

# Message Development: (Testimony at a Public Hearing)

## **Can I testify at a public hearing?**

Legislators do not hold many public hearings, but those that are held are open to public comment. Sometimes a legislator will ask someone to speak at a committee meeting. If you testify at a public hearing or in a committee meeting, prepare your statement in writing. That way, it will become a part of the official record.

- **Who You Are:**

- **Name:** Eric Donat

- **City/ Town:** Waterloo

- **Legislative District:** Iowa Senate District 31/ Iowa House District 62

- **Issue:** Sheltered Workshops/ Work Activity Centers

- **Explain your position (support or oppose):** Sheltered Workshops aren't as positive/ wonderful as their supporters or organizations who run them claim.

- **What are you asking for? – Tell your story: explain how a bill would hurt or help you:**

These sheltered workshops pay people with disabilities who work in them less than the minimum wage of \$7.25 and perennial “training wages” less than \$5.00 per week.

My story: When I moved back to Waterloo/ Cedar Falls area in 2000 – VR placed me in the sheltered workshop run by Goodwill Industries of NE Iowa in Waterloo.

I worked there for *only one week* (I was paid 6-8¢/ hr.- which for me added up to \$3.24 for my week of work. They had me in their sorting room (set up and run like a factory) sorting [in order to measure how fast/ accurately I did piecework - (The training program supervisor claimed that how fast or accurately I did piecework sorting would determine how much I was paid and whether I got help from Goodwill in obtaining a “regular job” in the community). During my time at Goodwill the training program supervisor also treated me badly without any dignity) –

This experience helped instill in me the belief that work or having a job was *not* positive or did not provide me with dignity. The fact that I was paid 6-8¢/ hr. (added up to \$3.24/ week) told me it was better to live off my SSI payments and do volunteer jobs to the level of my abilities and be treated much better.

After Goodwill - I found a volunteer position at our local ILC.

Former Rep. Willard Jenkins also “discovered” me at Goodwill, because I attended an event he held there. He asked me to volunteer for him because “I was too smart to work there.” It is because of Rep. Jenkins that I advocate and work with legislators to this day. My advocating makes me feel as if I’m doing something commiserate to my abilities that is a contribution to society...And I have dignity instead of being shut away and forgotten.

- **Suggest improvements or changes:**

1. Require that sheltered workshops/ work activity centers pay minimum wage or a living wage for disabled workers who have permanent placement there.
2. "Training wages" start at \$5.15/ hour until a disabled worker moves to permanent placement (after one year of employment) when he/she receives at least minimum wage.  
(how fast/ or accurate disabled workers do piecework sorting should not determine how much individuals are paid.)
3. Job Placement training programs – for obtaining a "regular job" in the community – should be six months maximum – and should actually result in a "regular job in the community" paying minimum wage or better [Training programs should not result in continued or extension of placement within the sheltered workshop – or simply changes in duties or position.]
4. Since disabled workers would earn at least \$5.15/ hr. Part of ongoing community supported living training would include the basics of financial literacy (ie, Dealing with money, writing checks/ balancing a checkbook, paying bills, having checking/ saving accounts - etc.) – If the disabled person has a payee or other 'financial overseer' then that person would work with the disabled individual hand-in hand or explain things to an sufficient level of understanding.
5. Change the relationship between organizations/ companies who have contracts for piecework sorting of sheltered workshops in order to enable the sheltered workshop to pay more than \$3-5/ hr. (pay is at level because of these contracts – Workshops fear loss of contracts if they pay more.)
6. Change Social Security Administration rules / SSI & SSDI payments/ Medicaid rules to make working/ having a job actually worth it (And, it worth trying to get off SSI)

Where – I can say having a job that pays - is worth it more - than living on SSI, and volunteering for legislators who give me dignity - instead of me being shut away and forgotten - Is worth my time and effort to change and try something else...

But, at this time my experience at Goodwill and the 6-8c/ hr and \$3.24 per week instills in me *the exact opposite*.

- **Key Points to Make:**

- **Remember to thank the committee or hearing panel for allowing you to give testimony.**
- Then - afterward, follow-up later. Send them a note or a thank you – ask them how things are going with the issue.