



Myths & Facts About Supported Employment for People with I/DD

MYTH: People with intellectual or developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families are dissatisfied with vocational centers (also known as center-based work centers or “sheltered” workshops).

FACT: Vocational centers are valued for the services they provide to people with I/DD who are unable to adapt to competitive employment. When these centers are threatened with closure, clients with I/DD and their families are the most fervent advocates for keeping them open. 98% of 9,700 recent public comments (2020 CRC data) regarding this issue were in favor of retaining these provisions.

MYTH: All people, regardless of the nature or severity of their disability, can find minimum wage jobs and be successful in competitive employment.

FACT: Some individuals have difficulty adapting to competitive employment. Vocational centers provide opportunities for meaningful work while providing more specialized supports such as personal hygiene care, preventing and attending to seizures, assisting with behavioral issues, providing medical and/or emotional support, providing consistent person-centered routines and adaptations, and support for developing social skills. Many of these ADA accommodations cannot be replicated in a competitive employment setting, especially the provision of trained support staff.

MYTH: All people are better off “fully integrated”.

FACT: The definition of “integration” has been distorted to mean that disabled people are forcibly mixed in as minorities among a nondisabled population, instead of incorporated as equals in society. If the principle of integration was truly upheld, nondisabled people would be integrated in settings with a majority of people having I/DD just as frequently. The value of individual choice should be regarded above the unproven presumption that being in a competitive setting is most beneficial and desirable for all people with I/DD. There is no peer-reviewed study to prove this presumption to be true.

MYTH: Vocational centers exploit workers, pay “subminimum” wages, and do not regard disabled people as a “whole” person.

FACT: The 14(c) provision of the Fair Labor Standards Act provides flexibility for employers to hire people who are not capable of meeting the productivity level of a worker with average abilities. Biannual evaluations, rigorous certificate renewal processes, and Federal DOL oversight protect against exploitation. Vocational centers are required, by this law, to pay minimum wages or higher to those who can to perform at an average productivity level <https://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs39.pdf>.

In contrast, there are few provisions to monitor worker exploitation and bullying in the competitive environment. People who are unable to meet average productivity or capacity will be fired or never hired in the first place. The dignity of having a job like other adults inherently reflects more regard for people with I/DD as being “whole” than forcing them to give up ability-based wages in favor of day activity if they would prefer to work.

MYTH: Requiring minimum wage pay will increase the standard of living and quality of life for people with disabilities, bring them out of poverty and dependence, and improve job opportunities.

FACT: Rather than improve their standard of living and quality of life, most people who qualify for ability-based wages under 14c provisions will completely lose the choice to work, resulting in thousands of undocumented job losses. Most vocational centers will either need to drastically reduce the number of employees or shut down altogether since it is not economically feasible to pay people minimum wage if they are not able to perform at an average capacity. The majority of these individuals already qualify for disability services that provide for living expenses, so their economic situation will not change.

MYTH: Many states have already phased out “subminimum” wages because it is an “archaic” law that should be eliminated.

FACT: Many of our best laws, including the US Constitution, have stood the test of time. There have been no unbiased, peer-reviewed studies to prove the benefit of eliminating this provision, nor is there a universal database to determine how many people are or will be affected (and to what degree). According to 2020 CRC data, Vermont and Maine, who have ended 14(c), have the overall lowest annual mean earnings for employees with I/DD. There has been a dramatic increase in “NonWork” status and “pending” 14(c) certificate status for people with disabilities over the last several years.

MYTH: It is the Civil Right for all people with disabilities to earn minimum wage.

FACT: It is the Civil Right for all people with disabilities, along with support from legal guardians (if applicable), to have the right to choose to work at their own level of ability among the people of their choice. Our public education system provides Individual Education Plans to outline developmentally appropriate accommodations for people with disabilities, recognizing that the needs of every individual will vary. Children with I/DD do not typically “outgrow” their condition. As adults, they continue to require varying levels of accommodations in their vocational settings (Least Restrictive Environment), vocational tasks, support systems, and pace of productivity. Accommodations for wages, based on productivity and services required, need to be recognized as ADA accommodations for vocational success. This is also true for vocational settings and supervision.

