

Lawmakers, business leaders learn about successes in hiring those with disabilities

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BY JAMES LAWSON

jlawson@kenoshanews.com



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Kyle Cerretti and his mother Mary speak during a breakfast meeting Monday for lawmakers and business people about employing those with disabilities. Kyle, diagnosed with autism as a child, couldn't speak or read at one point, but he is now a college freshman with a job at a local golf course. (KENOSHA NEWS PHOTO BY KEVIN POIRIER)

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Disability advocacy agencies on Monday brought together lawmakers and business leaders to learn about education and employment options for people with disabilities, and how they can work together to serve that population.

The legislative breakfast — sponsored by non-profit advocacy agencies Disability Rights-Wisconsin, LCS Potential is Limitless and The Arc Wisconsin — gave space for people to promote job opportunities, push for supportive legislation and to hear success stories of people who had overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Laura Owens, a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor and president of the TransCen Inc., a non-profit organization supporting the improvement of education and employment success for youth and young adults with disabilities, told how there has been some success in the treatment of people with disabilities. She said it has gone from institutionalization and isolation, to helping them find jobs that could become careers.

Referring to the disabled as an "insular minority," Owens said, "We want people to be able to contribute to society. There is a job for everyone regardless of their disability. People with disabilities want to work. Employment should be the expectation, not the exception."

A success story

Kyle Cerretti was one of several young adults who shared his story with the group. Diagnosed as a child with severe autism, Cerretti was at one time unable to speak or recognize spoken language and was not able to interact with other children.

His mother, Mary Cerretti, was told he could not learn.

Through his early struggles, some educators thought it was a hopeless endeavor. Others wanted to put the young Cerretti in a home. However, Mary Cerretti wouldn't have any of that.

"I just couldn't believe what they were saying. Like any mother, I thought of him one day being successful, going to college and getting married," she told the crowd at the Kenosha Woman's Club.

She advocated and fought along the way, year after year, to get the best for her son. He eventually began to improve.

At age 9, he was speaking and beginning to do well. As he advanced through school, he was voted most successful student and made the National Honor Society. He got his driver's license on his first attempt.

Now a freshman at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Kyle has a 3.06 grade-point average and works at Bristol Oaks Country Club.

"I want to have a wife and family, be independent and earn my own money," he told the audience to a chorus of applause.

Medicaid concerns

Another issue raised at the meeting was concern over possible federal cuts or adjustments to parts of Medicaid.

Lisa Pugh, state director of The Arc Wisconsin, said proposed changes to Medicaid could affect the state's IRIS (Include, Respect, I Self-direct) program, a Medicaid home and community-based service for patients with long-term needs.

She said since Medicaid is the primary funding source, cuts to the program could have a very serious impact on that service. She said there are 1.2 million Medicaid recipients in Wisconsin.

State Sen. Robert Wirch, D-Somers, and state Rep. Tod Ohnstad, D-Kenosha, attended and said they strongly support legislation that would cover some of a financial shortfall that could come if the federal government cuts funds.