

North Dakota Protection and Advocacy Project

Testimony to Interim Workforce Committee
Senator Tony Grindberg, Chairman

August 1, 2008

Good morning, Chairman Grindberg and Members of the Legislative Assembly's Workforce Interim Committee. I am Bruce Murry, a public policy advocate and lawyer for the Protection & Advocacy Project (P&A). P&A is an independent state agency promoting disability rights. I wish to raise two issues important to people with disabilities: finding meaningful and rewarding employment, and hiring qualified workers to provide disability services. P&A works with many other agencies and resources. Please see <http://ndpanda.org/priorities/employment.html> for more information.

P&A has worked with the Governor's Olmstead Commission and its workforce development committee. This committee formed because people with disabilities find it difficult to hire and retain qualified and committed direct care service professionals. This is true whether one experiences disabilities early in life, or from the effects of aging. Agencies, companies, & facilities attempt to provide direct care staff drawn from a broader pool, and with more training. However, they face the same lack of qualified, reliable workers. Market forces in North Dakota have driven wages beyond those traditionally paid to direct care professionals. One pilot workforce development effort is pending within the Department of Human Services following the closure of a nursing facility. The Money Follows the Person Demonstration Project wants to educate displaced workers about opportunities to provide services to former residents in their own homes and communities. P&A believes that service providers, funding agencies, advocates, and people with disabilities are interested in contributing to other solutions to

these challenges. Service providers have indicated a specific interest in this Interim Committee looking at the market for direct service professionals.

P&A and many other agencies are involved in helping people with disabilities find competitive employment. Fourteen percent of North Dakotans age 5 and older have disabilities, and 11 percent of working-age North Dakotans have disabilities. (Cornell University 2006 Disability Status Report.) However, only 27 percent of working age North Dakotans with disabilities actually work full time. Just over half are employed at all. Fourteen percent of unemployed North Dakotans with disabilities are actively looking for work – equal to 1.5% of the total current workforce. This represents both an untapped resource and an unmet need. A few brochures from P&A and other agencies are attached to illustrate some of the challenges, opportunities, and successes experienced in these efforts. People with disabilities, employment agencies, and advocates are interested in helping more people with disabilities fully engage in the workforce.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the workforce development interests of people with disabilities, both as workers and employers. P&A would be very pleased to contribute to future discussions of workforce development, and would be happy to recruit individuals with disabilities, funding agencies, service provider groups, and other advocates to participate.