

Testimony of Virginia Harmon
President of the Richland County Board of DD
To the House Finance HHS Subcommittee
March 17, 2015

Testimony Regarding Employment for People with Developmental Disabilities

Good Morning Chairman Sprague, Ranking Member Sykes, and Members of the House Finance Health and Human Services Subcommittee. My name is Virginia Harmon.

My family and I moved back to our hometown of Mansfield about 10 years ago after living and working in the Columbus area for 30 years. I am a retired elementary teacher; my teaching career was spent in Whitehall, a Columbus suburb.

My husband and I have one daughter – Gwendolyn, or “Wendy”. My husband David is also retired, after having worked for nearly 40 years in higher education finance.

Currently, I serve as President of the Richland County Board of DD. I am also a trustee of the Ohio Association of County Boards Serving People with Developmental Disabilities.

As the DD system continues to evolve, there is tremendous focus on Community Employment. Today, I am here to talk about my daughter’s successful employment history with Kroger.

Wendy began working at Kroger in Pickerington after graduating from high school, and thanks to the Richland County Board of DD, was able to continue with Kroger in Mansfield after we relocated. We recently celebrated her 10th anniversary as a Kroger employee. Her employment is beneficial to her in many ways.

At the core of those benefits is a solid sense of self worth. The American character is based on independence and self-sufficiency – a job in the community allows people with developmental disabilities to pursue those ideals and to feel a part of the American dream. Our daughter takes responsibility for purchasing her own clothes, medicines, entertainment, to help pay her living expenses and to make charitable contributions... things that many of us take for granted, but for many others these things are the fabric of lives well lived.

Jobs in the community also provide opportunities to develop friendships and relationships with others in the community. Wendy’s best friend in Mansfield is a coworker from Kroger and they do all of things that other best friends do.

Some jobs, like Wendy’s, bring people with developmental disabilities into contact with people throughout the community. This allows them to define themselves and see themselves, in part, as reflections of the ways that others see them. I can still remember what a startling experience it was for us when Wendy introduced us to someone that she knew but that we didn’t.

As a taxpayer, Wendy has developed a strong and growing sense of ownership in what it means to be an American citizen. She educates herself about candidates and ballot issues, and she votes in every election. She doesn’t always agree with us, but she votes as an informed, caring citizen.

But the benefits are not just those flowing to the workers themselves. Our daughter and other workers with developmental disabilities constitute an important resource for Ohio’s companies and employers. I would urge you to ask any of them about their workers with developmental

disabilities; they will tell you stories about some of the most dependable, hardest working and determined employees they have. Those can be hard traits for any of us to develop without the responsibilities of a job to raise the bar for us. However, as a Board member for two organizations that are committed to maximizing opportunities for community employment for people with developmental disabilities, I know that my daughter's experience is not the norm.

Liz Prather, the Superintendent for both the Richland and Crawford County Boards of DD is now going to share a number of concerns about improvements needed to the current employment process in order for community integration to become a reality.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have after you hear from Ms. Prather. Thank you!