

Address to the United States Presidential Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities, April 7, 2000*

It is a real honor to address what I believe to be some real barriers to employment for people with significant disabilities. We are only three months away from the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and still we have a staggering seventy per cent unemployment rate among people who have significant disabilities. I would like to propose four recommendations which I believe can drastically reduce that awful statistic. I hope that this task force will consider including my recommendations in its report to President Clinton.

Recommendations:

1. *Stop allowing vocational service providers to use sheltered employment placements as successful case closures.*

For the most part in our job market today, sheltered employment work cannot be considered a real job. And yet, when individuals with disabilities are placed in sheltered workshop settings the job of the vocational service provider is considered to be complete. We reward the providers for a job left undone or incomplete. I believe this policy is contrary to the least restrictive environment provisions included in federal laws for people with disabilities. These include the ADA, Rehab Act Amendments of 1998 and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). By allowing vocational service providers to continue to use sheltered employment placements as successful case closures I believe we are encouraging people to break the law. Employees with disabilities have the same right to work in the community in least restrictive environments as employees without disabilities.

2. *The federal income tax code needs to include a credit for people who use personal assistance services (PAS) as a workplace support.*

Currently, the only tax relief employees who use PAS in their careers can get is by claiming what they pay a personal assistant, as a medical deduction. Claiming PAS as a medical deduction, although allowable, is in practicality inaccurate. It can be viewed as degrading because people with disabilities who are able to work are definitely not sick or ill. PAS should be an allowable deduction, just as any other business expense incurred by a person without a disability. Not only is this necessary to give the employee with a disability monetary relief, it will increase the dignity of employees with disabilities who use PAS as a career support.

3. *It was recently proposed that the social security administration begin to allow people over the age of 65 to earn as much as they want to without losing any of their social security benefits.*

It is expected that President Clinton will sign this into law this very day. Considering the embedded discrimination which has occurred for centuries against people with disabilities who wanted to work, I suggest a similar policy be put in place for employees with disabilities. It may not be fiscally feasible to do this across the board, so I propose putting such a policy in place for employees with disabilities who have been employed less than 25 years after the passage of IDEA. My reasoning behind this proposal is simple. Students with disabilities may not have had an opportunity to gain an education equal to students without disabilities, and they were not prepared to compete with their non-disabled peers in the workplace. Certainly I know that some will argue that equal opportunity to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment is far from being a reality for many students with disabilities. However, the amendment to the so-

*This is an address given by Ed Turner, a training associate at Virginia Commonwealth University in the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports. His comments do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the director or the staff of the RRTC.

cial security policy I recommend, would be a great benefit to those who overcame great obstacles in becoming employed despite their inability to compete on the same educational or skill level as employees without disabilities.

4. The double deduction tax benefit allowed for employees with visual impairments should be extended to employees with all types of disabilities.

Currently this deduction allows individuals with visual impairments to claim themselves twice on their tax form. Over the years, disability advocates have privately debated the double deduction among ourselves, but never brought it to the public forefront. We were concerned such a discussion might cause policy makers to take it away from individuals with visual impairments. However, I believe the time has come to publicly put this issue on the table for consideration of all individuals with disabilities, not just those with visual impairments. Although

new advances in assistive technology and the use of PAS as a workplace support results in more and more people with significant disabilities entering the workforce, the rate of unemployment remains too high for people with significant disabilities. These supports can be very costly and this double deduction would be of great value to all individuals with disabilities. It is time for drastic actions to be taken.

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