

New York State Senate Public Hearing

Employment for People with Disabilities

Testimony Submitted by a Parent and Disability Advocate

Mount Kisco, New York | May 4, 2026

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Lucille Rossi, and I am the parent of a 25-year-old daughter with an intellectual and developmental disability (I/DD). I am also a graduate of the New York State Partners in Policymaking program and serve as a volunteer member of the OPWDD DDAC Sub-Committee on Employment and Meaningful Activities. I speak today not only as a parent, but as an advocate who has spent years navigating the systems that are supposed to help our children find meaningful work—and who has witnessed firsthand how often those systems fail them.

The promise of “Employment First” is written into New York State’s Executive Order 40. It declares that competitive, integrated employment is the first and preferred outcome for people with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities. My daughter, and the tens of thousands of New Yorkers like her, deserve to see that promise kept. Today, I am here to tell you it is not being kept—and to ask for your leadership in changing that.

My Family’s Experience

My daughter has a significant intellectual disability. For the past ten years, our family has worked tirelessly to prepare her for employment. Starting with her very first transition plan when she entered high school, we fought for community-based work experiences. By the time she exited at age 21, she had averaged 10 to 15 hours per week of real-world work experience. She then completed a two-year vocational transition program, followed by a Project Search program—a nationally recognized model for students with disabilities entering the workforce.

She graduated from Project Search and was deemed employable, with the expectation that she could work at least 16 hours per week. That should have been a moment of celebration. Instead, it marked the beginning of a new set of obstacles. What followed was months of navigating a convoluted, fragmented system with few real supports and little coordination between the agencies responsible for helping her.

Her experience with ACCES-VR—the state’s primary vocational rehabilitation agency—has been particularly discouraging. Since being labeled “employable” in spring 2024, she has met weekly with an assigned job developer. That job developer’s primary strategy has been searching (“doom scrolling”) job postings on Indeed. There has been no customized employment planning, no relationship-building with local employers, and no effort to match her unique strengths and interests to the right opportunity. The job developer has not received training in ACRE-certified customized employment techniques—a proven, best-practice approach that this state has largely failed to implement at scale.

We have not given up. We never will. But no family should have to fight this hard to access what the law already guarantees.

A Systemic Problem, Not an Isolated One

My family's experience is not unique. It reflects a statewide failure. Consider the data:

- New York State ranks 36th in the nation for competitive integrated employment of people with I/DD.
- Of the approximately 130,000 individuals enrolled with OPWDD, only around 10,000 have any supported employment services—and that includes people who need minimal support.
- New York spends over \$2 billion annually on day habilitation services, many of which keep people with disabilities in segregated, non-vocational settings rather than moving them toward employment.
- At a recent “Diverse Ability Job Fair” in Westchester County, over 350 job-seekers with disabilities attended. The demand is there. The pipeline is not.

In October 2021, the New York State Assembly held a full-day hearing on employment for people with disabilities. Nearly 100 people testified about the barriers they and their families face. At that time, the competitive employment rate for people with I/DD hovered around 15%. Five years later, it remains essentially unchanged. Hearings and proclamations are not enough. We need accountability, investment, and structural reform.

Specific Requests for Legislative Action

I respectfully urge this committee and the New York State Senate to take the following actions:

1. Require training in customized employment.

Mandate that job developers funded by ACCES-VR and OPWDD employment providers obtain ACRE-certified training in customized employment. Customized employment works. It matches individuals to jobs based on their strengths and the real needs of local businesses. It is not optional—it should be standard practice.

2. Establish accountability and outcome tracking.

Create transparent, publicly reported data on employment outcomes—by provider, by region, and by disability type. Track not just placements, but job retention, hours worked, and wages earned. Agencies and providers must be held to measurable progress toward competitive integrated employment, consistent with New York's Olmstead obligations.

3. Build a coordinated employment pathway.

Create a seamless, shared pathway between schools, ACCES-VR, and OPWDD so that young people with I/DD do not fall through the cracks between systems. Transition planning should connect directly to employment services, with no gap in support as

students exit school. The current system requires families to re-apply and re-explain at every step—a burden that causes people to simply give up.

4. Redirect funding from segregated settings to employment.

Incentivize and ultimately require the shift of resources from high-cost, segregated day programs toward supported employment and customized employment services. People with disabilities who work pay taxes, become more independent, and reduce their reliance on public benefits. The return on investment is clear. The political will must follow.

5. Establish a cross-agency employment task force.

Convene a permanent, cross-organizational task force—including providers, state agencies, advocacy organizations, families, self-advocates, and transition experts—to identify barriers and drive solutions. New York can look to models like Colorado’s Senate Bill 16-77, which established exactly this kind of collaborative oversight structure.

Closing

My daughter, and other like her, want to and CAN work. She has something to contribute—to her employer, to her community, and to this state. All she needs are the right supports and a system that actually helps rather than hinders.

Thank you.