

John Sherman

Testimony on SF 1271

My name is John Sherman. For the record I am speaking as a private citizen. In 1986, I joined the Vocational Rehabilitation unit in the predecessor of DEED as an analyst and program evaluator with responsibility for the Extended Employment program (EE). I retired in 2017. During my time with Vocational Rehabilitation, I was involved with EE in all of its aspects. At my retirement I was the state director for the Extended Employment program.

The Extended Employment program provides long term on-going employment services to Minnesotans with severe disabilities. The support services are broad and not time limited. They are provided through a statewide network of community rehabilitation providers (CRPs). Their professional support services are provided to workers with disabilities, if needed, to maintain employment or advance in their jobs. The state appropriation is provided to the individual agencies based on the number of hours worked by individuals in their jobs.

Since 1986, the EE program has been in a historic race with inflation. Every few years there would be an increase in the state appropriation for the EE program. Over the following years, inflation would diminish the purchasing power of the appropriation and the grants supported by the program. The provider agencies would have to manage supports with lessened resources. They had a difficult time planning and maintaining stable, quality programming. Instability about the future is often disheartening for both the individual worker and the on-going support professional. While not really keeping track since retirement it is clear from the evidence of the history of inflation over the past two years that uncertainty has reared its head again.

The heartbeat of the EE program is the on-going employment supports professional. The professional is the catalyst which enables employers and workers with disabilities to successfully negotiate both workers and employers needs. The successful support professional checks in with the individual periodically, and when necessary, intervenes when there are problems that may disrupt the work session. They marshal needed resources, work with the employer to create a solution to the issue at hand, and most importantly to me support the individual worker to successfully meet the workers goals. Success is an outcome where an employer has productive, successful employee who is fulfilled in their work.

The success of the program depends on capable employment support professionals. Recruiting and retaining individuals with the unique skills to work with the individual with disability and understand their goals and needs, and simultaneously understand the business needs of the employer is the mission critical need for the community rehabilitation provider. The CRP needs stable and predictable funding to maintain staff who provide the long-term relationship with the worker with disability. Staff members face the day-to-day effect of inflation on their family finances. These professionals need realistic prospects of expected support for the future.

I support the language in Section 1 of SF1271. Subd(8a) would require the commissioner of DEED to prepare an annual growth factor adjustment which would adjust the rates paid to CRPs based on inflation. This would provide stable purchasing power to CRPs who meet their performance backed outcomes. Adjusting for inflation is an absolute necessity for stabilizing funding for providers in a program with a long track record of delivering services.

I also, support the requirement in Subd (8b) to require the commissioner of management and budget to prepare a budget change request in each biennial detailed expenditure budget submitted to the legislature. Requiring a hard request for a budget increase goes a long way to managing realistic budget development. To change the reimbursement rate without backing up with appropriate funding is irresponsible program management.

In closing, the language in these sections is responsible support for a 40-year program that has measurably improved the employment of Minnesotans with disabilities.

I am available to Members of the Committee for questions at any time.

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