



**Testimony of Michael Vovakes
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**before the House Labor & Industry Committee regarding
House Bill 2405, "Turning High School Graduates with Disabilities into Taxpayers Act"**

**Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
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Chairman Scavello, Chairman Keller, and members of the House Labor & Industry Committee; on behalf of Secretary Hearthway, thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 2405, legislation that would encourage and support competitive employment for high school graduates with disabilities.

Helping people with disabilities find competitive, integrated employment is an important component of Governor Corbett's JOBS1st PA initiative. Two weeks ago, the Governor's Cabinet for People with Disabilities, with support from the Departments of Education (PDE), Public Welfare (DPW), Transportation, Aging, Community and Economic Development and Labor & Industry (L&I), hosted the third annual PA Disability Employment and Empowerment Summit. Over 500 individuals, including persons with disabilities, representatives of businesses and community organizations attended. This year's event also included an on-site job fair for the first time.

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) primary mission is to assist Pennsylvanians with disabilities to secure and maintain employment and independence. This includes serving youth with disabilities transitioning from secondary school to post-secondary education or competitive integrated employment. In Program Year 2013, OVR provided services to 32,503 youth with disabilities including vocational counseling and guidance, career exploration, funding for college tuition, and services to promote independent living.

In 1999, a statewide Memorandum of Understanding was created between OVR, PDE, DPW and the Department of Health to coordinate transition services to youth with disabilities. OVR also maintains an internal Transition Policy, which was recently updated to enable students with disabilities to benefit from OVR services sooner and maximize the human services and education resources available to them.

Over the last three years, OVR has undertaken a number of initiatives to better serve youth with disabilities:

- The *Early Reach* initiative was launched in July 2013 in an effort to reach youth with disabilities earlier in their secondary school enrollment. *Early Reach* coordinators are assigned to each of OVR's fifteen district office locations and are tasked with

implementing a comprehensive outreach strategy to find and inform students with disabilities as early as age 14, and their parents, about available services and how they can leverage general and special education programs to assist them with transitioning from secondary education to employment or post-secondary education that leads to employment.

- In May 2014, the *Access College – Employment Success (ACES)* grant in the amount of \$1,350,000 was awarded to Dreams Realized through Education Aspiration Model (D.R.E.A.M.) Partnership to create college-based certificate programs for young adults with intellectual disabilities. The grantee is expected to develop and implement programs at no fewer than two Pennsylvania colleges or universities during each year of the three-year grant period. Programs are expected to provide a mix of credit and non-credit course offerings and extracurricular activities that provide accessible, integrated and developmental opportunities with the goal of increasing participants' opportunities for community-integrated, customized or competitive employment following program completion.
- *Project SEARCH*, a work readiness program for secondary school age youth continues to grow. We currently have nine sites and will be starting four more in the next year. Two will be for young adults and two will be for our youth who are in their last year of high school. Pennsylvania sites received 6 awards for their high placement rates at the *8th Annual Project SEARCH Conference*. Pennsylvania has one of the highest percentages of placement rates in the nation.
- *Promoting Academic Success (PAS)* was recognized by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) as an emerging practice. The *PAS* program provides a one-credit college course to students with disabilities in their junior or senior year of high school, to help them determine if post-secondary education is an appropriate goal. This course is offered on a college campus to maximize the student's experience in the post-secondary education environment.
- L&I's Bureau of Blindness & Visual Services' (BBVS) expanded specialized services for children statewide without the need for additional state resources. The change doubled service capacity, going from 700 children helped to the ability to help 1,500 children. Services assist children who are blind or visually impaired to maximize their general and special education experience, and in turn better prepare them for employment or post-secondary education that leads to employment when they transition to adult life from secondary education.
- BBVS's successful *Summer Academy* was strengthened and expanded by moving it in early 2014 from the Hiram G. Andrews Center to Penn State University's main campus (PSU). The *Summer Academy* provides intensive training for students who are blind or visually impaired and expected to attend college on such things as navigating a college campus, white cane use, traveling on public transportation, doing laundry, utilizing assistive technology and using an ATM. The *Summer Academy* was expanded from 2 to 3

weeks, and the move to PSU provided students with an even more realistic college campus training experience and better prepared students for competitive employment.

