

Closing the Disparity Gap of People with Down syndrome in the Workforce

By Charlotte Woodward

The unemployment rate for people with a disability is still twice as high as the rate for people without a disability. It is a time to engage in thoughtful discussions about the pivotal role employment plays in the lives of people with disabilities and advocate for change. October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) and this serves as an important occasion to acknowledge and celebrate the employment achievements of individuals with disabilities.

Reflecting on my own employment journey, doctors told my parents that I would never learn to read or write because I was born with Down syndrome. They predicted that when I grew up, I would most likely work in a sheltered workshop, an environment where workers with disabilities are often secluded from their typical peers and paid below minimum wage, also known as subminimum wage.

Fortunately, their predictions were profoundly inaccurate. Not only did I defy expectations by mastering the skills of reading and writing, but I recently graduated from George Mason University, summa cum laude, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology, specializing in Inequality and Social Change. My studies complement my work at the National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS) and have given me the knowledge and skills needed to advocate for the Down syndrome community.

NDEAM holds a personal significance for me, but its importance extends beyond me. Firstly, it allows workers to recognize individuals with disabilities as integral members of their workplace teams, contributing their skills and talents to various industries. Secondly, it serves as a vital platform for public education, shedding light on the multifaceted issues surrounding employment for people with disabilities.

Section 14(c), a provision of The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 that allows employers to obtain special certificates to pay workers with disabilities wages below the federal minimum wage, is one of the many obstacles that workers with disabilities still encounter. Often, 14(c) workers are in isolated, sheltered workshops. Section 14(c) was originally intended to help wounded World War II veterans, who were thought to be less productive than other employees, due to their disabilities. But what started as a means of getting disabled veterans back into the workforce, eventually became a way for certain businesses to employ people with not only physical disabilities, but also those with intellectual and developmental disabilities and pay them subminimum wage.

Earlier this year, Virginia became the 16th state to eliminate 14(c), but more needs to be done nationally to help workers with disabilities. There are approximately 120,000 workers still employed under 14(c) certificates and half of them earn less than \$3.50 per hour, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Employees with disabilities deserve to be paid a living wage and to work alongside others in their community. By using 14(c) certificates, employers perpetuate myths, misconceptions, and stereotypes about people with disabilities, and their low expectations of workers further exacerbate and facilitate inequity.

People with Down syndrome and other disabilities are an untapped talent pool of capable employees who are ready to make an impact and should have the opportunity to participate in an inclusive workforce and be given the respect, dignity, and wages they deserve.

This NDEAM, I hope you will continue to celebrate workers with disabilities and join me in advocating for inclusive work environments, and a nationwide elimination of 14(c). Please contact your legislators to voice your support for the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act (H.R. 1263/S. 533).