

Senate Standing Committee on Disabilities
Senate Standing Committee on Labor
Joint Public Hearing on Disabilities and Employment
Remarks prepared by AHRC New York City



Good morning members of the Senate. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Hannah Millson, and I work for AHRC New York City's employment and business division, helping New Yorkers with disabilities prepare for, find, and maintain jobs in their communities. AHRC New York City represents the largest supported employment program in the State: we are a team of 270 of employment specialists, job coaches, program directors, and job developers serving approximately 2,000 individuals to find meaningful work and to thrive in employment.

I'm here today to address a disconnect I see every day: New York has built systems intended to prepare people with disabilities for employment, yet too often those systems stop short of helping people actually secure and sustain jobs.

The problem is not a lack of solutions.

The problem is that we underinvest in what works, while maintaining a fragmented service system that is difficult for individuals and families to navigate, and failing to adequately fund the job coaches who make employment possible.

These are systemic barriers that continue to widen the employment disparity for New Yorkers with disabilities.

Enhanced funding for supporting people with higher needs to reach employment goals

First, we must expand access to proven employment models across all service systems through dedicated funding.

We know the models that work, and the economic case for this investment is clear.

According to the Rockefeller Institute of Government's report on the economic and social impact of disability service providers in New York -- released just last week—our field has generated \$15.6 billion in economic output, supported more than 194,000 full-time jobs, and contributed \$2.4 billion in federal and state tax revenue in 2023 alone.

This is evidence that expanding employment opportunities for people with disabilities is not only the right thing to do—it is good economic policy with measurable returns for our state.

New York already has proof that intentional investment works.

Through New York State Industries for the Disabled, which connects people with disabilities to employment through state-supported contract work, our state has demonstrated that strategic investment, strong employer partnerships, and structured employment pathways produce measurable results.

The success of NYSID shows us that when New York commits resources and aligns systems, outcomes improve.

But successful programs cannot scale without direct and sustained investment.

We must bring that same level of commitment to customized employment and individualized supports—particularly for people with higher support needs who require more intensive job development and coaching to achieve competitive integrated employment.

Customized employment is an evidence-based approach that tailors a job to an individual's strengths while meeting an employer's operational needs. This is a model that creates sustained, long-term employment outcomes for people with higher support needs. As New York moves towards Employment First principles, it will become increasingly crucial to invest in strategies that support people with disabilities with a range of support needs. And yet, access to customized employment remains limited across our state.

At AHRC New York City, our day habilitation programs support approximately 1,700 individuals with a wide range of support needs. Every one of these individuals deserves the opportunity to pursue competitive, integrated employment if that is their goal. But without meaningful investment in customized employment to expand provider capacity, many of these individuals will never have a fair opportunity to access work.

Providers like AHRC New York City often lack the funding structure necessary to deliver this level of individualized support or provide the intensity of job coaching required to move someone from readiness into sustained employment.

This challenge is particularly acute in New York City.

The OPWDD supported employment reimbursement rate for individualized services in New York City is the lowest in the state—despite the widely understood reality that the cost of living in New York City is significantly higher than in other regions.

That mismatch makes it extraordinarily difficult for providers to retain staff, deliver individualized supports, and scale the very employment models we know are most effective.

Simply put, we do not have the resources to offer this support at the scale New Yorkers need.

Fragmented Systems (OMH / ACCES-VR / OPWDD)

Even when effective employment services exist, too many New Yorkers cannot access them because our service systems are fragmented. Employment supports are divided across agencies including Office of Mental Health, ACCES-VR, and Office for People With Developmental Disabilities.

This fragmentation creates barriers at every level.

For providers, it creates administrative burden and operational inefficiency.

For individuals, it creates service gaps—especially during critical transitions.

And for families, it creates confusion, repeated applications, conflicting guidance, and interruptions in support, all while trying to help a family member who is ready and eager to work.

Most concerning, it prevents people from seamlessly accessing services that already exist.

Internships are a clear example. At AHRC New York City, we created the Partnership for Inclusive Internships, which places individuals in meaningful internship opportunities across city, county, and state government agencies.

The results speak for themselves: more than 250 individuals have participated, and 40 percent have gone on to competitive employment in the public sector. This is a proven pathway to employment.

And yet many qualified individuals cannot access this opportunity because restrictive eligibility requirements and fragmented funding systems shut them out.

That is a missed opportunity—not only for those individuals, but for the employers and communities that would benefit from their contributions.

What we are seeing is not a program failure: These are successful models delivering measurable outcomes.

When people are excluded from proven programs because of fragmented eligibility and funding structures, that is a systems failure—and one we have the power to fix.

DSP Investment

Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) - job coaches- are critical to the success of supported employment for people with disabilities, serving as job coaches, trainers, and facilitators of community integration. Their ability to provide consistent support directly impacts employment retention and quality of life for people with disabilities.

However, this sector faces a crisis characterized by high turnover, staffing shortages, and a lack of professional respect.

Job coaches are expected to work demanding and ever-changing schedules, learn the nuances of different workplaces, know how to support their individual in the work environmentall while navigating intensive documentation across funding sources with different criteria. And yet -- these positions earn slightly above minimum wage, often comparable to entry-level retail or service jobs. In fact, many times the people supported earn more than their job coach.

The undervaluing of this critical position leads to high turnover and many job vacancies, creating an operational problem for agencies like ours. How can we support people with disabilities at work, when we cannot maintain a consistent workforce?

Solutions

Today, I have highlighted three major challenges facing our sector: underinvestment in effective employment strategies, a fractured service system burdened by structural barriers, and the continued undervaluing of the workforce that makes integrated employment possible for people with disabilities.

At AHRC New York City, my colleagues and I have also thought deeply about solutions—solutions we believe could have a meaningful impact.

First, we must expand access to proven employment models, including customized employment, across all service systems through dedicated funding and training. We know these models work, but effective programs cannot scale without direct, sustained investment.

That investment must also reflect the realities of service delivery. In New York City, providers need reimbursement rates that align with the actual cost of doing business in the largest and most expensive city in the country. That means establishing an OPWDD supported employment rate that reflects the true cost of delivering high-quality, individualized services in New York City.

Without funding that matches operational realities, providers cannot build the workforce capacity necessary to expand these models—and we cannot expect improved employment outcomes.

Second, we must prioritize alignment across our funding agencies. Employment services should be accessible, coordinated, and consistent, and New Yorkers with disabilities should not have to navigate a fractured system to access the dignity of work. This requires establishing consistent service expectations, reimbursement structures, and outcome measures across ACCES-VR, OMH, and OPWDD so that access to employment supports is determined by an individual's goals and needs—not by which funding source they qualify for.

New York should consider value-based reimbursement models that reward successful employment outcomes. These models reduce unnecessary administrative burden, and create stronger accountability for helping people secure and sustain competitive, integrated employment.

And finally, we must invest in the workforce that makes employment possible. Better wages for Direct Support Professionals and job coaches are essential to improving recruitment and retention, and in turn, strengthening the quality and consistency of support that we can offer to people with disabilities.

If we want stronger employment outcomes, we must professionalize and invest in this workforce through competitive wages and recognition of job coaching as the specialized, professional work that it is. Job coaching is not an optional support. It is essential for the success of the programs.

On behalf of AHRC New York City, and the thousands of New Yorkers we support in accessing employment and full community inclusion, thank you for your time and for your thoughtful consideration of these issues.