



September 3, 2019

Senator Jacque  
Chair, Senate Committee on Local Government, Small Business, Tourism, and Workforce Development  
Wisconsin State Capitol, Rm 7S  
Madison, WI 53707

Dear Senator Jacque and Committee members:

The Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities (BPDD) thanks the committee for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill 344.

BPDD has been involved with the five-year federal PROMISE grant since its inception, is a member of the PROMISE steering group, and has administered several PROMISE contracts, including the Family Training contract that has demonstrated the effectiveness of the Family Navigator model. Our previous experience with the federal Let's Get To Work grant—which focused on improving community employment outcomes for transition-age students with disabilities—demonstrated that elevating family expectations was critical in determining whether the student with a disability would enter the community workforce<sup>1</sup>.

In the PROMISE grant, BPDD applied what we learned from Let's Get to Work and suggested testing a peer to peer model who could work with not only the individual, but their family. Both in the disability and in the mental health fields, the use of family navigators has been found effective in connecting families to necessary supports. Navigators are typically someone from the community, who is experienced with disability, who has similar experiences to the families they are developing relationships with and is knowledgeable about local resources and supports. This peer support model has been shown to be an effective way to help families address the barriers interfering with obtaining or sustaining employment. This model changes the trajectory from a lifetime of public benefits to a lifetime of work and career.

Family navigators build relationships over time. Investment in relationships and connection to community members are unique to this approach, and key to transforming what families feel is possible and ultimately employment success. Often, low-income families are dealing with many daily challenges that impact employment—including lack of transportation, housing instability, food insecurity, caregiver shortages, childcare access, health or chronic conditions that require appointments and ongoing therapy, and other issues. Many people with disabilities and families do the best they can to cobble together a patchwork of fixes to stabilize their lives, and often that includes relying on means tested benefit programs that have strict income, asset, and other requirements. Fear of losing access to programs that are critical to survival—including Social Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), Medicaid, FoodShare, Housing Assistance, etc.—if they work at all or too much is a huge barrier to overcome.

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<sup>1</sup> After three years 60% of these youth with disabilities were working in the community, compared to an overall 19% employment rate for people with disabilities .<http://www.letsgettoworkwi.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Outcomes-Recommendations-June-2014-final.pdf>

Family Navigators work with families to solve real life problems in order to create a path to employment. The relationships Family Navigators have with families are personal, and that is critical to understand and address the unique set of circumstances and challenges that each family faces before they can take the next step to employment. Family Navigators are not a referral service, they are trusted folks with established credibility who are meeting people where they are and figuring out how to help individuals to find their path. Sometimes, it means connecting families to information and public resources that provide more stability. Sometimes the solution is not a government program or service, but a connection to another person in the community who has a job referral, is looking for a carpool partner, who can provide childcare. Simple things that are not part of a service system can make an incredible difference, but that demands a knowledge of what people need and people on the ground with the knowledge of the community who can make it happen.

When people with disabilities and their family members are employed, the state benefits in three important ways; our workforce capacity is increased, state tax revenues are increased<sup>2</sup>, and employees contribute (through payroll taxes) into major federal programs (Social Security and Medicare) that support many Wisconsin citizens. Wisconsin is experiencing a workforce shortage. We have people who want to work or who want to work more; Family Navigators can help resolve the barriers faced by low-income populations that can keep them out of the workforce and connect them to a job that fits for them in an area that is accessible to them<sup>3</sup>.

The PROMISE project was limited to transition age (19 to 23) youth with disabilities receiving SSI and their families. That description fits 8000 transition age youth in Wisconsin. Continuing the demonstrated best practices documented by Promise can move more youth and families to financial independence while reducing the dollars spent on public benefits by the state<sup>4</sup>. Even small improvements to employment and earnings can result in significant cost savings. If just 5% of PROMISE youth earn a little more than \$1000 a month, this results in annual cost savings to SSI and Medicaid of ~\$2.7M per year. If just 5.4% of PROMISE youth are employed with health insurance through their employer, the public health care savings will have funded the entire 5-year Wisconsin Promise grant (\$32.5 million).

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<sup>5</sup>. Our role is to seek continuous improvement across all systems—education, transportation, health care, employment, etc.—that touch the lives of people with disabilities. Our work requires us to have a long-term vision of public policy that not only sees current systems as they are, but how these systems could be made better for current and future generations of people with disabilities.

Thank you for your consideration,



Beth Swede, Executive Director, Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities

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<sup>2</sup> According to the National Governor's Association, states forego nearly \$6.5 billion per year in state tax revenue when working-age people with disabilities remain unemployed. Extrapolating across the lifespan, that number grows to \$195 billion over the course of 30 years. Even modest gains in employment and hours worked stand to increase state revenues.

<sup>3</sup> 507 PROMISE youth started at least one new job and are projected to work an average of 26 hours per week earning an average of \$12.94 per hour (\$16,822 annually). 5% of PROMISE youth earned at least \$1,180 per month (Substantial Gainful Activity level), resulting in annual cost savings to Medicaid and SSI of ~\$2.7M per year. 306 PROMISE family members started at least one new job.

<sup>4</sup> There are 8000 transition age youth in Wisconsin receiving SSI benefits, SSI state supplement, and Medicaid at a cost of \$196M annually

<sup>5</sup> More about BPDD [https://wi-bpdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Legislative\\_Overview\\_BPDD.pdf](https://wi-bpdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Legislative_Overview_BPDD.pdf)