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*Equity, Opportunity, and Inclusion for People with Disabilities since 1975*

## **TASH Testimony on Integrated Employment**

Provided to the National Advisory Committee on Increasing Integrated Employment for Individuals with Disabilities – July, 2015

Good afternoon. My name is Barb Trader, and I'm here today as the Executive Director of TASH. Celebrating our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, TASH was founded by researchers working with people with severe disabilities who believed that *research* should drive advocacy, and that all people with disabilities should have access to a full life – at school, at work and in their communities. The vision of a full life includes a WORKING life, and TASH members have developed practices, supported by research, which make integrated employment a possibility for all people, regardless of the perceived severity of disability, the attributes of the communities people live in, or the economic pressures of the times.

The individuals that TASH represents are among the most under-represented group of citizens in the workforce in our country. Our organization has advocated for innovative strategies and progressive policies such as supported employment, access to rehabilitation technology, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIA) to improve access to competitive employment for our constituency. During the past decade, two innovations have emerged that are of critical importance to all individuals who experience significant barriers to employment: *Customized Employment* and *Discovery*.

It would be fair to say that for many job seekers with disabilities the largest barrier they face to becoming employed is the negative attitude of potential employers. People with disabilities have traditionally been perceived as less able than their non-disabled peers. However, as negative perceptions fade and job seekers receive quality employment supports, effective training, good job matching and the accommodations guaranteed by the ADA, most employees with disabilities are fully able to compete effectively in the work place. Additionally, the strategy of *competitive supported employment (SE)*, starting in the mid-1980s, allowed many individuals with significant impact of disability to become competitively employed through the use of job developers to assist in navigating the personnel office and job coaches to assist both employees and employers to offer better training and support.

However, there remains a chronically unemployed group of individuals for whom the impact of their disabilities directly affects their ability to meet the existing demand of job openings in the competitive workforce. It is estimated that over 300,000 individuals with significant disabilities are in sheltered employment and perhaps millions more are in day programs or at home living unproductive, lethargic, often-boring lives in an unseen existence below the poverty line. Many of these individuals have intellectual and development disabilities and, as such, are the focus of TASH's mission. If these individual are to become successfully employed for regular pay in the community, Customized Employment and Discovery must be available to them.

For the first time, WIOA (2014) includes Customized Employment (CE) and Discovery as strategies to be used to develop employment opportunities for people with disabilities. It was first defined by the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) in the US Department of Labor in 2001. It was based on field-based efforts to turn the concept of job carving into a viable employment model that benefited both employers and job seekers with significant disabilities who were not benefitting from competitive supported employment. CE is currently defined by ODEP as “*a flexible process designed to personalize the employment relationship between a job candidate and an employer in a way that meets the needs of both. It is based on an individualized match between the strengths, conditions, and interests of a job candidate and the identified business needs of an employer. Customized Employment utilizes an individualized approach to employment planning and job development — one person at a time . . . one employer at a time.*” The value of CE is that it works for individuals who are unable, due to the severity of their disability or other life complexities, to meet the competitive demands of an open job. In this way, CE goes beyond the protections of the ADA and of the competitive standard that is so often an aspect of SE through negotiations with employers who voluntarily agree to customize job descriptions. CE seeks to match and negotiate the job seeker’s conditions for success, work interests and specific contributions with areas of specific benefit to potential employers. In this way both parties benefit and the doors open, at least conceptually, for *all* job seekers with a disability to become successfully employed.

The strategy of *Discovery* is of critical importance as a tool to substitute for the negative consequences of vocational evaluations. In a manner similar to that of competitive, demand employment, assessments set a threshold of expected performance related to the normative performance of others. Since the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, employment services for job seekers with disabilities have relied on comparative, norm-referenced assessments and evaluations to both assure the potential of benefit by individuals regarding the expenditure of public funds and to guide individuals into jobs that best fit them. In the 1992 Amendments to the Rehab Act, Congress directed VR counselors to basically presume benefit in terms of an employment outcome, but the practice has persisted at the grass-roots level in the years since. While many individuals with disabilities will benefit from a well-administered comparative assessment, job seekers with the most significant impact of disability, especially many with intellectual and developmental disabilities, will be found unlikely to benefit in terms of an employment outcomes. Many of these individuals end up in sheltered workshops, day programs or at home or in institutions, unemployed and poor.

*Discovery* is a process based on qualitative research rather than quantitative, comparative research. The fundamental question of *Discovery* is, “who is this person?” The fundamental value of *Discovery* is that all people have specific areas of competence and potential contribution. By getting to know job seekers deeply it is possible to translate their life competencies into their conditions for success, interests to certain aspects of the job market and specific contributions to be offered to potential employers. In this way, *Discovery* provides the foundation for the negotiation of a Customized job for individuals with significant disabilities.

Good jobs for people with disabilities do not ONLY result from responses to job announcements posted in the open marketplace. Some of the best jobs – and best job matches – are those that are the result of *Discovery* and Customized Employment strategies. This investment results in a much better quality of life for people with severe disabilities and a far superior return on investment of public funds.

TASH urges this Committee to call for the training and development of a disability provider workforce that is skilled in Discovery and Customized Employment as an important component of a comprehensive plan to increase integrated employment for all citizens in our country. THANK YOU!