

Equal Employment for Persons with Disabilities

By Max Barrows



In the disability rights movement, sheltered workshops and the sub-minimum wage are HUGE topics. I am going to share what I hear from Self-Advocates I've spoke to as Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered Vice President. As a person with Autism, I have never experienced a segregated setting like a sheltered workshop. This is due to growing up in a state like Vermont that converted all of its sheltered workshops into supported employment. In other states, a lot of persons with disabilities are not so lucky. Across the country, persons with disabilities say that sheltered workshops have taken a lot away from them. On a personal level they have said their lives have been robbed from them. They lost the opportunity to be more included in their community. They lost a chance to broaden their capabilities in a real work environment. They also lost the chance to build other social connections beyond just persons with disabilities and staff.

An important value for persons with disabilities is to have real jobs with real pay. A real job is when you work in the community alongside persons without disabilities. Real pay is when you are paid what you're worth in a specific job setting, a job that fits your abilities. This never includes being paid a sub minimum wage.

You may hear people say that individualized supported employment is too expensive. Well, this may sound true but it is NOT! Sheltered workshop programs cost too much money to run. Maintaining and owning buildings is expensive. Management of a sheltered workshop comes with high salary. All this money could be used for better outcomes such as supported employment.

Another myth is that people in sheltered workshops would like to stay in them. There is fear among people in sheltered workshops that they may lose their friends. Well done conversions to supported employment provides for much

better ways to make good social connections. Despite these fears, research shows that the people in sheltered workshops want to work in the community.



Despite the evidence that including people with disabilities through support employment is a better way, why are we not moving fast enough toward this model? We need more people to look into what doesn't work about sheltered workshops. My perspective is this is a civil rights issue. It's all about dignity and respect. It's not just about building self-confidence, but also getting people to see our abilities to work. We should live in the community, have a job,

be self-employed (or even run your own business), and also pay taxes.

Involvement in our economy is a real important part of true inclusion. We need to be seen as givers, not just takers!