

Proponent Hearing for Elimination of Sub-Minimum Wage Employment – 5/14/25

Dan Sutter

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Lear, Ranking Member McNally, and all the members of the House Commerce and Labor Committee! Thank you for this hearing and for listening to our voices on the elimination of sub-minimum wage employment here in Ohio.

I am here today as a 12-year volunteer member and past President of our Stark County Board of DD, as well as a 2-year trustee for the Ohio Association of County Boards of DD. I've termed out of these positions but remain involved. I'm a volunteer. An advocate. I'm also a parent of an adult daughter with disabilities. I'm her dad. I'm also a dad for two other typical daughters. And I'm a husband to my wife. Our two typical daughters are married and starting their lives on their own. Our oldest daughter, Alyssa, still lives with us. Like many families, we've managed through various levels of dysfunction. No one starts out with a game plan and all the answers when having a child or family member with a disability. And to this day, it's a work in progress. We keep learning. I've experienced the tremendous good in people and the community. And, unfortunately, I've seen the not so good in people. But it's through the decades of collective advocacy, our unique Ohio County Board system, DODD, OOD, and other involvement, that so much progress has been made to make lives better for our individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. I can tell you. I feel fortunate to be living in the year 2025 versus 1 or 2 generations ago when it comes to having a family member with DD.

Which brings us to the topic of this bill for the elimination of sub-minimum wage employment. Sub-minimum wage was an established milestone born out of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act. The poet and advocate, Maya Angelou, stated it quite well and it applies here. "Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better." I think we are here! And my hope is that you ultimately agree that it is time to take this

next incremental positive step and vote to eliminate sub-minimum wage employment.

When this policy was first presented, a fellow OACB trustee and I both thought eliminating sub-minimum wage employment was not a good idea. Any individual with disabilities that can work at any wage level, was worth it! It's what they need. And it works for them. But we both have daughters with disabilities that were able to gain employment in our respective communities in different counties making competitive wages. The differences were clear. Community employment versus employment in a segregated setting. And competitive wages versus sub-minimum wages. And the average wage in this setting was only \$4.15/hour! And it came to light for my own personal experience with my daughter's community employment. And it applies to so many others. Our Alyssa simply does not thrive in a segregated setting. After high school, she moved from day program to day program. Some had segregated work environments. But nothing worked! It was a difficult time for us. And I know so many parents and caregivers can relate to that! But it was the creativity of our county board along with grant funding from OOD that an internship program was created. And our Alyssa was a candidate. A candidate because our county SSA saw something in her that others didn't. And also because, after 9 years of struggling, nothing else was working! Everyone in Alyssa's surroundings did not think this was going to work. As parents, we even had our doubts. But as stated, nothing was working, and it was worth a try. And now, Alyssa is into her fourth year of community employment! It's hard to express how impactful this was. Why? Because I got to witness the spike in Alyssa's self-esteem and self-purpose. And while still there, we witnessed a decrease in chaos and dysfunction in our family!

To draw an analogy from real estate, we regularly hear "it's Location, Location, Location!" Well, the Location for employment for our individuals with disabilities is out in the community! This is where we are making progress. This is where we are doing better and can continue to do so.

It is employers, the community, and county and state support coming together to increase this reality. Kevin Miller, our Ohio Director for OOD working for Governor DeWine showed us the data is clear when he presented the positive business performance of companies that hired individuals with disabilities. And in my 38 years working for The (successful) Timken Company in Stark County, there was tremendous emphasis on supporting communities where our company does business everywhere in the world. Doing business in strong communities is simply “Good Business.” And so many successful companies adopt this culture. As a business, you want to be part of building strong communities!

...So, the reality is, not every single individual with disabilities can be like Alyssa and work in the community. But the reality also is, more individuals can! And Ohio has taken so many steps in this right direction. So, to take that next step of doing better, there are two pieces in this bill that will help. One, provide financial incentives like the grant that Alyssa was part of to gain community employment. This could also be in the form of financial help for providers who will now be paying minimum wage to those who maintain their current employment. And secondly, for those that can't, provide flexibility for those to stay in their segregated work environment, if they choose. But pay them a minimum wage.

Thank you for listening to my story. I'm grateful for this opportunity. And I ask you to vote for the elimination of sub-minimum wage. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.