized supports.
- Inadequacies in service delivery, including difficulty accessing services and a lack of flexibility.
- Insufficient opportunities for professional development for those who provide services.
- Insufficient resources and opportunities for training and post-secondary education leading to employment for individuals with disabilities.
- Inadequacies in transportation services to and from job sites.
- A cultural mindset of low expectations on the part of professionals, businesses, parents, and individuals themselves that people with disabilities are unemployable.
- The lack of a high school diploma or other competency based vocational diploma that employers want job candidates to have.
- The fear of losing one's benefits if one works. (SSI, SSDI, health insurance) Any cuts at all prevent them from being able to pay their monthly rent, utilities and other bills.
- Asset limitations. There is no way to save for emergencies and other things to help pull them out of poverty. The \$2,000 limit that was established when the program was started is equal to almost \$13,000 in today's dollars. The ABLE act could help with this.
- Lack of information or insufficient information about benefits.
- The need for Supported Employment, particularly for individuals with more significant disabilities.
- The waiting list for services and supports. There are over 7,000 individuals on the statewide waiting list for services for individuals with intellectual disabilities. As a result of this, the individuals receiving services in Tennessee are older. The youth with disabilities face significant challenges in accessing services and supports.
- Presently, there is no direct support for individuals with developmental disabilities.
- There is not sufficient funding for Vocational Rehabilitation services and other training programs.
- Failure to prepare secondary students for employment while in high school and successfully and seamlessly transitioning them to adult service systems that can help them obtain jobs.

- The need for long-term supports for some individuals who need that level of support to be able to keep their job.
- SSA benefits system is too complex to navigate and understand (examples: Work Incentives, PASS Plans, IRWE's)
- Vocational Rehabilitation system is also difficult to navigate and they often deem people "too disabled to work." They do not focus on those with the most severe disabilities.
- Not enough engagement with employers at the federal level to promote and incentivize employment for persons with disabilities.
- Lack of adequate funding.

Solutions

- Encourage Memorandum of Understanding among agencies to facilitate coordination among programs and produce successful outcomes for people with disabilities. Individuals and families struggle to navigate complex systems. Many families need to navigate both the Social Security Administration and Centers for Medicaid & Medicare Services and Rehabilitation Administration. Communication and alignment between these service systems would benefit families served by these systems and promote better outcomes.
- Pass the ABLÉ act.
- Increase the asset limits for SSI/SSDI. There could be an automatic cost of living inflator put in place even if it cannot be adjusted to today's dollars.
- Engage and support businesses in employing people with disabilities.
- Ensure every student with a disability leaves high school with a smooth transition that would include a choice of (but not limited to) post-secondary education, a job training program, or paid, integrated employment to the same extent as students without disabilities.
- Create policy and infrastructure that allows one to be able to move seamlessly from school to adult supports with a minimum of duplicative application and assessment information, perhaps by creating electronic records much like a person's electronic medical record, that could hold all relevant information and be accessed as authorized.
- Support individuals with disabilities and their families by increasing their knowledge about the benefits of employment as a life goal and about the different supports that are available. Often families and individuals themselves do not see employment as a real possibility.
- Ensure that all working-age individuals with disabilities have access to a system of supports that enables them to obtain and maintain employment in the community throughout their lives. Many people need some level of support (some long term supports) in order to maintain their employment. Research shows that, for every dollar taxpayers spend on supported employment services, they received between \$1.17 and \$1.77 that is otherwise spent on more expensive services with far less beneficial and preferred outcomes.
- Better dissemination of cost-effective, HCBS aligned, innovative methods for meeting individual needs in person-centered ways across state lines.
- Practical technical assistance for providers in how to convert from a facilities-based model to an Employment model to align with expected CMS guidance on HCBS higher standards and expectations.

- Making One Stop Employment Centers available and accountable for ALL job seekers, not just those who can search for themselves.
- Encourage businesses to have a more accessible employment application process including being able to verbally apply when the person is not able to fill out an online or computer application.
- Reevaluate the Ticket to Work program to address the need for some individuals to have long term supports to be successfully employed.
- Provide incentives to cities to develop and/or improve transportation for individuals with disabilities.

Research confirms that when people with disabilities are connected to work experiences in their communities, achieving goals such as finding a good place to live, having friends and using their talents all become much more likely. For all of us, a good job is about much more than a paycheck. It contributes to a sense of accomplishment, self-worth, and independence. A meaningful job can make a difference in the lives of people with disabilities just as it does for all citizens.

Every person, regardless of hardship, disability, and prejudice, can excel if given the opportunity. Many people with intellectual disabilities yearn for a job. Though they are desperate to earn a wage, many have never gotten the chance. For them a job means more than just a paycheck. It means truly being part of the community.