



**PEOPLE INC. NYS STATE SENATE DISABILITIES & LABOR COMMITTEES
WRITTEN TESTIMONY REGARDING DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT IN NEW YORK
STATE**

Chair Fahy, Chair Ramos, and Members of the Senate Standing Committees on Disabilities and Labor:

Thank you for convening this hearing and for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of People Inc. My name is Anne McCaffrey, and I serve as President and CEO. People Inc. is the largest nonprofit human services provider in Western New York and the largest provider of workforce services for people with disabilities in our region. We support thousands of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities across Western New York and the Greater Rochester region, and we are a member of New York Disability Advocates.

I want to use this testimony to do four things: describe what employment for people with developmental disabilities actually looks like on the ground in Western New York; share data on the scale of the unrealized economic opportunity this issue represents for our state; offer concrete recommendations the committees are well-positioned to advance this session; and respectfully ask the committees to put real resources behind Governor Hochul's Employment First commitment.

The People We Serve and the Work We Do

People Inc. operates a continuum of employment and prevocational programs designed to meet individuals where they are and move them, at their own pace, toward competitive integrated employment.

Supported Employment Program (SEMP) is the core of our employment work. Through SEMP, we provide individualized job carving, job development, on-the-job training, stabilization, and long-term follow-along support to people referred through ACCES-VR. Every placement is community-based and integrated. Participants are employees of their workplace, paid the prevailing wage.

Our Community Prevocational Program (CPV) provide volunteer placements, job exploration, and skill-building to prepare individuals for competitive integrated employment.

The Employment Training Program (ETP) and Young Adult Life Transitions (YALT) programs operate on two college campuses — Daemen University and Hilbert College, as well as in the community in the cities of Lockport and Buffalo. They provide opportunities for paid internship experiences, social connections, and a college-affiliated launchpad into adult employment.

Pathway to Employment, and the Social and Vocational Enrichment Transition Program extend our reach to students with disabilities aged 14 and older — building job readiness in the years before ACCES-VR eligibility, when the foundation for adult employment outcomes is being laid.

These programs do not exist in isolation. They are tightly coordinated with school districts, ACCES-VR district offices, OPWDD service coordinators, and a network of more than 200 employer partners across Western New York.

What This Work Produces

In our 2025 program year, People Inc. served 561 individuals through SEMP — 241 funded through ACCES-VR and 320 funded through OPWDD. As of this submission, 439 of those individuals are working in the community.

Three numbers from our 2025 outcomes are worth committee attention:

Seven years. That is the average job tenure of a People Inc. SEMP participant. National Bureau of Labor Statistics data put median tenure for the broader workforce at roughly four years, and tenure in retail, food service, and the lower-wage sectors where many of our placements occur is closer

to two. The men and women we place are not just employable — they are the employees their managers most want to keep.

Two hundred employers. Tops Friendly Markets employs 19 People Inc. participants. Wegmans employs 18. Walmart, Walgreens, and Denny's each employ several more. The Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority contracts with us for cleaning services at the Buffalo Niagara International Airport. These are not pity placements. They are repeat customers.

94% employment among satisfaction-survey respondents. In our 2025 survey of 102 SEMP participants, 94 percent are currently employed, 93 percent are working in a job of their choice, 88 percent are satisfied with their job, and zero respondents reported being dissatisfied with their job. Ninety-nine percent reported that their job coach treats them with respect.

These numbers are produced by people, and I want the committees to hear from a few of them.

Liam O'Mahony, Director of Marketing & Communications at the Brothers of Mercy Wellness Campus, describes People Inc. as a partner that connects them to "talented, dedicated employees who bring great value" and contributes to a workplace where "each department complements the others."

Kim Minkel, Executive Director of the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority, frames the economic case directly: "When individuals with disabilities earn a living, they spend those earnings where they live. They contribute to a stronger community and economy."

Dave Schutte, owner of Creekview Restaurant, describes John G., who has worked in his kitchen for 24 years — as "the hardest worker we have on the team", whose work ethic inspires the rest of the staff.

And Christian Lippert, a dishwasher at Brothers of Mercy and a SEMP participant, tells us simply: "I am not afraid to learn new things now. They find creative ways to help me and make my job fun."

This is what the committees are protecting and expanding when you fund this work.

The Scale of the Unrealized Opportunity

Despite outcomes like ours, the macro picture in New York and nationally remains discouraging.

National Core Indicators data analyzed by ThinkWork at the Institute for Community Inclusion show that only 16 to 17 percent of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities receiving state services hold a paid community job. Among those without jobs, 41 to 42 percent say they want to work — but only 63 percent of that group has a documented employment goal in their service plan. The system is not even asking the question reliably.

