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My name is Jane Rhys, and I have worked in the disability field since 1975, in mental health, developmental disabilities, and special education. In the 2011 Legislative Session, the disability community united to create the Kansas Employment First law. On May 25, 2011, Kansas became the first state to pass the law with the approval of the Governor of Kansas. Our law required that integrated, competitive employment be the first option for Kansans with disabilities. The law contained an independent Oversight Commission, whose role is to make sure the law is followed by tracking implementation of the law, providing accountability and supervision. All state agencies are to cooperate with the Commission and provide the data needed to track implementation.

The disability community worked on the original bill because people with disabilities have historically had higher unemployment rates than people without disabilities. U.S. Department of Labor statistics show that unemployment for the general population in February was 7.7 percent but unemployment for those with disabilities was 12.3 percent, a significant difference. People with disabilities, even those with significant disabilities, want to work, to earn wages just like people in the general population. I was quite proud of the fact that Kansas was a leader in this area, passing the first Employment First law. Since then 20 other states have a law or policy and 14 others are working on related initiatives.

Including an independent oversight commission in the original law was deliberate. There was concern that Employment First would not be consistently implemented across all programs or services. Accountability is a fact of life beginning at a very young age. Parents demand it of their children, teachers demand it of their students, employers demand it of their employees, and it is demanded of us in almost every aspect of our life. We also demand it of others, we want our food free of contamination, the goods we buy to be well made, everywhere one looks there is accountability. And your constituents demand it of you every four years when we hold elections. So, with due consideration, accountability was built into the Employment First law.

Is the law perfect? No, and we appreciate the need to improve it. So we have worked to develop amendments to Substitute for Senate Bill 195 that will not change the law, nor in fact change the Bill, but that will improve the law and better ensure its success.

Focus will be placed on involving stakeholders in the implementation of the law including both the business and disability communities. In order to determine progress of employment of people with disabilities there must be measurable goals and objectives. Just as accountability is a part of life, so is measurability. Everything is measured to ensure accountability. When buying a car we often want to know miles per gallon, when we go somewhere we check out how far it is and how long it takes to get from one place to another. We are paid certain amounts at work often hourly, weekly or monthly. If we perform well we may receive a salary increase, usually a percentage of our wage because we met certain measurable goals. We set goals for ourselves at work or in school and measure how well we accomplish each goal.

Employment First is a good law as well as a good idea. It not only benefits those with disabilities by helping them become gainfully employed, it benefits the state of Kansas. If people with disabilities are employed they reduce the amount of assistance needed from the state in the form of costly government programs as well as increase their independence. Furthermore, Kansas spends a lot of money educating students who have disabilities. If they graduate to their parents' living room, we are wasting our investment in students with disabilities.

Finally, I would encourage requiring state agencies to "collaborate" with the Commission rather than changing the wording to "in conjunction" with the Commission. "Cooperation" is a stronger word and emphasizes the need for our state agencies to be not just a part of this law, but active participants.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity of providing information regarding a subject of great interest to me and I would be happy to answer any questions.

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