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‘Our work, our choice,’ advocates for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities tell Pa. lawmakers

Vocational programs, commensurate wages provide individuals with I/DD with skills improvement, steady paycheck and socialization

HARRISBURG, Pa. (June 5, 2023) – Advocates for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) today urged the Pennsylvania General Assembly to preserve employment protections and to properly fund programs, stating that everyone has the right to work in an environment where they receive the protections, support and accommodations that help them thrive.

At today’s news event hosted by the Coalition for the Preservation of Employment Choice and the Rehabilitation & Community Providers Association (RCPA), advocates urged state and federal policymakers to increase funding related to the state Department of Human Services Office of Developmental Programs’ (ODP) participation rate schedule and to preserve Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which allows specific, qualified, provider/employers to pay individuals with significantly lower productivity due to their disability less than the prevailing minimum wage for work, based upon a set of highly regulated protocols, which is called a commensurate wage.

“Both the state and federal governments should continue to support every individual’s right to an ‘everyday life’ and choice to select the program that meets their needs,” said Pennsylvania Rep. Donna Oberlander (R-Armstrong/Clarion). “Individuals with significant disabilities must be offered the opportunity to learn and earn in a pre-vocational program, as part of a continuum of services. Pennsylvania’s current rates for services need to reflect the true cost of the overall service and not be bifurcated into facility versus community participation assumptions.”

Advocates told those assembled that these programs are critical to individuals with I/DD as they offer meaningful employment, support and interactions with peers and others that is otherwise not readily available.

“The Coalition for the Preservation of Employment Choice, RCPA, and families are speaking for those whose voices are not being heard,” said Colleen Stuart, president of the Coalition for the Preservation of Employment Choice and CEO of Venango Training & Development Center, Inc. “Individuals with significant disabilities choose prevocational workshop programming to continue to learn and maintain new skills and earn a paycheck in a safe, supportive, and positive educational and workplace setting. Without adequate rates that cover the cost of services, they will lose this choice as providers will not be able to maintain.”

DHS’ ODP participation rate schedule stymies providers for individuals with I/DD in facility-based vocational programs. Individuals in these programs have cognitive, physical or behavioral disabilities, and sometimes physical disabilities. These individuals require extensive accommodation and support, and often direct and continuous supervision. However, the ODP rate schedule does not cover the cost for these supports and accommodations, and this underfunding threatens vocational programs.

“These programs mean a lot to the individuals they serve,” said Richard Edley, PhD, president and CEO for RCPA. “When you systematically limit choice, you are taking away a basic principle of helping people with disabilities. When you then limit funding and create policies that effectively close programs, you are taking away critical services and meaningful activities. We cannot have a system that leaves people with disabilities behind.”

Advocates say that they’ll continue to push at the state and federal levels to retain services and programs that help individuals with I/DD secure rewarding job opportunities.

“My daughter Alex just turned 18 years old. She is profoundly autistic with a significant intellectual disability, and we are looking at all the options and support available to help her thrive in life,” said Craig Leen, counsel to the Coalition for the Preservation of Employment Choice and partner at K&L Gates. “This potentially includes working in supported employment with a commensurate wage if she wishes. It is critical that none of her options be removed. Policymakers should not focus on a one-size fits all solution that would force some individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities out of employment, but instead promote employment options depending on the level of support and accommodations each individual needs to be successful in the workplace.”

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About the Coalition for the Preservation of Employment Choice:

The Coalition for the Preservation of Employment Choice, Inc. is a coalition of families, caregivers, and other stakeholders working to preserve employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The coalition supports the elimination of barriers to employment and the expansion of employment opportunities for all. More at <https://employmentchoice.org>.

About the Rehabilitation and Community Providers Association (RCPA):

With well over 350 members, the majority of who serve over one million Pennsylvanians annually, Rehabilitation and Community Providers Association (RCPA) is among the largest and most diverse state health and human services trade associations in the nation. RCPA provider members offer mental health, substance use disorder, intellectual and developmental disabilities, children’s, brain injury, medical rehabilitation, and physical disabilities and aging services, across all settings and levels of care. Visit www.paproviders.org for more information