

TESTIMONY OF Mary Willard

Buffalo, MN

Chair Tomassoni and members:

My name is Mary Willard and I am the mother of Alec Willard who submitted written testimony. Thank you for the chance to testify today in support of Senate File 3972.

In his testimony, Alec has set out his reasons for wanting to go to college and what it would take for him to be successful. I can share with you the reasons I and the rest of his family want that for him. Alec has always been willing to meet goals and work hard. As with many teens and young adults, he hasn't been inclined to independently motivate himself, but if given help with goal-setting and with timely progress checks along the way, he is often successful in meeting those goals. He has participated in adapted sports or Special Olympics for many years, since the time around middle school when other more competitive teams no longer chose him for their rosters. If it weren't for Special Olympics and programs similar to it that adapt their systems to accommodate unique needs, there would be no place for this population to play competitive sports, nor to work on their own physical fitness. It's the same case for academics – unless given the right opportunity through supports such as academic, housing, and social environments, this population does not have the same opportunities as its peers. If we continue to deny them that opportunity, they become recipients of financial and other social programs and do not have meaningful activities to fulfill them, rather than becoming the contributing members of society they should be.

With the current labor shortages and alternative work arrangements coming out of the pandemic, we need to consider how to tap into this talent pool and utilize their abilities to the fullest. Alec's unique way of considering or solving a problem is not weird or wrong, it's simply different *because of* his disability and with that he brings a truly diverse perspective to the table. In my professional life, I worked with an incredible consultant with a developmental disability and she brought multi-millions of dollars to our business in animal welfare design principles primarily *because of* her having a disability. She brought solutions to the table that none of us "typical" thinkers ever considered or had the capability to consider—we just didn't think that way. Additionally, if we are truly serious about advancing diversity and inclusion,

disability is an intersectional aspect of diversity that can help society be more successful in this space.

When we looked at post-secondary options for Alec, we discovered that the available programs i) did not have supported housing, ii) did not have public transportation due to being in smaller towns, and iii) are either two-year colleges with only one-year occupational skills programs and no academic track that fit his needs and interests, or the other is a prohibitively expensive two-year program which does not offer an academic track in his area of interest. Alec received independent living skills studies in his transition program through the local school district and those skills are things we continue to build upon each day in the home – we don't need a college to provide that for him, or at least not to solely provide that. What he needs is a focused career-related curriculum that will result in a degree, certificate or other credential that will make him competitive in the labor market. He is not a traditional learner but will make great progress if given the right opportunities, as would many of his peers. Key to his success is transportation as he does not drive and likely never will, as well as supports with independent living to ensure he makes good daily choices and remains safe. He also would greatly benefit from peer and staff supports to ensure he is understanding and completing the assignments and staying on track academically.

We need more Minnesota college options for students like Alec and Inclusive Higher Education would provide that. For that reason, I respectfully ask that you support Senate File 3972. Thank you very much for your time.