

Op-ed: Vermont Setting the Standard for Supported Employment

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DAIL's Developmental Disabilities Services Division (DDSD), in partnership with its provider agencies and DAIL's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), has helped individuals who experience developmental disabilities to work in the job market alongside their fellow Vermonters since the early 1980s. The core philosophy of supported employment in Developmental Disabilities Services (DDS) is the belief that people with cognitive disabilities can contribute to the workforce when provided individually tailored supports and thoughtful job matches. This notion sets Vermont far apart from other states where individuals often go into sheltered workshops or congregate work groups that isolate them from the regular workforce and real jobs in the business community.

Most Vermonters heading off to work today are unaware that a contentious national debate is brewing over the injustice caused by Section 14(c) of the U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act, a labor law permitting sub-minimum wages—sometimes less than one dollar per hour—be paid to workers with developmental disabilities. The most basic idea of Section 14(c) is that people with disabilities are less productive, so their earnings may be based on piece rate in a sheltered workshop isolated from the regular workforce. Section 14(c) has promoted dismally sub-standard wages for workers, with the only chance of entering the workforce contingent on reaching production levels comparable to industry standards. So what is wrong with paying sub-minimum wages when a worker is much slower than the typical pace?

Section 14(c) is disrespectful to people already marginalized by society and a poor training option compared to intensive real time job site training with real employers. That is why Vermont began closing its sheltered workshops over 30 years ago when other states were developing thousands of workshops as their new vocational best practice, Vermont literally stood alone in the nation by deciding to create access for workers in Vermont's business community.

In addition to the ethical dilemma, Vermont realized that manufacturing was only one sector of the workforce, so why train all workers in bench work? It was clear that jobs should be matched to the individual using person-centered strategies. Vermont believed that, with this approach, people often considered unemployable could in fact work with job supports.

In 1982, Vermont's DDSD, DVR, the University of Vermont, and many community partners participated a *Supported Employment System Change Initiative*, administered by Dr. Susan Hasazi at UVM. This steered a conversion from sheltered workshops to job development and employment support programs. Vermont's business community became a strong ally by consistently hiring employees, many of whom had similar support needs to people labeled as

unemployable outside Vermont. The initiative demonstrated that with solid support services and a presumption of competence—regardless of the level of disability—most people can work.

Elsewhere today, sheltered workshops still teach endless pre-vocational activities and still do not yield job placements, leaving workers separated from the workforce, sometimes for a lifetime. Vermonters care about equal treatment for *all* citizens, so it is no surprise that a model that teaches perpetual pre-vocational skills and excludes a specific group from the workforce was ready for transformation in this state.

The path we have taken has led to great success for individuals. In 2015, the employment rate for Vermonters who receive developmental disabilities services was 47 percent; evidence of what is possible when personalized job development in a wide range of employment – from clerical to customer service to self-employment – replaces the packaging and assembly work found in sheltered workshops. This high employment rate has drawn attention from beyond Vermont as pressure increases from the US Justice Department, funders and the federal government to replace workshops with competitive employment.

As the first state to close sheltered workshops, Vermont serves as an example and resource to others looking to transform their systems. We host numerous visitors who come to research our supported employment model and values. The *National Council on Disability* came to Vermont in 2012 to include our processes in recommendations to President Obama, Congress, and the Justice Department related to Section 14(c). The State of Rhode Island invited a Vermont team to assist in improvements to their employment services, and Vermont recently hosted a visit from SGenable, a human service agency in Shanghai asking for our assistance with their sheltered workshops.

Not all applaud what we have accomplished. We also hear from critics who doubt the authenticity of Vermont's workforce inclusion. Some say they want to keep workshops because workers will be traumatized by the change. Some express skepticism about society's acceptance of workers in jobs. Some think that businesses will not tolerate employees who receive help provided from job coaches. Some have the notion that when one is not completely independent from supports, he or she is unemployable. Some genuinely worry that the elimination of workshops will plunge people into loneliness and inactivity for lack of other services.

In response to skepticism, we can only share that people who experience developmental disabilities in this state *are* rooted in their communities and it is a rare occurrence when an employer does not welcome on-site supports. Leaving people with nothing to do is absolutely a concern if these organizations fail to transform into effective employment services and fail to provide meaningful community services for those who do not work.

Dale Delio, supported employment consultant and researcher, addresses this last concern when he says, “*While this could actually happen, it could only occur if those providers elect to do nothing about modernizing their services over the phase-out. [...] agencies do exist that serve the same individuals with the same kinds of support needs, and do so without using sub-minimum wage. A good deal of evidence supports the ending of this antiquated practice.*”

Vermont was featured last fall in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*'s highly acclaimed series on civil rights and segregation of people who experience developmental disabilities. The reporter spent a full week traveling our state to meet with workers, families and agencies, with many hours spent at job sites speaking directly with employers. Individuals shared how it felt to be closed off from the real workforce. Many described their current jobs in the regular workforce as rewarding and matched to their talents and abilities. These stories serve as a serious reminder of the *immeasurable human connections* that participation in Vermont's workforce brings into peoples' lives.

Toward the end of the visit, the reporter asked Ric Wheeler, Employment Services Director at the Counseling Service of Addison County for his opinion about retaining sheltered workshops for the most challenged. Ric's rapid reply was, "*If someone can work all day in a workshop, why can't they work anywhere with a little bit of support? I don't get it!*" Ric's sentiment sums up our collective perspective!

We can be proud of the path our state has taken and the marked difference it makes for our fellow Vermonters and business community.

View Vermont in this five-part series:

<http://www.startribune.com/Vermont-took-bold-step-to-end-segregation-of-disabled-adults/330697181/>