

Testimony of Anita Dowd-Neufeld

Senior Vice President

Family Residences and Essential Enterprises, Inc. (FREE)

Joint Public Hearing on Disabilities and Employment

May 6, 2026

Good morning to the Chairs- Senator Fahy and Senator Ramos and members of the Committees. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on the very important topic of employment for people with disabilities.

My name is Anita Dowd-Neufeld, and I am the Senior Vice President at Family Residences and Essential Enterprises, or FREE. We are a nonprofit agency supporting more than 5,500 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental health needs, and traumatic brain injuries across Long Island and New York City, through a range of employment, community, housing, and clinical services.

We are funded through New York State agencies including OPWDD, OMH, NYSED, the Department of Health, and the Department of Labor, along with county contracts and private grants.

At FREE, we strongly support the Employment First Initiative. We believe that “employment for all” is a human right... not a privilege. We work closely with state and local partners to help individuals find and maintain meaningful employment.

However, despite this shared commitment, there are still clear gaps that must be addressed.

Gaps in Service Delivery

We continue to see gaps across systems that make it difficult for individuals to move from services into employment.

There is still a lack of coordination between government agencies, nonprofits, and the business community, leaving individuals to navigate systems that are not aligned. When this happens there is rarely a successful outcome for the individual supported as our service delivery systems are complicated and documentation requirements are often overwhelming. More collaboration is needed between agencies along with a streamlined-referral system.

We also hear directly from the people we support about how benefits structures create barriers. New York created the Medicaid Buy-In program over 20 years ago to address this issue, but individuals still face a “benefits cliff,” where earning even slightly more can result in losing critical supports. This creates a real disincentive to increase hours or advance in employment, especially when reinstating benefits can be complicated and time-consuming.

To address this, we need policies that allow individuals to increase their income gradually without risking their healthcare, housing, or stability. In the meantime, increased access to trained benefits navigators is critical to help individuals understand their options, problem-solve in real time, and make informed decisions about work. Greater collaboration and clearer guidance across systems will help create more consistent and supportive pathways to employment.

Strengthening Partnerships and Workforce Pathways

We know that partnership is the key to success.

For the past 11 years, FREE has partnered with ACLD, the Town of Oyster Bay, and our local, county, and state workforce partners to host the Talent Connection Job Expo. This event brings together hundreds of individuals of all abilities with employers who are actively looking to hire.

It is a place where real job matches happen.

This event demonstrates that when job seekers, employers, and service providers come together in one space, meaningful employment opportunities are created. It works because it is built on relationships.

We need to continue expanding opportunities like this:

- Job readiness workshops
- Vocational training
- Direct employer engagement

We also strongly encourage the expansion of high school apprenticeship programs and Work Tryout programs, where employers are compensated to provide firsthand, real-world work experience. These programs are critical in helping young adults build skills, gain confidence, and establish connections with employers early on, creating a much smoother transition from school to employment. FREE is currently working with the Brentwood School District, The Suffolk County Department of Labor and Empire State College to create a certificate and apprenticeship program for High School Students grades 10 -12 to become direct support professionals for the nonprofit sector. This program will create the opportunity for students to gain college credits while in High School and have immediate employment upon high school graduation.

In addition, stronger coordination between agencies like OPWDD, ACCES-VR, OMH and workforce systems can help streamline referrals, expand internships, and ensure ongoing workplace support regardless of the government source which is funding them. This is

particularly important for individuals with co-occurring disorders who require support services from multiple state funded organizations .

These are practical strategies that lead to real employment outcomes.

Transportation Barriers

Transportation continues to be one of the biggest barriers to employment.

Individuals need reliable and affordable transportation to attend interviews, participate in training programs, and get to work consistently.

Right now, transportation options are often limited, unreliable, or too expensive.

Without dependable transportation, even the most qualified candidate cannot maintain employment. This is an area where additional investment and creative solutions are urgently needed.

Addressing Employer Stigma

Another major barrier is stigma.

Successful employment providers spend as much time supporting and educating employers as they do support the job seeker.

It is critical for employers to understand what a person *can do*, rather than focusing on perceived limitations.

Employers also need to know that they are not alone. Service providers are there to support both the employee and the employer. If challenges arise, we are there to help navigate them in real time.

We also believe that businesses should be incentivized to hire individuals with disabilities through programs such as federal and state tax credits. These incentives can help open doors and encourage more inclusive hiring practices.

When employers are informed and supported, they are far more likely to hire and retain individuals with disabilities.

Closing

In closing, we strongly support the Employment First Initiative and the belief that employment is a right for all people.

To make that a reality, we must:

- Strengthening coordination across systems

- Expand partnerships that connect individuals directly to employers
- Address transportation barriers
- Continue educating and supporting the business community

We appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective and look forward to continued collaboration to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities across New York State.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions.