

Testimony regarding employment by Alex Mikowski, MSW:

- **Competitive Integrated employment is possible for people with disabilities earning subminimum wage**
- **SWTICE is a pilot program that is working and needs to be extended**
- **How this project has intersected with OPWDD and DOL Career Centers**

This is my second time submitting testimony at the state level. I feel very passionate about all issues that relate to people with disability having equitable access to live in the community. As a person with a disability and Executive Director for our local Independent Living Center called Access to Independence of Cortland County, these issues are vital to address.

As I have previously stated, I am a person with a disability. You will notice a few of my disabilities- I have

- a slight studder (speech disability),
- I have a learning disability in written expression – much of this testimony was written with voice to text.
- I have some physical health disabilities and now use a rollator to travel.

As a first grader my teacher said I “wouldn’t amount too much as I couldn’t really read, talk or write”. It is due to IDEA, ADA and supportive people that I didn’t end up working at a subminimum wage myself.

The grant

“The Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment or SWTCIE for short is a pilot program funded by the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration. New York is one of 14 states receiving the SWTCIE grant, with NYSED’s Adult Career & Continuing Ed Services (ACCES) as the State grantee. SWTCIE’s goal is to reduce the number of people working for subminimum wages, and increase the number of people who attain competitive, integrated employment. The participants for SWTCIE are people who are currently earning subminimum wage, and people who may be “contemplating” subminimum wage. This could include youth transitioning out of high school and people who are currently engaging in sub minimum wage sheltered workshops.

New York’s SWTCIE will provide enhanced services to participants, including Customized Employment, benefits planning, and opportunities for training and work experiences. The SWTCIE services will be provided by five Independent Living Centers, covering six counties, collaborating with ACCES-VR and the personnel in the sheltered workshops. NYAIL will oversee and provide technical assistance to the ILCs in the six counties. Counties include: Erie, Monroe, Wayne, Nassau, Suffolk, and Cortland Counties.” From the NYAIL website <https://ilny.us/programs/swtcie>

Context of our community

Cortland County is a rural county in central New York with approximately 46,000 residents, including the small City of Cortland and several outlying towns. The county faces many of the challenges typical of rural communities, such as limited public transportation and high rates of poverty, which can exacerbate health issues. Notably, Cortland County has a significant population of individuals with disabilities across all age groups. Nearly half (45.7%) of Cortland County students in grades 7–12 self-identify as having some form of disability or “difficulty,” including learning disabilities, mental health challenges, and physical or sensory impairments.

I am first going to address subminimum wage.

I believe that most if not all people can work for at least minimum wage. I have worked with many people who are volunteering, in programs or earning less than minimum wage that have many marketable skills. In the last 18 months of this grant, we have had the honor of working with many individuals. We have built confidence, tried new experiences and helped job seekers do many familiar and unfamiliar activities. The result of these effort have been several job seekers getting interviews and getting jobs.

We were one of 5 Independent Living Centers that were chosen for this project. And New York State was one of several states that were awarded this opportunity. More information can be found on the state’s website <https://www.nyswtcie.com/>

ACCES-VR has contracted with NYAIL (New York Association on Independent Living) who then subcontracted with each Independent Living Center. This has been critical to the success of program. It has helped us to learn from each other and ensure that best practices are being implemented at each site. More information can be found on NYAIL’s website <https://ilny.us/programs/swtciem>

This program was designed to with job seekers that many of the service systems including ACCES-VR historically didn’t serve because they were viewed as “too disabled”. This program is flexible, driven by the interests of the employment seeker and response to the needs of the employment seeker. One of the interesting approaches that we applaud is partnering with Independent Living Centers to deliver the program. New York State is the only state to do so. This choice centers the project with lived experience as by statute more than 50% of the staff and board have to be people with disabilities ourselves.

People with disabilities have to be creative as we constantly have to problem solve barriers related to living as a disabled person in an often-inaccessible world.

While this project is also offering some existing services like benefits advisement and self-advocacy classes, there are also approaches that NYS has not previously rolled out

including Customized Employment (CE). The below is an excerpt from ACCES-VR website.

Customized Employment

“Customized employment is a process for achieving competitive integrated employment or self-employment for people with disabilities who face significant barriers to working. Customized employment skips the step of applying for jobs against people who do not face the same barriers. Instead, jobs are developed to meet the needs of the employers while playing to the strengths, interests and abilities of the individual. It is an approach that benefits many people with significant disabilities who may not find success through other employment strategies.

Participants will work with peers through their local Independent Living Center to receive employment and wrap-around pre-employment services. ILC staff have been trained to provide customized employment by our partners at Griffin-Hammis Associates (GHA) in conjunction with San Diego State University to ensure CE is provided to fidelity.”

Interception with DOL One Stop Career Centers and OPWDD programs

Cortland is a collaborative community, and this project has not been an exception. We closely work with the Department of Labor’s One Stop Career Center. We often work together to give presentations, refer job seekers and strive to build opportunities for employment. Because our county doesn’t have a disability staff member at the Career Center often refers to us for support. And we refer community members to the Career Center’s job fairs, workshops and one-on-one meetings. We also help promote the Summer Youth Employment and take a student when asked.

We also interact with OPWDD service providers and coordinate any programs that the job seeker is involved with. We best serve the job seeker interests when we all understand each other programs (both limitations and opportunities) and work for the common goal of a Competitive Integrated Employment for every job seeker.

By building on the momentum of this project, we can support many people with disabilities to leave roles paying \$3 an hour to become full employees who pay taxes and have opportunities for advancement. **This project is currently scheduled to sunset September 30th 2027.**

Background on the agency that I represent- ATI Cortland

Access To Independence of Cortland County, Inc. (ATI Cortland) is a 501(c)3 non-profit that is run by and for people with disabilities. We are an Independent Living Center (ILC). Independent Living means being able to make your own choices about where you live, who you live with, where you work, and how you spend your time. Everyone deserves to participate in community life and pursue the activities they want to. People should also be allowed to take risks and succeed and fail on their own terms. Independent Living involves people knowing what choices are available, choosing what is right for them, and taking responsibility for their own actions. For people that have disabilities that affect their ability to make complicated decisions or pursue complex activities, independent living means making as many choices for themselves as possible.

We started as a grassroots coalition called Cortland County Accessibility Committee (CCAC) under CAPCO in the late 1980s and by 1998, we had become our own non-profit organization. In 2000, Senator Seward and Assemblyman Luster co-sponsored legislation that identified ATI as New York State's 36th Independent Living Center (ILC). In 2001, ATI began receiving ongoing funding through ACCES-VR (Adult Career and Continuing Education Services-Vocational Rehabilitation), part of the State Education Department, to serve as an official ILC.

We have over 2 decades of experience working with diverse populations, managing grants, and improving community health outcomes for people of all abilities.

As an ILC, we are primarily staffed by people with disabilities. This allows us to weave our own lived experiences into the fabric of our services. A requirement to be an ILC is that more than 50% of our staff, leadership and board need to have disabilities. We work to ensure that everyone has the tools to live their most independent lives.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter.

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(She/ Her pronouns)

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