

**Written Testimony in Support of HB 660: The Student Job Reformation Act
Presented to the Maryland Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
Provided by Lisa Wiederlight, M.P.P./Parent of a Young Adult with Autism and Epilepsy in
Baltimore County
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Thank you for the opportunity to provide my written testimony on this important legislation. I am respectfully requesting your support of this bill to give disabled Marylanders the best chance to use their skills and determination to become the most independent and productive members of our society that they can be.

The Maryland State Department of Education's Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) has a critical function. According to its website, the Division "helps people with physical, emotional, intellectual, developmental, sensory, and learning disabilities to go to work and keep their jobs by providing services such as career assessment and counseling, assistive technology, job training, higher education, and job placement."

Given that people with disabilities usually have a much higher rate of unemployment than those without disabilities, this organization has significant opportunities for improving the economic, social, and emotional well-being of Marylanders with disabilities. By way of example, research from Drexel University found that up to 80 percent of people with autism are under or unemployed. I know from personal experience that people living with autism can absolutely be employed and successful in the workplace.

Do we know how well DORS serves this important function? Has there been an evaluation of the expected versus realized outputs and outcomes from the Division?

My involvement as a DORS stakeholder began when my son was referred to its pre-employment training program during a school IEP meeting. He was about 16 years old. Understanding the need for my son to be included in the community while also receiving job training and socialization with others, I jumped at the chance.

I completed and sent back the mountain of paperwork.

I waited a few weeks patiently while wondering if I should follow up. When someone finally followed up with me., she told me she had a work opportunity doing clerical work at Sinai Hospital. "Hmmm, clerical work" I thought to myself. My son is an outside guy. He loves his volunteer time on a farm, and he enjoyed hanging out with a local college basketball team. I decided to give it a go, but had to clarify first with the caseworker, that my son also has epilepsy, and has a one-on-one aide at school. I'm pretty sure I wrote about that in the paperwork. The caseworker told me she was not sure if the opportunity could accommodate those needs, and that she would get back to me.

She didn't. I called twice and did not receive an answer.

The next communication I received from DORS was a letter essentially telling us that my son was being disenrolled from the program as a result of his lack of participation. My son (and those like him) deserve better than this.

I called back and talked with a supervisor, who told me that she would re-enroll him in the program, and that I would hear from a caseworker soon.

I didn't. And then, I gave up. If they can't even handle professional and necessary administrative paperwork, I wasn't going to trust them to address my son's special needs.

I then spoke with many other parents of children with special needs to see what they thought of DORS. All but one of the numerous parents with whom I spoke told me they had similar negative experiences

with DORS, and that I should not bother even thinking about using DORS to help my son. They told me as long as my son was on the DDA waiting list, that we would be fine.

Why are taxpayers funding an organization that is known by many of its stakeholders to be ineffective? Taking into account the importance of DORS' function, it is critical that the Maryland State Government review and dramatically improve DORS' operation by identifying its challenges and strengths, and then developing appropriate recommendations for improving its effectiveness in serving Marylanders with disabilities, and the businesses who employ them. We can do so much better than this.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important legislation.