

While there are many areas of concern within I/DD services, today's focus is the effectiveness of New York State's disability service and workforce systems in supporting competitive, integrated employment. From the perspective of a parent of a 35-year-old man with a college degree served through OPWDD's self-direction model, the system is falling short of its stated goals.

Since his college graduation in 2020, we have been unable to access a qualified Job Developer to support his transition from entry-level work—secured and maintained independently—to employment aligned with his degree, skills, and career goals. This reflects a broader systemic issue: a significant shortage of qualified employment professionals within the self-direction model. In our region, providers with ACRE credentials and expertise in customized employment are not available.

This gap is not about individual readiness; it is about infrastructure. The current system does not ensure access to essential services such as career planning, networking support, and individualized job development. Without these, individuals with developmental disabilities are excluded from the competitive labor market, regardless of their qualifications.

New York State's "Employment First" commitment requires measurable implementation. I respectfully urge the following actions:

- **Invest in workforce development:** Establish targeted funding, incentives, and reimbursement rates to recruit, train, and retain qualified Job Developers and Career Coaches, including those with ACRE certification.
- **Set and enforce provider standards:** Require competency-based credentials and demonstrated expertise in customized employment for providers delivering employment services.
- **Ensure equitable access across service models:** Guarantee that individuals using self-direction can access the same quality and range of employment supports as those in agency-based models.
- **Expand funding for individualized employment supports:** Increase availability of career planning, discovery, job development, and ongoing coaching services that are neurodivergent friendly, personalized and outcome-driven.
- **Create accountability metrics through the Life Plan:** Track and publicly report outcomes such as competitive, integrated employment rates, job retention, wages, and alignment with individual career goals.
- **Strengthen cross-system coordination:** Align OPWDD services with workforce development systems, including vocational rehabilitation and employer engagement initiatives, to improve job matching and hiring pipelines.
- **Support employer engagement:** Incentivize businesses to hire and retain neurodivergent workers through education, technical assistance, and partnership programs.

Underemployment among individuals with developmental disabilities is not inevitable; it is the result of gaps in service design and delivery. Addressing these gaps will require targeted investment, accountability, and alignment between policy and practice.

I urge New York State leaders to use this hearing to fund and implement these solutions so that every individual who wants to work has access to the supports necessary to achieve competitive, integrated employment. With the right infrastructure in place, meaningful employment is not an exception—it becomes the expectation.

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“Life doesn’t make any sense without interdependence. We need each other, and the sooner we learn that, the better for us all.” Erik Erikson