

Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council Meeting: Subminimum Wage, April 5, 2016

We all believe in the worth of people with disabilities. We know that people with disabilities are members of our society who deserve the same human rights and dignities granted to everyone else in our society. We are here today because we are a person with a disability directly affected by subminimum wage, or we know someone who is, whether friends, family members, people we serve, or coworkers.

Many of us are intimately familiar with the history of subminimum wage employment, created in the 1930s not by villains or despots but by deeply caring people who wanted to see their loved ones with disabilities have the dignity of working and earning something, anything during their days. Subminimum wage, rooted in the old stereotypes of people with disabilities as “less productive,” was a way providing employment for people who were never expected to be part of community life.

Many things have changed since the 1930s. We no longer accept the hurtful stereotypes and institutionalized lives of days past. We no longer accept being shut into a home or shut out of our communities. We expect accommodations, supports, and services so that all Michigan citizens can achieve their full potential. It is time to raise our economic expectations and roundly reject the notion that workers with disabilities are worth less. We cannot continue to tell people with disabilities they have equal rights and value while ignoring a law that allows people with disabilities to be worth less. This is why Disability Network Southwest Michigan strongly opposes the continued use of subminimum wage in all employment. We urge the Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council to join us.

Michigan has committed decades to supporting subminimum wage systems and practices. We can honor the past as we work towards a more inclusive future. We must now commit as strongly and thoroughly to employment and community supports. We must not leave anybody out, nor can we allow our fears to dictate our direction. Instead, we must advocate for supports, services, and transition processes that recognize the diversity and strengths of all individuals with disabilities. Organizations and states across the country are successfully supporting people with disabilities to earn full wages for their work. SRVS in Tennessee transitioned 40 percent of its sheltered workshop participants to competitive, full wage employment in just one year. In 2015, New Hampshire outlawed subminimum wage. All State of Vermont employment programs mandate competitive wages. Countless other states, including Maryland, Rhode Island, Minnesota, Washington and Oregon are on the path to competitive, integrated, full wage employment. This is Michigan’s chance to join them.

How much are people with disabilities worth? People with disabilities are worth just as much as anyone else, and should be paid accordingly.