Census ACS data for 2024 show that 45 percent of working-age people with any disability are employed, compared to 77 percent of people without a disability. For people with cognitive disabilities — the population most directly served by our programs — the employment rate falls to 40 percent. Poverty tracks these gaps: 9.9 percent of working-age people without disabilities live in households below the poverty line, compared to 23.6 percent of people with any disability and 26.6 percent of people with a cognitive disability.

New York performs worse than the nation. In 2024, only 28.8 percent of New Yorkers with disabilities participated in the labor force, compared to 69.9 percent of non-disabled New Yorkers — a gap of more than 41 percentage points, and 3.5 points worse than the national average for people with disabilities. One in four New Yorkers with a disability lived below the poverty line. OPWDD's February 2026 employment services data confirm that of more than 135,000 people in the OPWDD system — most of working age — only roughly 14,000 receive employment supports. The remainder are people we are not yet reaching.

The committees should hear this number plainly: the gap between people in OPWDD's system who could benefit from employment services and those who currently receive them runs into the tens of thousands. Closing it is not just a matter of dignity — though it is that. It is a matter of household income, state and federal tax revenue, reduced reliance on public benefits, and access to a workforce New York's employers urgently need.

Recommendations

In alignment with Governor Hochul's Executive Order 40 and New York's Employment First commitment, People Inc. respectfully offers the following recommendations.

1. Align SEMP Reimbursement with OPWDD Rate Increases

Job coaches are the load-bearing element of supported employment. They develop relationships with employers, train participants on the job, advocate when problems arise and stay involved long

enough to make placements stick. Our 2025 satisfaction survey makes clear how participants experience them: 99 percent say their coach treats them with respect, 95 percent say their coach listens to their concerns, and 95 percent say their coach is available when needed.

People Inc. currently employs approximately 30 SEMP job coaches at a starting salary of roughly \$21 per hour. Caseloads run 20 to 30 individuals. In some cases, coaches support participants on a one-to-one basis throughout an entire workday. We have vacancies, and demand is growing. Wage growth elsewhere in New York's labor market has outpaced what fee-based SEMP funding allows us to offer.

We respectfully ask the committees to align SEMP reimbursement rates with the OPWDD increases so providers can recruit and retain qualified coaches. We also ask the committees to support dedicated funding for employer-relations positions at provider organizations — a function distinct from job coaching that requires its own staffing model and is essential to expanding the pipeline of inclusive employers.

2. Aggressively Promote and Expand New York's Tax Credits for Hiring People with Disabilities

This is among the highest-leverage and lowest-cost actions available to the Legislature, and it is one we believe deserves significantly greater attention than it currently receives.

New York already offers the Workers with Disabilities Employment Tax Credit, which provides employers a credit of up to \$2,100 per qualifying full-time employee — and a partial credit for part-time hires — for individuals certified through ACCES-VR. The federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit provides up to an additional \$2,400 per qualifying hire. Stacked together, these credits can deliver more than \$4,500 in first-year tax benefit to an employer who hires a person with a disability through a program like ours.

These are real, meaningful incentives. They are also dramatically underutilized.

In our experience working with more than 200 employer partners across Western New York, the majority of employers we approach about hiring a person with a disability — including sophisticated, well-resourced companies — have never heard of the New York Workers with Disabilities Employment Tax Credit. Many have not heard of the federal WOTC either. When we

walk them through it, the response is uniformly positive. The credits move conversations from "we'd like to help" to "let's do this."

The problem is awareness, not policy. Specifically, we recommend the committees direct or support the following:

A coordinated, statewide employer-awareness campaign on the Workers with Disabilities Employment Tax Credit, jointly executed by Empire State Development, the Department of Labor, and ACCES-VR. The campaign should include direct outreach to chambers of commerce, industry associations, payroll providers, and HR networks; a clear, employer-friendly online resource hub explaining eligibility, certification, and stacking with the federal WOTC; and integration with ESD's existing employer-engagement and incentive-promotion infrastructure.

Streamlined certification. The credit's value is undermined when the certification process is opaque or slow. ACCES-VR should publish clear timelines and a single point of employer contact for credit-eligibility certification, and the agency should be resourced to meet that standard.

An expansion or enhancement of the credit itself. The credit's per-employee value has not been meaningfully updated to reflect the cost of hiring and onboarding in 2026. The Legislature should consider increasing the credit cap, extending the credit period beyond the current first-year structure for retained employees, and creating a small-employer multiplier so that businesses with fewer than 50 employees — which face the steepest fixed costs of disability-inclusive hiring — receive an enhanced benefit.

