

My name is Derrick Ek and I am the Outreach and Systems Advocacy Coordinator for AIM Independent Living Center in Corning, NY.

AIM offers a wide range of services to people with all types of disabilities, including supported employment services under contracts with ACCES-VR and OPWDD.

These services include career exploration, work readiness training, job placement and job coaching. AIM has provided supported employment services in the greater Elmira-Corning area, which includes Chemung, Schuyler and Steuben counties, for approximately 20 years.

One of the biggest issues faced by AIM's employment specialists is a noticeable decline in employer engagement in recent years.

AIM has lost partnerships with area employers, and establishing new partnerships has been challenging despite significant outreach efforts. This makes direct job placements more difficult. Employers also seem reluctant to host AIM consumers for workplace assessments or work-based learning experiences.

The drop in employer engagement creates challenges for AIM's employment specialists when trying to connect participants with career fields aligned with their interests and strengths. Opportunities in certain fields are few and far between, especially since a large portion of AIM's service region is rural.

We are not certain of the root causes of the decline in employer engagement, but state-level policy solutions might include a statewide campaign featuring paid advertising, outreach and trainings to make employers more aware of tax incentives and other benefits for businesses who hire people with disabilities. These benefits include tapping a broader, more diverse talent pool to boost recruitment; demonstrating a commitment to equal opportunity hiring and an accessible inclusive workplace; and ongoing job coaching provided at no cost which improves long-term retention.

Other recommendations specific to state agencies include streamlining the referral process by which ACCES-VR directs consumers to local supported employment providers, which can be lengthy; and providing more information and training to care coordinators in the OPWDD system about OPWDD employment programs such as Employment Training Program or Pathway to Employment.

Thank you for your consideration.

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