



Testimony In Support of Senate Bill 274
Senate Committee on Economic Development and Local Government
October 10, 2013

Chairman Gudex and members of the committee, I appreciate this opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 274, which would increase access to workforce development services for people with disabilities. I want to thank Senator Shilling for authoring this legislation with me, and Governor Walker for showing his support by including it in his jobs package.

With October being Disability Employment Awareness Month, this is the perfect time to address an important need. Wisconsinites with disabilities have been hit particularly hard by the economic downturn. Many have turned to the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), which provides important job training and employment assistance services for people with disabilities who are looking for work.

On average, DVR works with 17,000 job seekers with disabilities. Each month, DVR averages 1,486 new applicants, provides 726 new Individualized Plans for Employment, and successfully closes 319 cases. The DVR offers career guidance and counseling, job search and placement assistance, rehabilitation technology, job training, transportation, and more. It also serves employers looking for training and technical assistance regarding disability employment issues. And the DVR has proven its efficacy, providing a return of \$2.10 for every \$1.00 invested.

However, over 4,000 people with disabilities remain on the waiting list for DVR employment assistance, with some waiting up to four months. At the same time, employers are struggling to find well-trained, reliable, and qualified job applicants. By investing in services to help people find work and eliminating barriers to employment, we can empower individuals and improve workplace opportunities for thousands of people with disabilities.

Senate Bill 274 would shorten the waiting list by making a smart investment to capture full federal funding for the DVR. Under our bill, Wisconsin will be able to take full advantage of federal incentives for the state's successful vocational rehabilitation program. This will provide employment assistance to thousands of unemployed Wisconsinites with disabilities, and will restore hope to those waiting for help.

Senator Shilling and I are pleased that our bill received early bipartisan support, including that of our governor, as well as the endorsement of advocacy groups like Disability Rights Wisconsin and the Board for People with Developmental Disabilities. Working across the aisle to put people back to work should be our focus this session, and Senate Bill 274 is an important step toward that goal. With your support, we can get people back to work and help those with disabilities access valuable job training services.

I urge the Committee's support of Senate Bill 274 and I welcome any questions you may have. Thank you.





October 10, 2013

Senate Committee Economic Development and Local Government
Senator Gudex, Chair
State Capitol, Room 330 South West
Madison, WI 53707

Dear Sen. Gudex and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on proposed Senate Bill 274.

When I first got out of the state institution, I didn't go to a regular job. I went to a sheltered workshop. But it wasn't challenging enough for me. I needed more to do. I wanted to work with people with and without disabilities. I just wanted to be part of my community and have a voice.

When I got up in the morning I wanted to have a purpose, and I didn't have a purpose because I didn't look forward to going to the sheltered workshop at all. Because I knew that I was going to be doing the same thing as I did the day before. I was putting stickers on Betty Crocker cookbooks.

My job coach started working with me. And I used DVR, and they helped me go to school and get my first job. I haven't used DVR in over twenty years, because I have been employed in several jobs and volunteered for that whole time. I have worked in retail, food service, and now I have my dream job working at People First of Wisconsin, where I have been for fourteen years. I have been successful with the support of a job coach as I have moved up in my career.

Now I advocate for me and other people with disabilities. I wanted to give back to my community. After 14 years, I am now the Executive Director of People First Wisconsin.

I want you to know that psychologists said that I would not amount to anything. That I would have to work in a sheltered workshop and live in a group home.

I don't live in a group home, I live in my own apartment and my roommates are my two sweet baby kitties. And I don't work in a sheltered workshop. I am a part of my community. And I pay taxes.

I would like the committee to look at employment and to understand people want to have a purpose. They want to be like other people. In the community at large. That means they want to pay taxes. They want to live in their own apartments. And they want a job that pays a decent



People First Wisconsin
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wage. They don't want charity, they want to have what everyone else has. They want to be treated like a person, not a number.

It is not what is on the outside, it is what in your heart. We are people. We are not a label. You label jars not people.