Promotion of the OPWDD Employment Training Program alongside the tax credits, allowing more employers to participate in wage-subsidized trial employment. Combined with the tax credit promotion campaign, this gives the state a tiered set of incentives — a trial-employment subsidy followed by a multi-thousand-dollar tax credit on permanent hire — that can be marketed as a unified employer offer.

Public recognition of inclusive employers. A Governor's-level annual recognition program for employers with outstanding records of disability-inclusive hiring would create reputational incentive at low cost and would generate the case studies the awareness campaign needs.

Promoting these credits aggressively is, in our view, the single most efficient lever available to the Legislature for moving the employment rate. The fiscal cost is minimal compared to the workforce, tax revenue, and reduced-benefits-spending gains they would unlock.

3. Address the Benefits Cliff Through Counseling and Education

After tax-credit awareness on the employer side, benefits-cliff fear is the most common single barrier we encounter on the participant side.

People with disabilities and their families are routinely told — accurately, in some scenarios, and inaccurately in others — that earning income will cost them SSI, SSDI, or Medicaid. The Rockefeller Institute's 2023–2024 analysis of benefits eligibility rules confirms that the complexity around the Substantial Gainful Activity threshold creates real and perceived risks that discourage employment, even when employment would improve the individual's overall financial position.

We respectfully ask the committees to:

- **Fund and expand Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) programs** statewide, with specific attention to underserved suburban and rural regions, including those in our service area.
- **Require benefits advisement as a standard element of every ACCES-VR Individualized Plan for Employment**, so that no participant makes an employment decision based on benefits assumptions that could be corrected by a 30-minute conversation with a credentialed counselor.
- **Support Cornell University's WIP-C (Work Incentive Practitioner) credential program** and create funding pathways for provider organizations to embed WIP-C credentialed counselors within their employment programs.

4. Address Transportation Barriers

The majority of individuals served by People Inc.'s employment programs live with family or independently in the community, not in a group home setting. Transportation to and from work is, for most of these families, a daily logistical and financial challenge — and in our service area, particularly in the suburban and rural communities outside the Buffalo and Rochester cores, it is one of the most persistent practical barriers to employment.

Public transit routes and schedules in these communities rarely align with shift-based employment hours. Paratransit lacks the scheduling flexibility employment requires. We respectfully ask the committees to support targeted transportation investments, including expanded paratransit flexibility for employment-related trips, employer-accessible shuttle programs, and transportation-assistance funding within employment service budgets.

5. Strengthen Interagency Coordination Through Formal Structure

Western New York is fortunate to operate in a region where ACCES-VR program coordinators, OPWDD Employment Training Program coordinators, and provider organizations work closely together. The pipeline functions because the people running it have built the relationships. But informal coordination at the regional level is not a sustainable substitute for formal structure at the state level — and it is not replicable for regions where those relationships do not exist.

We respectfully recommend that the committees direct the executive branch to establish a formal interagency coordination framework — through a memorandum of understanding or, preferably, statute — between ACCES-VR (NYSED), OPWDD, and the Department of Labor, covering at minimum: shared case management protocols for individuals moving between agencies; joint discharge planning at school-to-adult transition; a unified, cross-agency data system for tracking competitive integrated employment outcomes; and regional Employment First councils with defined authority and membership.

The April 2026 OPWDD Employment First Implementation Plan provides a natural vehicle for this work, and the Legislature should ensure it is funded and resourced to deliver.

Conclusion

Employment is a pathway to dignity, independence, and full participation in community life. For people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the barriers to that pathway are real — but they are not mysterious, and they are not insurmountable. We know what works. People Inc. has spent decades demonstrating it across Western New York: 439 individuals currently employed in the community, an average tenure of seven years, partnerships with more than 200 employers, and a participant-satisfaction profile that any employer in the state would envy.

In September 2024, Governor Hochul signed Executive Order No. 40, formally committing New York to be an Employment First State. The Legislature now has the opportunity to put resources,

structure, and accountability behind that commitment — by aligning SEMP rates with the OPWDD rate increases, by aggressively promoting the tax credits New York already offers to inclusive employers, by funding benefits counseling, by addressing transportation, and by building the formal interagency structure that translates good intent into consistent statewide practice.

On behalf of People Inc., the people we serve, and our employer partners across Western New York, thank you for your attention to this issue. I look forward to your questions and to working with the committees and your staff in the weeks ahead.