

DOWN SYNDROME

Individuals with Down syndrome are citizens who matter in the workforce

by David Egan | November 05, 2023 07:02 AM



As states nationwide begin to eliminate subminimum wage and the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has announced its review of Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, I urge businesses to continue hiring individuals with disabilities at a competitive wage.

This outdated law was enacted in the 1930s, allowing businesses to receive a certificate to have the ability to pay individuals with disabilities less than the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, the elimination of this specific section would allow individuals with disabilities to earn the federal minimum wage. While this was originally created to incentivize businesses to hire individuals with disabilities, it has left us earning wages that aren't livable.

Currently, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is nearly twice that of people without disabilities. Although it is a good thing that section 14(c) is being eliminated, we're now seeing issues where businesses don't see the incentive to hire us at a lower wage, especially when individuals without disabilities can do the same work.

As an individual with Down syndrome, we contribute to the economy and have abilities to perform at work, in spite of our challenges. Businesses miss a great opportunity when they ignore us and do not include us in the workplace.

Reflecting on my own journey, I have been exceptionally fortunate and am immensely proud of my fulfilling path in competitive employment. I began with a summer internship at Booz Allen Hamilton's distribution center after graduating from high school. Following the completion of my internship, I was offered a full-time job with the company and received full benefits like all other employees, which was not common in 1998! Back then, there were not many companies that hired and paid individuals with disabilities a competitive salary. Booz Allen Hamilton had high expectations and **acknowledged my contributions** to the community, including my honest and strong work ethic. This experience served as the catalyst for my 25-year employment journey and advocacy career.

Low expectations and assumptions about what we are capable of are persistent barriers that stand in the way of opportunity and workplace inclusion. I have since become an author and advocate.

I stand as living proof that the decision to hire individuals with Down syndrome yields positive results – and this has even been supported by research. Studies have shown that **individuals with Down syndrome and disabilities are reliable, consistent, and loyal employees.**

Today, I help to advocate for others with disabilities by showcasing that individuals with Down syndrome, like myself, are not only capable but also valuable assets in the workforce. “Hiring individuals with disabilities is a good business decision and a social responsibility” as I said to Congressional members when I **testified in 2011** in the Senate Committee on Health Education, Labor, and Pensions.

Many people with differing abilities want to work and earn a fair wage, but we need opportunities to be hired. Jobs must exist, but they won't unless employers see the value of hiring us and make an intentional effort to raise their expectations of what we can accomplish. Work is about productivity and making money, but it is also about human interactions and learning to work as a team.

People with disabilities help uncover human values to improve the work environment and company culture. Businesses, like **Bitty and Beau's**, which has over 25 locations in the nation, show how successful businesses can be when hiring individuals with disabilities. I am proud to say that all of my employers, starting with Booz Allen Hamilton, then CBRE, the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation, and Source America recognized my ability and included me fully. In fact, I was “One of Them and Not One Among Them.”

While some progress has been made in recent years in hiring people with disabilities, there is more work that must be done. I encourage businesses to continue hiring individuals with disabilities, especially as we just celebrated National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October. We should empower businesses to open their doors to individuals with intellectual disabilities and see the potential that we bring to the workforce.

We deserve a fair and livable wage, hire us and we'll show you what we're capable of. You will not regret it!

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