

House Bill 225

May 21, 2025

House Commerce and Labor Committee

Thank you, Chair Johnson, Vice Chair Lear, Ranking Member McNally, and members of the House Commerce and Labor Committee, for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 225.

My name is Phyllis J. Mesko, and I have been a pediatric nurse for many years, and I am here to tell my son Mark's story.

I was the oldest of three girls growing up in an Italian family. In 1956, the doctor told my parents that my younger sister Nancy, born with a disability, would never walk or talk. My mom and dad were devastated. I saw first-hand what they did over and above to prove the doctor wrong. My father had parallel bars built in the basement and we all took turns working with her. He also collected tax stamps which were given out when I was young for purchases whether small or large. Our friends and family would give them to him to help pay for some of Nancy's therapy. With constant support and advocating not only did she walk and talk, but rode a two-wheel bike, learned to drive and work for 30 years at a local pediatric hospital. Nancy was strong, happy, and resilient, moved to an assisted living facility in her later years, loved life and was the toughest person I ever knew. She was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer and a fall took her life last year.

Because I saw how my mom and dad's extra support and advocating did to help my sister excel and have a better quality of life, I knew just what to do for my son. When Mark was training in high school for a future job placement, being he was in the multi-handicapped class and non-verbal, people "assumed" he was not able to work in the community and could only work in a subminimum job making a subminimum wage. Mark's dad and I went to a nearby workshop with his SSA to observe the job, and workers on a mini assembly line putting small toys together. I asked the manager how long they worked at this job and if they made minimum wage. She shook her head and said that her workers were not able to work in the

community and they made very little, certainly not minimum wage. Knowing my son, I knew it wouldn't be a good fit, remembering while at a video store with others he was to only do a part of the job consisting of gathering VCR tapes out of the drive-thru box, bringing them into the store, checking them in, and putting them back on the shelf. He would not give the key to the next person and insisted on doing the entire job. We then went to Goodwill where he would have the opportunity to inflate beach balls, since he liked the beach, the manager thought this would be a great job. I observed young people sitting at the stationary machine, which was impossible for my son, unless it was in front of a computer. While trying a different job site, I was notified my son could not match objects and would not be a candidate to work in the community. I was confused knowing this was not the case. I asked if his glasses were clean, the response was: "What, he wears glasses?"

For Mark to be successful at our local grocery store, the person with him needed to get to know him. Mark's job coach is very familiar with him now but first needed to gain his trust by getting to know him out of the work environment and learning how to gauge his mood for the day, his method of learning and abilities with redirection if needed, giving constant praise and support for a job well done. He and Mark became friends, and Mark began to trust him. He provides structure and consistency at the work site. He is also with Mark to stage the next job he is responsible for while providing a safe environment for him to work in a calm atmosphere geared to Mark's need for visual training, being he has a challenging time processing only auditorily. His job coach is also the liaison between Mark and the managers at the work site. Knowing and understanding Mark's disability and intermittent medical issues, I worked alongside HR to come up with a short list of accommodations for Mark to be successful working alongside his typical co-worker earning the same wage.

I feel very strongly that it is important for people with disabilities to be able to work for an equal wage. They deserve the same opportunities, the chance to belong working in the community with typical peers, while earning the same wages. Because they were born with certain needs, with support, and respect, they can have a positive impact on their community which in turn helps them gain financial independence, and a feeling of self-worth. This leads to them becoming a team player with their co-workers and included in their companies' social activities. The work site is viewed as a diverse place of

employment giving all employees the right to be part of their work family. The disabled person can sharpen their job skills and gain more independence just like their typical peers and show they deserve the same pay rate. They bring diversity to the table that not only benefits the business but helps them feel like they belong. Being able to purchase a favorite DVD or go out to lunch with the money they themselves earned has a positive impact and they prosper. Mark will rise to the occasion and put his best foot forward while eating with his co-workers at lunch provided at his store by socializing, non-verbally, that he loves being part of the group. If Mark is doing the same work even with support, he is entitled to the same benefits as anyone else and not a subminimum wage because he has Autism. Since he is working alongside his co-workers who are in the union, Mark is also in the union, which protects him. My hope is that all disabled people, physically or mentally with support, and guidance, can have the same opportunities to work in the community with their typical peers at a job that they would like, and are interested in, making the same wage. My sincere hope is that subminimum wage will be phased out.

Respectively,

Mark V. Mesko and Phyllis J. Mesko