MYTH: Elimination of “subminimum” wages and closure of “sheltered workshops” will reduce costs to Health and Human Services by moving more people into the competitive workforce.

FACT: States that have already eliminated special wage certificates and vocational centers have not proven any increase in full-time employment for people with disabilities (of any level of severity). The costs to individual families, lost wages for family caregivers who are forced to stay home, and to the state for increased PCA care, law enforcement, and other related costs will outstrip the economic benefits of allowing groups of people to participate in vocational center programs. The inefficient costs and lack of availability for trained job coaches to serve every person who is displaced if vocational centers are forced to close is both economically and physically unfeasible.

MYTH: Vocational centers are isolating environments.

FACT: These centers are part of the greater community. Those who choose jobs at vocational centers develop a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and self-worth because of work completed. Far from being isolating, they typically offer people a sense of camaraderie, developmentally appropriate programming, and an opportunity to interact with their peers. Especially in rural areas, these centers are often the primary hub for transportation and social community opportunity for people with I/DD.

MYTH: Vocational centers are the only choice for work for people with intellectual disabilities and will limit opportunities for competitive employment.

FACT: There are many resources available through state vocational rehabilitation departments and through flexible programming with vocational centers to assist with opportunities for competitive employment. No one can legally be forced to work in a vocational center. Most states require vocational centers to offer competitive employment first before people can become eligible for center-based work. Vocational centers *expand* opportunities by providing a full range of job opportunities and day activities.

MYTH: Vocational centers do not provide opportunities to transition to competitive employment.

FACT: Vocational centers provide opportunities for people to learn skills necessary to be successful, such as being on time, working with others, and completing assigned tasks. Many facilities provide flexible programming so that clients can work part-time in a competitive setting and balance the rest of their time at the community work center.

MYTH: With proper planning, vocational centers can be successfully phased out.

FACT: The severity of a person’s disabilities cannot be “phased out”, trained away, or significantly improved by surrounding them by nondisabled people in an unsupported environment. While people with significant disabilities may develop and mature, as any adult will do, many of them will have severe limitations that prevent successful competitive employment for the rest of their lives. Eliminating programs that meet their needs will not “force” them to become nondisabled.

MYTH: Vocational centers do not provide meaningful jobs.

FACT: Examples of work opportunities include manufacturing, item assembly, recycling, packaging, repair, machine operating, work crews (hotel room cleaning, lawn care, delivery service, etc . . .), rug and candle making, arts and crafts (gift sales), laundry service, and retail sales. Some vocational centers own their own small businesses in the community that employ primarily people with disabilities, including thrift shops and gift shops. These model programs are able to sustain a budget beyond Medicaid-funded programs. <https://dese.mo.gov/special-education/sheltered-workshops/jobs-performed-sheltered-workshops>

MYTH: Vocational centers violate the 1999 Supreme Court Olmstead decision.

FACT: The 1999 Supreme Court Olmstead decision supports CHOICE. Closing these centers contradicts the opinion expressed by the majority of Justices in Olmstead by eliminating a desired, chosen, and helpful employment option. “The goal of placing individuals with disabilities in the most integrated setting must be balanced against what is appropriate and desirable for the individual.” (Hon. Judge Frank)

MYTH: Parents object to eliminating center-based programs because they are “afraid” and have low expectations for their adult children.

FACT: Most parents of adult children with I/DD have already experienced over 12 years of Special Education IEP meetings and consultation with educators and therapists. They know far more about the needs of their adult children than most well-meaning policy makers and have much greater vested interest in ensuring their childrens’ best interests and vocational success. Their concern is most often based on understanding the *reality* of their adult child’s limitations and vulnerabilities rather than “fear”. Many families and individuals with I/DD would prefer a well-rounded, developmentally appropriate, full-day program among peers than a myriad of hour-long job shifts with a job coach.