

House Hearing

September 13, 2016

On behalf of the #IWantToWork campaign and all Pennsylvanians with disabilities. We are grateful for your support of Employment First Pennsylvania. I would like to start by thanking the Labor and Industry Committee and all of its members for their continued support for people with disabilities. A special thanks to Chair Representative Gingrich for her leadership of this community and Minority Chair Representative Galloway. We would like to recognize Representatives Cutler and Miller for their leadership in sponsoring House Bill 2130.

Living in a state where Employment First is not just a nice thought, but is rather the law of the land could be a game changer for me and the tens of thousands of other Pennsylvanians with disabilities. As of 2008, 11.3% of working age individuals were adults with disabilities. Of these individuals with disabilities only 39% were employed. According to a 2015 Kessler Foundation's recent survey, 69% of unemployed people with disabilities want to work, and are actively preparing for employment or are looking for jobs. However, as the system is set up now, there are countless barriers against these individuals in gaining employment.

If you are unfamiliar with the #IWantToWork campaign, I would like to provide you with a little bit of information about who we are. If you have not yet had the privilege of joining us in a selfie, don't worry, you will certainly get that honor soon. The #IWantToWork campaign is a project created by United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania and the Campaign for What Works. It was established to promote the employment of people with disabilities throughout Pennsylvania.

On May 17, Governor Wolf signed House Bill 400 into Act 26 of 2016. When fully implemented, it will be a life changing law for young people with disabilities. The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation will be able to support high-school students with disabilities in obtaining part-time and summer jobs; helping youth with disabilities as they gain critical job experience and skills while they prepare for work after finishing high school. #IWantToWork is not just about legislation --- we are about creating a societal shift. In order to make the changes necessary to improve the employment outcomes of people with disabilities, the campaign has developed a business coalition, established an extremely successful social media campaign that reaches over 20,000 people per month, and created videos, articles, and blogs to address the issue. I have my colleagues on the campaign here today.

But HB400 was only the first step. Through this legislation and its additional funding, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation is supporting high school students in obtaining employment. But life is not over on graduation day. We want to ensure that all individuals with disabilities have the ability to pursue their goal of Employment First.

Employment First Pennsylvania, or HB 2130, supports the belief that all individuals, with or without disabilities, should be able to pursue competitive, integrated employment. In other words, the primary goal for all individuals is to have a job that pays at least minimum wage

and is in an integrated environment. For Employment First to be successful, a strong foundation has to be laid through this legislation. This legislation requires: An independent Employment First Oversight Commission, an Executive Coordinating Committee consisting of Deputy Secretaries in all state agencies involved in implementing Employment First, and the development of a three-year plan for improving employment outcomes, and the regular reporting of data on the progression of Employment First outcomes. It also sets a goal that local and state government workforces consist of at least 7% people with disabilities.

This bill in itself does not require additional funds. It does, however, require the reallocation funding within the intellectual and developmental disability funds. Currently, there is \$400 million that supports intellectual and developmental disability programming, but only 5% is presently being used for supported employment. We would like to see through this bill a shift in the allocation of this money, with a greater emphasis on employment. We want to ensure there is continued movement within the managed care model to enable everyone to receive the support they need including those with physical or intellectual disabilities.

Earlier this year, an Employment First Executive Order was signed by the Governor. We applaud this effort and it is a good start, but the Executive Order is term-limited and does not cover the comprehensive elements needed for Pennsylvania to become a truly Employment First state. This legislation takes the Executive Order and adds an independent oversight commission, data collection, and a Coordinating Committee made of department deputy secretaries.

Employment First is not a trend, a charity case, or a fad; it is a policy and cultural shift that requires a comprehensive legislative approach to be successful. We recognize that society often needs a strong nudge from legislation for cultural changes to occur, and legislation has to be in the right society, culture, and time for it to be successful. That time is now.

As a child of a long line of teachers and a farm girl, obtaining higher education and gainful employment were never questions that I had to decide, they were expectations. Like any other child, I spent hours playing veterinarian, teacher to my very unappreciative canine pupils, and marine biologist (somehow campaign manager never fell into my make-believe scenarios). Never once did I dream about living in poverty, reliant on governmental services, prevented from working due to a society that was not ready for me to be successful.

Having a disability, managing services, and navigating the system is a full-time job, especially for those of us who want to have a real job. Through the objectives and requirements of this legislation, individuals with disabilities will have access to the benefits of having government and organizations working to make employment more accessible rather than inadvertently creating more barriers. To allow all individuals to pursue to personal potential and obtain competitive, integrated employment, we need your support.