

Statement of Pat Airy to Mental Health and Disability Services Redesign Fiscal Viability Study Committee

Dec 17, 2013

Good morning! My name is Pat Airy, and I'm the President and CEO of Goodwill of the Heartland. I thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Goodwill of the Heartland shares your intent to better serve people with disabilities, and we are excited by the focus on employment. We absolutely believe that all people with disabilities should have the right and opportunity to work.

When Goodwill was founded by an Iowan in 1902, its mission was to give people a hand up rather than a hand out *through the power of work*. We live that mission today and every day, which is why Goodwill Industries International was recently recognized as the 19th most inspiring company in America.

Goodwill of the Heartland, serving 19 counties in Eastern Iowa and Western Illinois, is one of the largest employers of people with disabilities in the State of Iowa. In 2013, we've employed more than 744 people with disabilities in our Goodwill stores and work centers, paying them wages of more than \$840,000.

As the experts in training and employing people with disabilities, and as an agency that must implement whatever guidance federal, state, and county officials prescribe, we'd like to share with you some thoughts and concerns.

First, integrating people with disabilities into community employment is a laudable goal that we fully support. However, providing necessary support for such workers requires funding beyond which businesses and non-profits like ours can provide. Without proper funding, integration for many people with significant disabilities is unattainable, and could actually lead to higher unemployment.

Second, the employability of people with disabilities varies widely. On one hand are people with disabilities without any observable limitations, for whom integrated, community employment is easily attained. On the other hand are those whose disabilities are so severe that productivity or behavioral issues make supported community employment much more difficult, if not impossible. In between those extremes are people for whom community employment is an option, provided they receive appropriate training and supports. Our

concern is that policymakers not take a “one size fits all” approach, but rather allow for employment opportunities that best serve the varying degree of employability for those with disabilities.

Of particular concern to us are those with the most severe disabilities, like Michael, who are poor candidates for community employment. The Michaels of the world need the supports that our work centers provide or else they will lose the opportunity to work altogether.

At Goodwill of the Heartland, 545 of our 744 clients had productivity less than 100%. Of those 545, the average productivity was only 39%, which is well below the level that a community employer would require (and this doesn’t even take into account those who might have self-care, self-direction, or communication limitations). If forced to close our work centers due to an abrupt change of funding, literally hundreds of such clients, as well as supporting counselors and trainers, will be out of work. In such a case, the unintended consequence of a “one size fits all” integration strategy will eliminate rather than create opportunities for work.

As a result, we recommend the following:

- 1) Allow for some transition time so that organizations like Goodwill of the Heartland can adapt to new rules and funding changes. Our community doesn’t have the capacity to rapidly absorb 744 clients, particularly if 545 of them have an average productivity of only 39%, making an abrupt loss of funding disastrous. We need some lead-time to plan and adapt to whatever changes are coming, particularly as they relate to funding. Getting clear guidance on timelines and milestones for changes is necessary for organizations like ours to plan, which is critical for our clients and their care-givers.
- 2) The shift in focus from work training to community support must be accompanied by appropriate and timely funding. We will need to hire and train additional community support staff at the same time we’re still maintaining work center staff. Such a transition is not a simple task, and requires proper sequencing.
- 3) Align state and federal requirements for integration. Under the federal AbilityOne program, in which Goodwill of the Heartland is a participant, 75% of direct labor must be done by people with a severe disability. Yet state requirements for integration require 50% of work crews larger than 8 workers to be people *without* disabilities. These and other conflicts between state and federal requirements need to be sorted out so that organizations like Goodwill of the Heartland can comply.
- 4) Please don’t lose sight of the fact that a certain percentage of people with disabilities, people like Michael, will likely need a work center environment to succeed. For them, community employment may not be appropriate. Help us find a way ahead that preserves this

environment for those people with the most severe disabilities. Doing so is consistent with Olmstead* and is the right thing to do.

4) Finally, I invite members of the committee and your staffs to visit our Cedar Rapids work center. There you can see first-hand the need for such an employment option. You can meet Michael in-person, and you can assess for yourselves both the employability of our clients and the loss that would come from losing the work center option.

Thank you for your time.

*Such work centers are consistent with the Olmstead ruling as they fill the gap: (1) for those to whom community-based services are inappropriate, (2) for those who don't choose community-based treatment, and (3) to those for whom community-based services cannot be reasonably accommodated.

Most importantly, such work centers provide employment to the most severely disabled, who would otherwise be stuck in Day Habilitation, in Adult Day Care, or at home. Far better (and cheaper, in the case of Day Habilitation) to honor the person's desire to work at a work center than to take the choice of work away.