

Witness Testimony on House Bill 225

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Thank you for this opportunity to offer my testimony on House Bill 225, the Ohio Employment First and Greater Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities Act. I offer this testimony on behalf of myself, as an individual and Ohio citizen, and not on behalf of Ohio APSE or my former employer, Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

My interest in this bill grows from my nearly 20 years working at Cincinnati Children's. During that time, I worked for Project SEARCH, a program that prepares young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities for competitive, integrated employment. Project SEARCH was developed at Cincinnati Children's and, because it is so effective, the program model has been replicated at over 800 hospitals and other businesses across the United States and worldwide.

What I learned from Project SEARCH is that the biggest obstacle and barrier to successful employment for people with disabilities has nothing to do with their capabilities, but rather, it is the low expectations that surround them. Through Project SEARCH, I learned that these low expectations are unfair and inaccurate. I saw it demonstrated again and again that, with proper preparation, adequate workplace adaptations, and consistent support; people with intellectual and developmental disabilities can work at the same, or higher, levels of quality and productivity as typically abled people.

Many of the young people who go through Project SEARCH are individuals with significant disabilities whose families have been told that they will never work. But I have seen countless examples of how these young people are transformed by spending time in an atmosphere of high expectations. Through the program they are immersed in workplace culture, and they receive rigorous training in marketable skills. It is remarkable to witness these young people entering the program shy and withdrawn, or overly silly and unable to control their behavior. And, by the end of the program they are communicating effectively and presenting themselves in a professional manner.

This is why I am so passionate about the need to pass House Bill 225 and end the practice of paying people with disabilities a subminimum wage in the state of Ohio. The practice is based on unfair and untrue assumptions about the capabilities of these individuals and creates a destructive atmosphere of low expectations that traps people in dead-end, exploitative situations, while denying them the right to pursue fulfilling and meaningful careers in competitive, integrated employment.

