

Why State Contracting Policies Must Change to Improve the Bottom Line for Business and People with Disabilities

Updating an Outdated Law

Since Wisconsin's State Use Program was written into law more than two decades ago the Legislature and the Governor have publicly recognized the value people with disabilities bring to our communities and workplaces. In October 2013 the Legislature unanimously passed a resolution declaring that people with disabilities "are capable and willing to work at competitive-wage jobs with the right supports and job fit" and that "employees working in integrated jobs make more financial contributions to their communities, use fewer public benefits, and experience better health outcomes." The State Use Program, a model built upon charity-wage employment for people who are "severely handicapped" and indefinite contract awards that exclude participation by private business, must come in line with modern views about business and employability.



People with Disabilities and their Families Have a Vision for the Future

The Legislature and Governor's recent proclamations about employment are more in line with the views of people with disabilities and their families today. In early 2014 Governor Walker declared the year of the *Better Bottom Line* "to recognize the benefits of employing people with disabilities in the workplace, to encourage increased participation by individuals and public and private employers, and to invest in programs assisting in integrating persons with disabilities into the workforce." People want jobs at wages that allow them to reduce their reliance on government assistance; families want more independence and career choice for their children. Families concerned about segregation and isolation for their loved ones want the choice of a workplace in the community with friends and co-workers without disabilities. No one describes themselves as "severely handicapped."



Wisconsin State Government Must Lead Efforts to Be a Model Employer

The state's commitment to modernizing its contracting practices sends a strong 21st century message about the value of people with disabilities in the workforce. If Wisconsin businesses are paying employees with disabilities minimum wage, the state should too.



Businesses have told states they are more likely to hire people with disabilities if state government is doing it successfully. State initiatives that proclaim the benefits of employing people with disabilities must include a commitment from the state government to be the kind of employer they expect private sector businesses to be.

People with disabilities are the only employees working on State Contracts that can be paid less than minimum wage under Wisconsin law. Many private employers value the work people with disabilities do and pay above minimum wage. A person's salary should not be based on the presence of a disability but rather on the value of the work they perform. By setting a precedent that all state contract work pay at least minimum wage, Wisconsin would establish itself as a Model Employer of people with disabilities, thereby promoting the self-reliance and independence of people with disabilities.

How Should the State Change the State Use Contract?

- Align State Use Contract definitions of people with disabilities with those used by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). Eliminate outdated language that refers to people as "severely handicapped".
- Ensure that State Use Contract positions are used as intended, as training grounds for other permanent private sector employment. Require that State Use Contract employees are connected to Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and other employment services.
- Ensure State Use Contract employers pay at least minimum wage. If private employers are expected to pay minimum wage, the state should, too.
- Expand eligibility to compete for state use contracts to high quality private sector businesses and businesses owned by people with disabilities.
- Align State Use Contracting practices with the Governor's Better Bottom Line initiative.

The End Result

When people with disabilities working on state contracts are paid at least minimum wage, it will increase their ability to contribute to local economies, more fully participate in their communities, help lift them out of poverty, and reduce overall reliance on public benefits programs. Wisconsin has the opportunity to serve as a role model for private businesses as a quality employer for people with disabilities.