



ADMINISTRATION ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

DISABILITY IS A NATURAL PART OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE..

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MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES ABOUT MENTAL DISABILITIES GREATEST BARRIER TO EMPLOYMENT

EEOC Hears Experts and Individuals with Mental Disabilities Detail Struggles to Gain Employment at Meeting

WASHINGTON—The greatest barrier to employment for people with intellectual and psychiatric disabilities are employers' myths and fears about their condition, not the disabilities themselves, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) learned at a hearing held today. The hearing focused on a group whose rate of unemployment and underemployment far exceeds the national average.

“We want job seekers, workers, and employers to understand the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act and be well equipped to comply with them,” said EEOC Chair Jacqueline A. Berrien. “Today’s Commission meeting provided an important opportunity to dispel myths and learn about effective ways to dismantle barriers to employment for people with disabilities.”

Sharon Lewis, Commissioner of the Administration on Developmental Disabilities, U.S. Department of Health And Human Services, underscored the need to dismantle barriers for people with intellectual disabilities, noting that “the proportion of the population of people with disabilities who are employed is estimated to be 17 percent, compared to 63 percent for people without disabilities.”

As Ruby Moore, Executive Director of the Georgia Advocacy Office, the designated Protection and Advocacy System for People with Disabilities in Georgia, told the Commission, “one of the biggest obstacles to employment is consciously and unconsciously-held beliefs about people with psychiatric, cognitive or intellectual disabilities.” She further testified that most of the accommodations individuals with mental disabilities require can be provided in a well-managed, flexible workplace—often without any out-of-pocket costs to the employer. She stated that these flexibilities have the effect of aiding all employees, not just those with disabilities.

Chief among the misapprehensions surrounding the employment of people with psychiatric disabilities is that they are violent. In fact, psychologist Dr. Gary R. Bond of the Dartmouth Psychiatric Research Center of Dartmouth Medical School, told the Commission, “violence is exceedingly rare among people with mental illness . . . [and] being employed significantly reduces the possibility of violence even further.”

The unemployment rate for individuals with psychiatric disabilities is not only low compared to the general population, it is also half the employment rate for people with other sorts of disabilities. The lack of employment has a particular impact on individuals with psychiatric disabilities for whom work is “a crucial element in the recovery process,” according to Dr. Bond. Samuel R. Bagenstos, Principal Deputy Assistant

Attorney General for Civil Rights at the U. S. Department of Justice echoed this point: “Work commands respect, and it represents agency, responsibility, and independence. Work is the place where people with and without disabilities can come together, share common projects, and break down barriers of stereotype and prejudice.”

Donna Malone, a person with a psychiatric disability, related the beneficial effect of work: “I realized that working hard was a way that I could feel good about myself and no one could take it away.” After working successfully for a number of years at Land Air Express without incident, she was discharged while hospitalized due to her disability because her supervisor had a “gut feeling” that she was a “danger” and had to “look out for the safety of his other employees.” Following a lawsuit by the EEOC alleging failure to accommodate and discriminatory termination under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the case was settled for \$360,000.

Similarly, Anupa Iyer, a law student at the University of Seattle and currently interning at the EEOC, said that “work was my salvation,” after being hospitalized for a psychiatric disability. However, at her places of employment, she endured ridicule and was stigmatized, experiences which motivated her to enroll in law school.

Tenesha Abbott, who has an intellectual disability as well as learning disabilities, spoke of how her job at a local grocery store helps her “stay active and learn new things.” Through her work, she has improved her reading skills and is learning responsibility which she hopes will help her to live on her own. Her manager, Jack Eaton, related how pleased he was when employees with intellectual disabilities were able to move up to more complex jobs with greater responsibilities. He said that dealing with people’s individualized needs, as he does with employees with mental disabilities, makes him a better manager for all of his employees.

“Our witnesses brought home the fact that people with mental disabilities can work, and want to work, just like everyone else. And it’s a win-win situation when employers figure out how to tap that work potential,” said EEOC Commissioner Chai Feldblum.

The EEOC enforces the nation’s laws prohibiting employment discrimination. More information about the EEOC and the Americans with Disabilities Act can be found the EEOC’s website at www.eeoc.gov. Information about this meeting, including witness statements and a video of the event, can be found at www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/meetings/index.cfm.