

Testimony to the Senate Business, Labor and Technology Committee**February 28, 2018****Senate Bill 18-145 Employment First Recommendations****Bob Lawhead, Policy Advisor, Colorado Developmental Disabilities Council**

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I presently serve as Policy Advisor for the Colorado Developmental Disabilities Council and have worked in the field of developmental disabilities for more than 40 years. I am considered a national subject matter expert in disability employment and presently serve as the Co-Chair of Colorado's Employment First Advisory Partnership. Over my career I have testified both before this body and before Congress. It is my firm belief that through the years I have bored many legislators with monotonous facts and figures about the potential for citizens with significant disabilities to be highly productive members of society through employment. Thus today, I come before you as a father.

My son Jess was born with Down syndrome in 1996. Because of an upper airway obstruction, the doctors said he might not live, that if he lived, he most likely would not be able to speak, and if he survived, he would most certainly need to be constantly attached to a breathing support machine. In addition, Jess had a significant cognitive disability. It was so significant that Jess has not been able to participate in standardized testing to this day.

Jess has received 14 airway surgeries and finally breathed on his own at the age of three. He has been fully included during his school career which culminated in what I believe was the proudest moment thus far in his life, his high school graduation. During graduation he had the biggest grin I have ever seen on his face! Jess attended a transition program for the next two years where he gained work experience in a number of volunteer jobs. He has volunteered at the Humane Society, our local hospital and at what would probably be the favorite volunteer job for any young man, mail sorter at the Kappa Kappa Gamma Sorority House. He now works for Care Connect where he delivers groceries to shut-ins with the help of a driver.

Jess is presently 21. As is the case with many men his age, he wants a girlfriend and eventually, a wife. He definitely wants to get away from my wife Anastasia and I by moving out of his garden level apartment in our home and into his own place. He also wants to work, but this may be the greatest challenge he has faced yet in his short life. We have not been able to find anyone who is able to provide the supports Jess needs to find and keep a job. There are plenty of segregated and congregate day program options but that's not what Jess wants. He wants to be employed like his dad, his mom and his cousins and earn a pay check.

Back in 1996, when Jess was born, Colorado was one of the leaders in the nation in assisting people like Jess to work in the regular community jobs. In those days over 50% of Colorado

adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities served by the state were working in community jobs. Some locations around the country have continued to make progress. For instance, Washington State reports that more than 80% of their citizens with intellectual and developmental disabilities work in the community. Based on the most current figures I am familiar with, Colorado has fallen back in the pack with somewhere around 10% of people like Jess employed in regular community jobs.

The problem is that Colorado agencies serving people like my son do not consider employment a priority. Finding and keeping jobs for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities can be challenging. It requires three things that were present in Colorado back in 1996:

1. A commitment on the part of state government that employment should be the priority for state-funded services for working age individuals with disabilities,
2. Well trained staff who understand how to: a) focus on the business needs of the employer and b) provide effective on-the-job training, and
3. Service rates that allow for adequate training and compensation for employment support professionals.

With the passage of the SB16-077 two years ago Colorado made progress on the first requirement by stating that employment was the first and preferred service option for adults with disabilities. The bill you are considering today, SB18-145, is primarily an attempt to address the second requirement: well trained staff. It provides that the staff who are charged with finding a job for Jess and then training Jess on the job are competent. The nationally approved training requirement provides employment staff working with people like Jess with the skills to assure that the needs of both business and the job seeker are met. It supports a good employee-job match as well as enhanced employer and employee satisfaction.

The other primary objective of this bill is to have the state collect employment data to determine whether we are making progress in employing people who, like my son, are served by Colorado's Home and Community Based Services program within HCPF. We cannot measure our progress in this area without having solid data. Speaking of data, a national, multi-year study found that for every dollar used to fund these employment services, taxpayers receive \$1.46 back in the form of taxes paid, savings from alternative programs, and reduction in governmental subsidies.¹

Jess has been preparing his whole life to become a respected, valued citizen through having a job. In U.S. society our work defines us and is a source of friendship and connection to our community. Please help make employment a reality for my son by voting yes on SB 18-145.

¹ Cimer, R.E. (2009). Supported employment's cost-efficiency to taxpayers: 2002 to 2007. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 34, 13-20.