

Workplace Dignity for All

Written by Andrew Wall

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After completing school, I worked at an organization that told my parents and me that it provided job training for people with disabilities. It was operated by former public school educators. It had commercial service contracts with companies and enterprises to provide the destruction and recycling of sensitive electronic equipment such as computers. I worked full days, dismantling and destroying electronic equipment alongside other young people with disabilities, supervised by a few people without disabilities. As a "trainee," I was paid approximately \$0.25 an hour.

My parents and I became concerned as several months passed and no suggestion was made as to how or when I or any of the workers with disabilities would complete "training" and go on to competitive employment in this field. When asked directly how many former trainees had moved on to competitive employment, the director of the program acknowledged that none had done so. My parents and I agreed that this was not a training program. My peers and I with disabilities were barely compensated for work that was otherwise commercially profitable. Contrary to what we were told, there was no plan for me to ever transition out of this work into work that paid a fair and dignified wage. I felt tricked and humiliated. Fortunately, I soon found a position with a local competitive integrated employer in my community.

Ten years of employment later, I have received raises associated with the increase in the New Jersey minimum wage, merit raises, and benefits such as paid time off. I am considered a valuable member of the staff, and I have even been recognized as Employee of the Month.



"Through my journey from being paid subminimum wages to obtaining meaningful employment, I have become an advocate for fair compensation and workplace dignity for all people with disabilities."

People with disabilities, such as myself, have valuable contributions to make as employees. Work should be respected and compensated for workers with disabilities as it would be for any non-disabled employees. In states that have eliminated 14(c) certificates, significant competitive employment increases for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have resulted. Those individuals can now experience, as I do, the pride of being contributors to society and the satisfaction of community inclusion that results from integrated employment.

As someone who has a 10-year career as a Culinary Arts Assistant, who has several culinary certificates, and is a member in the National Society of Leadership and Success and has Down syndrome—I know firsthand how important fair employment is and what people with disabilities can achieve when given real opportunities. That's why I urge you to support opportunities for competitive integrated employment and end the discriminatory practice of 14(c) certificates that allow employers to pay people with disabilities subminimum wages.



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