- For employers seeking to hire individuals with disabilities, the department fully understands the complexities of navigating state and federal programs. That is why OVR, in partnership with non-profit community rehabilitation providers, PDE, DPW, PA CareerLink® offices and the U.S. Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs has strengthened its *Single Point of Contact (SPOC)* model to give businesses a streamlined and simplified process and resource for hiring individuals with disabilities. The SPOC makes it easy to work with multiple agencies serving individuals with disabilities when seeking qualified, pre-screened applicants for job openings. These services include, but are not limited to, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) consultation, assistive technology and on-boarding supports such as on-the-job wage reimbursement or job coaching to enable workers with disabilities to succeed in the workplace.
- In November 2013, a “How-To Guide for Employers” was completed and published. It identifies OVR as the SPOC and was a product of an interagency workgroup and a private - public sector participants’ project team which included: The Hershey Company, AHEDD, United Cerebral Palsy of Central PA, DPW Office of Developmental Programs and The Arc of Luzerne County. Furthermore, OVR reorganized its central office and created a solely devoted, “Division of Business Services and Outreach” to lead efforts to more fully develop the SPOC model.
- *Work Partners* is a new partnership between the Berks Career and Technology Center (BCTC) and the Reading OVR District Office. The *Work Partners* team includes a School to Work Coordinator, a Job Coach, Classroom Educators and OVR Counselor who work with each Service Occupations student to achieve his or her employment goal. The partnership provides career planning and related work experiences designed to result in successful and sustainable competitive employment. *Work Partners* is jointly funded by OVR and BCTC.

Additionally, PDE’s Bureau of Special Education is in the process of requesting proposals from secondary schools and advocacy-based agencies looking to establish or expand school-based career development programming efforts for transition from school to community-based competitive employment for students for the 2014-15 school year. The purpose of the School to Community-Based Employment Grant is to improve competitive employment outcomes for youth with disabilities through strategies such as unpaid and paid work experiences with job coaching. In addition, the grant aims to establish sites that can serve as models for transitioning youth with disabilities from school to community-based employment.

Lastly, on July 22, 2014, President Obama signed into law the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which reauthorizes programs that had been previously authorized under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), as well as programs under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehabilitation Act). The amendments to the Rehabilitation Act, in title IV of WIOA, took effect on enactment. The new statutory provisions make significant improvements for individuals with disabilities, especially youth with disabilities as they make

the transition from education to employment, by helping to ensure that these individuals have opportunities to acquire the skills and training they need to maximize their potential and enter competitive integrated employment.

Regarding House Bill 2405, the administration applauds the intent of the legislation and supports its goals. However, I would be remiss if I did not note that Governor Corbett's proposed 2014-15 budget did have the *Jobs for All* program which would have provided services to the very constituency the bill's sponsors seek to cover. *Jobs for All*, if enacted, would have offered an on-the-job-training reimbursement to encourage employers to hire up to 1,000 youth with disabilities ages 18 to 25.

I will highlight two concerns the department has with House Bill 2405 as introduced. First, the legislation would make OVR the lead agency responsible for "developing connections" between local education agencies and private employers. While we embrace our role as the single point of contact for businesses in Pennsylvania looking to immediately hire pre-screened qualified talent into their workforce, making OVR the lead agency responsible for connecting business to education agencies goes above and beyond our current capabilities or resources related to business services. Additionally, the language is silent on what exactly a "connection" means and who would determine if the department is adequately making those connections. It is also important to note that the WIOA contains stronger language on agreements, collaborative roles and responsibilities between agencies and obligations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. §1400 et seq.). I would encourage the committee to take a look at the federal language and mirror it to ensure that these clearly defined roles are understood and preserved.

Second, the legislation calls for OVR and other public agencies to collaborate in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) development and participate in meetings when given "reasonable advance notice." While OVR currently strives to participate in the development of IEPs, it is not feasible for OVR staff to attend every IEP meeting. In 2013, OVR served 32,503 individuals with disabilities between the ages of 14 and 25 through the work of 430 Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors statewide. By comparison, there were 104,240 youth ages 14 to 21 who received special education services through the Pennsylvania education system according to the Bureau of Special Education.

Transition age youth is only a subset of all individuals served by OVR. In total, OVR serves approximately 80,000 people with disabilities through its vocational rehabilitation programs each year. The number of students between the ages of 14-21 that receive special education services in Pennsylvania is 24,000 more than OVR's total number of individuals served. It is also unclear what constitutes reasonable advance notice.

Mr. Chairman, we fully appreciate the spirit of this legislation and are available as a resource should you have additional questions or concerns. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have.