

To: Representative Petryk, Chair, Assembly Committee on Workforce Development
Members of the Assembly Committee on Workforce Development

From: Disability Rights Wisconsin, Amy Devine, Public Policy Coordinator

Date: January 10, 2018

Re: Testimony in Support of AB 625, competitive integrated employment of persons with a disability

Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW) is the designated Protection and Advocacy system for Wisconsinites with disabilities. DRW is charged with protecting and enforcing the legal rights of individuals with disabilities, investigating systemic abuse and neglect, and ensuring access to supports and services so that all Wisconsinites can learn, work, and live full lives in our communities free of abuse, neglect, and discrimination.

We ask for your support of Assembly Bill 625, which will positively impact competitive integrated employment opportunities for people with disabilities by increasing cooperation between state agencies, identify barriers to competitive integrated employment, and set benchmarks for improving competitive integrated employment rates. For people with disabilities, finding meaningful work leads to greater economic self-sufficiency, the ability to utilize and gain new skills, and fuller participation in the community.

People with Disabilities Want to Work

Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW) receives calls each year from people with disabilities who want to work and need assistance finding supports for a job that matches their abilities. They are seeking assistance from the Return to Work program, funded by the United States Social Security Administration. A woman who is deaf and has a master's degree in social work calls because she can't get interviews for jobs she is well qualified for. A father of five, recently home from his residential rehabilitation program, wants to go back to work teaching. A man with a Traumatic Brain Injury wants to return to work but can't return to his old job because of his disability, but he works with DVR to obtain training and assistive technology and begins his job search in a new field.

We have also seen teens with all kinds of disabilities sit in Transition classrooms talk about the jobs they will get after high school. This hasn't always been true for students with disabilities, who often saw the opportunity for work was not an option for them. These students want to work and they want work more than their non-disabled peers because they know it is a ticket out of poverty.

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The national data also demonstrates that people with disabilities want to work. The Kessler Foundation, in their 2015 National Employment and Disability Survey, talked to 3,000 people with disabilities and found that 69% of respondents were striving to work.

Unfortunately, unemployment rates for people with disabilities remains high. As of December 2017, the labor force participation rate for people with disabilities is 21% while the rate for people without disabilities is 68%. For people with a mental illness, approximately 80% are unemployed. It is our hope this bill will increase employment for all people with disabilities.

Employment as a Path to Self-Sufficiency and Less Reliance on Public Systems

Because many people with disabilities also live in poverty (21%) and rely on public benefits, investing in proven, effective employment supports is a smart decision that both improves quality of life and relieves stress on public systems. In 2017, 782 Wisconsin residents with disabilities earned enough income get off Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and/or Social Security Disability Income (SSDI). The current monthly income for people receiving SSI is \$750. SSDI recipient income is based on individual work histories. This figure demonstrates the positive economic impact that employment has not only on individuals, but on the State of Wisconsin and the nation.

In the DVR annual report from 2016, 4,615 individuals with disabilities successfully reached their employment goals and entered the workforce, with estimated earnings of \$82 million annually. This is more than double the public investment made during their time receiving services from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). Their wages bolster the Wisconsin economy and provide Department of Workforce Development the means to increase their independence and decrease their reliance on public assistance. With AB 625 and the collaboration between the Department of Workforce Development, the Department of Health Services, and the Department of Instruction, we hope to move the needle even further for people with disabilities.

Governor Walker has been one of the most vocal champions of employment for people with disabilities here in Wisconsin. In a speech, the Governor gave during the *Year of the Better Bottom Line (2014)*, his initiative to increase employment resources for employers as well as jobs for individuals with disabilities, he said, "Make no mistake, *A Better Bottom Line* is not about charity. *A Better Bottom Line* means helping both the individual and the company do well. We are looking for ways to help employers hire people who will add value to their organizations."

Finally, you may have noticed more employees with disabilities in your area when you hadn't in the past. This is a positive change for employees, employers, and our State where people with disabilities are recognized and integrated into our daily lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on this legislation. We believe that AB 625 will build upon the work already being done in Wisconsin to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities, and we look forward to working with legislators and agencies in the implementation of this proposal.

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