



To: Representative Petryk, Chair
Members, Assembly Committee on Workforce Development

From: Beth Swedeen, Executive Director,
Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities

Re: Testimony on Assembly Bill 625, Competitive Integrated Employment

Position: Support AB 625

This is an exciting day statewide for so many in our disability community who have worked hard over 6 years to see Employment First become a reality. The Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities is thrilled to testify in support of Senate Bill 514 and for Wisconsin to join 32 other states around the country who are prioritizing employment for people with disabilities with a formal Employment First policy.

BPDD is charged under the federal Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act with advocacy, capacity building, and systems change to improve self-determination, independence, productivity, and integration and inclusion in all facets of community life for people with developmental disabilities. Our board is comprised of 26 Governor-appointed members, the majority of whom have a developmental disability or are a family member. Our role is to seek continuous improvement across all systems that touch the lives of people with disabilities, and one of the top priorities we hear about in every corner of the state is the desire of people with developmental disabilities to work, contribute, and yes, pay taxes. BPDD has worked statewide on equipping youth, families, schools, employers and public programs to prioritize employment as the quickest and most effective way to build independence and pride in people with disabilities, breakdown social isolation, elevate community expectations for people with disabilities, and reduce overall public reliance.

Like you, I'm eager to hear from all the folks who have traveled in from around the state to share their stories of why employment is so important to them. Many in this room are our board members and project partners on employment efforts we have around the state. In fact, my daughter with developmental disabilities Cara would have been here today to tell her story. But hey, she had to work! So I will keep my comments short with 3 simple points:

First, people with disabilities want to work. A 2015 survey by our state's self-advocacy organization, People First Wisconsin, found 6 out of 10 people with disabilities want to work or want to work more hours per week. Many in the survey say not having enough support to find and keep jobs, or not having transportation keeps them out of the workplace. This bill will provide needed supports so people who can and want to work now will be able to.

Second, Wisconsin needs more workers. We now have chronic shortages of entry-level employees, skilled trades workers like welders, and other fields. A 2012 study by the American Society of Safety Engineers found nationwide that workers with disabilities had a turnover rate 48% lower than workers without disabilities, with 67% lower medical costs. People with disabilities are a greatly undertapped labor pool. Getting more people with disabilities into work will be good for Wisconsin business.

And third, while we are making progress toward better employment for people with disabilities in Wisconsin, we need this bill to speed things up our efforts. In our state's long-term care programs, only 15.5% of working-aged adults have jobs in their communities. The majority of people with disabilities who use long-term care in Wisconsin – nearly 57% -- are not working at all. And that number has held steady and even increased in the last three years. This bill provides practical steps that can change that statistic.

Our statewide hope is that this bill moves forward quickly.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Beth Swedeen". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid.

Beth Swedeen, Executive Director