

Statement of Janet Sullivan to Mental Health and Disability Services Redesign Fiscal  
Viability Study Committee  
Dec 17, 2013

Good morning! My name is Janet Sullivan, and I'm the mother of a young man who is autistic and intellectually disabled. I'm here today because I'm concerned that the changes occurring at the federal, state, and county levels could take away my son's opportunity to work. I'm asking for your help to prevent that from happening.

My son Michael is 29 years old. He has worked at Goodwill of the Heartland's work training center for over 6 years. Michael works because he chooses to work. He loves to work. His work gives him so much more than a paycheck. It gives him a sense of meaning and purpose, pride that comes from a job well done, and a structured environment with the supports he needs to succeed. The very fact that Michael, with his disabilities, can be a productive member of our work force, shows the importance our state places on the value and dignity of work.

Michael has behavior issues that are not compatible with integrated, community employment. While he has made tremendous improvement over the last 6 years, Michael still screams, makes loud noises, and jumps up and down. He can easily become overwhelmed at times - which can trigger these things. He sometimes runs in the workplace, and he can run up to people very aggressively – just to touch them. He needs frequent bathroom breaks. He is only 20-30% as productive at work as a person without disabilities.

Michael's behavior and productivity would make it very unlikely for a community employer to hire him, even with supports. It takes the special, supportive environment that Goodwill of the Heartland provides for Michael to work, grow, and flourish. If the push for integration eliminates work opportunities at places like Goodwill of the Heartland, I'm afraid that Michael will lose his opportunity to work. How sad it would be – if such a well-intentioned effort to provide employment for people with disabilities actually caused unemployment for Michael, and others like him who are the most severely disabled. Losing the freedom to work would crush Michael, and it would squander all the progress he's made at Goodwill.

I ask your help to ensure that work centers remain an option for the most severely disabled – those for whom integrated, community employment simply is not realistic.

Michael and I thank you.