



ILR School

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Institute on Employment and Disability

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Thank you, Madam Chairs and members of the committees. My name is Wendy Strobel Gower, and I am the Executive Director of the Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR). Cornell serves as New York's land-grant university, and ILR is one of the contracted schools. We are committed to improving quality of life in New York and beyond through research, outreach, and extension.

The Yang-Tan Institute is a globally recognized organization focused on employment and disability policy and practice. I am here today to share our perspective based on decades of experience working with New York State systems that support New Yorkers with disabilities, including the impacts of recent federal policy changes on those systems, the business community, and people with disabilities who want to work.

First, I want to commend New York State and its agencies for ongoing efforts to address longstanding barriers to employment for people with disabilities. Fragmented service delivery, limited career pathways, and interagency silos are challenges faced nationwide. New York's establishment of the Office of the Chief Disability Officer (OCDO) in 2022 created a formal structure to coordinate across systems and better connect job seekers with disabilities to employers.

Important initiatives are already underway, including interagency data sharing, model employer efforts, expansion of disability inclusive internships and apprenticeships, improved access to work incentives counseling and financial literacy, an Employment First business liaison, and stronger transition practices for students with disabilities. Planning for a Medicaid Buy-In expansion is also critical to reducing the "benefits cliff" that keeps many people with disabilities out of the labor force. Our faculty have been actively engaged in supporting this work.

Despite this positive momentum, federal policy changes are placing growing strain on disability employment, education, and support systems. Legal challenges to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and efforts to dismantle key functions of the U.S. Department of Education threaten access to education and employment protections. Without strong federal enforcement, New Yorkers with disabilities are at greater risk of exclusion. The state should explore opportunities to strengthen civil rights protections at the state level to prevent a return to institutionalization, greater unemployment, and segregation.

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The K. Lisa Yang and Hock E. Tan Institute on Employment and Disability is part of the Cornell University ILR School. The Institute works to advance the inclusion and full participation of people with disabilities in the workplace and community. Its research, training, and technical resources expand knowledge about disability inclusion, leading to positive change.

Federal actions have also disrupted business-led disability inclusion efforts. For years, we have worked with employers to promote disability as a core component of diversity and inclusion. That work was reinforced by Rehabilitation Act Sections 501 and 503, which established affirmative employment practices for federal agencies and contractors. Recent efforts to broadly eliminate DEI and affirmative action initiatives have unintentionally reversed progress on disability hiring and retention. These shifts are already affecting employer behavior.

New York is well positioned to influence business practices by continuing to lead as a model employer of people with disabilities. The state could further encourage private sector hiring through targeted incentives such as tax credits and procurement preferences, while also setting clear standards for disability inclusion for any entity doing business with the state, to guard against segregation and exploitation.

At the same time, safeguards are needed to prevent the expansion of segregated, subminimum wage employment. Through our work with ACCES-VR, we have documented the experiences of New Yorkers earning far below minimum wage in segregated settings—on average less than \$3.50 an hour. Many of these individuals have the interest and ability to succeed in competitive integrated employment but were never offered meaningful alternatives after leaving high school.

In 2020, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights recommended that Congress repeal Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, citing decades of evidence of poor oversight and worker exploitation. Many states have already taken action to eliminate subminimum wages and segregated employment. We strongly encourage New York to consider becoming the next state to do so.

We are also concerned about potential reductions to Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services. These services provide essential supports—housing, transportation, job coaching, and skills for independence—that make employment possible. New York must protect these services while refocusing regulations and rate incentives toward integration and employment outcomes. This includes improving performance metrics, adequately funding integrated employment programs, and ensuring people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are meaningfully offered opportunities to pursue work.

Too often, employment goals are undermined by systemic barriers such as transportation gaps, low expectations, and agency payment structures that discourage work. The state can and should ensure that funding models do not penalize providers for supporting employment.

Finally, successful reform requires a well-paid, well-trained direct support workforce and stronger connections to job-driven pathways such as registered apprenticeships, workforce certifications, and career and technical education. The New York State Department of Labor can play a key role in bringing educators, apprenticeship sponsors, and workforce partners together to ensure people with disabilities can access and succeed in these pathways.

In conclusion, New York has powerful levers to advance Employment First, strengthen economic security for people with disabilities, and protect civil rights. By building on existing initiatives and continuing strong cross-agency leadership, the state is positioned to become a national model.

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

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