People First of Wisconsin supports this bill. This bill will help a lot of young people getting out of high school at 21 and get into a real job.

I am also an author. I am giving the committee a copy to explain where I have come from and how I got to where I am today.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cindy Bentley". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Cindy Bentley
Executive Director, People First of Wisconsin

October 10, 2013

To: Senator Gudex, Chair
Members, Committee on Economic Development and Local Government

From: Lisa Pugh, Public Policy Coordinator

Re: Senate Bill 274 - funding and position authority for vocational rehabilitation services

The unemployment and underemployment of people with disabilities in Wisconsin is a serious issue that impacts multiple public systems. ([The employment rate is 70% for working-age persons without disabilities, while only 37% of people with disabilities are in the workforce.](#)) Our organization applauds all efforts by the legislature to address this issue and improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Increasing availability of vocational rehabilitation services in Wisconsin will go a long way toward addressing this problem.

This bill will provide the necessary state dollars to capture the total estimated federal matching funds available for vocational rehabilitation services for people with disabilities in Wisconsin. The state to federal match is generous at 21.3% state funds to 78.7% federal funds. [The fiscal bureau has determined this investment will eliminate a growing waiting list that stands currently at 4,129 individuals.](#) If a portion of this additional funding were also targeted toward increasing the availability of rehabilitation counselors statewide (9), as the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) has suggested is necessary, the investment could result in serving a total of 5,736 additional individuals.

According to DWD, the 3,250 DVR consumers who returned to the workforce in 2012 are projected to earn \$56.4 million annually, representing a 210 percent return on the public investment. These earnings result in purchases of goods and services that in turn support Wisconsin's economy and transform successful DVR customers into workers and taxpayers, while also decreasing dependence on public assistance (i.e. utilization of food stamps, low income housing and Social Security Benefits.)

This is an important time in Wisconsin's economy to invest in DVR and in employment of people with disabilities. DVR's strategic plan puts more emphasis on direct outreach to business – through the use of business consultants and their Business Service Initiative they are focusing on employer demand. They are helping job seekers with disabilities by matching skills training directly to business needs. This will result in better retention and better productivity for the worker and business. It is an excellent model to invest in that both maximizes a worker's potential and helps businesses improve the bottom line.

People with disabilities can and want to work. Their contributions can impact many parts of the state's economy as they become fully capable workers and earners. DVR can get people with disabilities the supports they need to be successful.

RECOMMENDATION: Support the full funding of vocational services and additional position authority as outlined in this bill.

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Protection and advocacy for people with disabilities.

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October 10, 2013

Senate Committee Economic Development and Local Government
Senator Gudex, Chair
State Capitol, Room 330 South West
Madison, WI 53707

Dear Senator Gudex and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share why I think Senate Bill 274 will have such a strong impact on the lives of thousands of people with disabilities in our state. I was motivated to come today because I'm a DVR success story. I was connected to DVR in high school, by accident. I heard about it my senior year when I was at my annual clinic visit from an intern who also happened to have a disability. She highly recommended the program and explained that it helped her get into med school. I applied shortly after that and was assigned a great counselor who has long since retired. He guided me toward my career goals and provided supports to help me get my Bachelor's degree in elementary education from UW Whitewater. That's what really set me on the path to where I am today – a career professional working with youth with disabilities, their teachers and families to help them also experience the success I have achieved.

My path to employment also began at UWW where I was hired by the Center for Students with Disabilities after I graduated to find college students jobs in their majors. While I was there I also started the state's Youth Leadership Forum and ran it for 8 years. I've provided parent training to help families understand the transition from school to the adult world. I co-developed YIPPE, a program that trains families and youth together on the transition process and I've worked on policy issues around people with disabilities and employment. All these experiences gave me a strong background in youth leadership, family engagement and youth employment over the past 15 years and created a niche for myself in the state as an expert on youth transition and employment.

Today, I am the project coordinator for the Let's Get to Work grant. This is a federal grant that I co-wrote and WI was one of only 6 states selected to implement a Partnerships in Employment grant. The grant is focused on making policy changes or improvements that lead to improved integrated employment outcomes for youth with significant I/DD. What we have learned from that grant is that earlier connection to DVR has a big impact on the long term employment outcomes for youth with disabilities. Families need to know that DVR exists and what kinds of services can be offered and when to access them. I'm fortunate that my late connection to DVR did not impact my overall outcomes; however, youth with more significant disabilities need more time to work on their employment skills. We also know from research that at least one paid employment experience while still in high school significantly improves the likelihood of long term employment outcomes as an adult. By fully funding DVR and adding 7 new positions, thousands more people with disabilities will receive the services they need to find and maintain employment in their communities.

When I was in high school and college, I was on Social Security benefits that had me living in poverty. I was one of the few who successfully transitioned from being on benefits to full time work that provided me with benefits through my employer. Without the assistance I received from DVR, I don't believe I could have made that leap. Sadly, I have at least 5 or 6 friends who are also well educated, skilled individuals who have not had success in finding employment.

I'd like to thank DVR for their assistance at a critical time in my life and my parents for expecting me to be employed. I now have a full time job that I love, I've earned my Master's degree in Vocational Rehabilitation, I own my own home, have a husband and two beautiful children, my own transportation that allows me to commute to work every day from Fort Atkinson in Jefferson County. Most importantly, instead of living off Social Security and living in poverty the rest of my life, I'm a proud taxpayer.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jennifer W. Neugart



WISCONSIN BOARD FOR PEOPLE
WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

October 10, 2013

Senate Committee Economic Development and Local Government
Senator Gudex, Chair
State Capitol, Room 330 South West
Madison, WI 53707

Dear Sen. Gudex and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on proposed Senate Bill 274.

The Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities (BPDD) advocates on behalf of people with developmental disabilities such as brain injury, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, Prader-Willi syndrome, and intellectual disability, and is charged with representing the interests of the disability community in Wisconsin. Sixty percent of the board—appointed by the Governor—is people with developmental disabilities or family members of people with developmental disabilities.

Employment is one of the top priorities we hear about from self-advocates and the entire disability community. One in five Americans has a disability. Difficulty in finding and keeping jobs is a common challenge for people with disabilities, impacting their ability to live independently and their reliance on public benefits. Here are a few facts underscoring this issue:

- Wisconsin's working-age employment rate for individuals without disabilities is half that of the general population's: near 70% for the general public, but only 37% for people with disabilities.
- Among non-employed, working-age people with disabilities, 80% say they would like a paid job.
- More than 4,000 people with disabilities are on the vocational rehabilitation program's wait list for critical employment supports that can help them move from a life of public dependence to financial independence.

Improving integrated community job opportunities enables people with disabilities to contribute to local economies, more fully participate in their local communities, help permanently get out of poverty, and reduce overall reliance on public benefits

Helping people with disabilities participate in competitive work in integrated work settings has significant return on investment. For every dollar of costs to taxpayers in funding integrated employment, taxpayers received an average of \$1.46 back. This bill's federal match means that for a \$4 million investment, Wisconsin would receive nearly \$18 million that could be used to provide critical employment supports to a population who desperately wants to work.

The Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) program successfully returned 3,250 disabled persons into the workforce in 2012, and early estimates show they are close to 3,800 successes for 2013. Workers with disabilities who received DVR support have an average wage of \$12 an hour, and are projected to earn \$56.4 million annually—a 210% return on taxpayer investment in the program.

This bill is a positive step toward simultaneously meeting our state's workforce needs for prepared workers, addressing Wisconsin's high unemployment rate for people with disabilities, reducing overall

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reliance on public benefits, and funneling more money into local economies through increased purchasing power.

Thank you for your consideration,

Beth Swedeen

Beth Swedeen, Executive Director
Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities