


 FROM OUR COMMUNITY

Agenda for people with disabilities should respect their choices

by Heidi S. Smith, John Wayne Barker and Michael Kraines

What do people with intellectual or developmental disabilities (I/DD) want as far as work choices? And, what do others think they want, or want you to believe?

Certain sources are saying that half of the individuals with I/DD want to work in competitive integrated employment. They are referring to positions where people make at least minimum wage and work mostly with others who do not have a disability.

Without solid data to back their claims, the sources are trying to create a perception, when the reality is something much different.

Thanks to the Section 511 counseling required by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), we have real results to consider. The Centers for Independent Living (CIL) was tasked with asking Minnesotans with I/DD served by Day Training and Habilitation (DT&H) programs about the employment choices they desired.

In the first year of Section 511 counseling and career sessions, we learned that there were 11,802 DT&H clients who were being paid a special minimum wage. Of these, 1,990, or about 17 percent, said they were interested in competitive integrated employment. The

figures were reported by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED).

It's important to note that competitive integrated employment may or may not be appropriate at this time for individuals in the 17 percent group, and that the much larger group, nearly five out of six, chose to continue working for the special minimum wage. All clients will be asked again in 2018 about their preference.

The total number of people receiving DT&H services was 17,745, according to the Minnesota Department of Human Services, of which 2,224, or 12.5 percent, were receiving Supported Employment Services under the Developmental Disabilities Waiver and were making at least minimum wage.

CIL interviewers who asked DT&H clients about their preferences were to serve as neutral gatherers of information, but that is a difficult thing to do when government entities are increasingly promoting competitive integrated employment over all other options.

Which brings us back to the person-centered idea of allowing for individual choices by people with I/DD. These were affirmed with the approval of Minnesota's Olmstead Plan by U.S. District Judge Donovan Frank, who has said publicly that "one size does not fit all."

He also said, "Many individuals with

disabilities in this state value living and working alongside other individuals with disabilities in settings such as group homes and sheltered workshops. The Court emphasizes that the Olmstead decision is not about forcing integration upon individuals who choose otherwise or who would not be appropriately served in the community."

"Many" was no exaggeration on the judge's part. We now know that 83 percent of the people served by Minnesota DT&Hs prefer to work in a center or on a crew.

Forced integration simply doesn't fit when people have chosen a different work path. We call this "intentional communities," where people choose to work in a center with others who have disabilities, where more support is typically offered.

These realities and preferences tend to get ignored by those who ascribe to a different mode of thinking. Some in our field are being swept off their feet by a belief that "All working age Minnesotans with disabilities can work, want to work, and can achieve competitive integrated employment," and very few should have the option to work in a DT&H. Certainly, some with I/DD can get competitive jobs, and will, and DT&H providers have been making that happen for years.

But, like cutting notches in the belt, there are human service leaders who take a sort of pride in keeping people with I/DD away from others who are like them, and from a supportive work environment that offers valuable experience and helps them to grow in their capabilities.

Many of us know that employment is more than just a paycheck, and the special minimum wage makes work possible for thousands of people with disabilities who could not otherwise earn a wage. Center and work crew options need to be preserved, while still offering direct hire placements to people who desire them.

When we talk about services for people with I/DD that build a quality of life, we need to consider all people, and not exclude those who don't seem to fit or match a predetermined plan that limits their options.

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