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California Legislature  
Senate Select Committee  
on  
Autism & Related Disorders



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INFORMATIONAL HEARING

*Vocational Training & Employment for Individuals  
with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) & Related Disorders:  
Challenges & Innovative Solutions*

August 5<sup>th</sup> 2014  
Tuesday 10AM – Noon;  
Capitol Building Room 112

**Overview & Summary**

This informational hearing will focus on the issues related to achieving successful, productive and effective “employment” of individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Specifically, a panel of experts, consumers, and stakeholders will be convened to provide an overview of the current status of employment opportunities for persons with ASD; to identify the gaps and challenges that currently exist; and to identify innovative and successful models that may enable individuals with this disability to optimize their potential to obtain gainful employment.

The hearing will identify and explore recent advances that have been achieved in such areas as integrated, supported employment and programs that have promoted the policies of “employment-first.” Educational, vocational, and “linked-learning” (career technical education) approaches that promote

employment opportunities will be reviewed. The hearing will review employment opportunities for individuals with the full gamut of ASD, including individuals who require intensive behavioral supports and services.

Currently there are over 70,000 individuals who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and are currently consumers of the California regional center system. ASD is now the most frequently occurring serious developmental disability and is more frequent than juvenile diabetes, childhood cancer and pediatric HIV diseases combined. Currently two-thirds of all new cases entering the regional center system are diagnosed with ASD. It is estimated that the regional centers serve only about 20% of individuals who are on the ASD spectrum.

Since the marked increase in the incidence of ASD (i.e. the "autism epidemic") dates from beginning of the 1990s, we are facing a tsunami of transitioning youths and young adults with this disorder. Nationally, more than 500,000 children with ASD will become adults in the next 15 years. In California, estimates indicate that over 80% of all regional center consumers with ASD are younger than 21 years of age. Currently there are only about 6,000 adults with ASD who are Regional Center consumers. This number will almost double in the next 5 years. By 2018, there will be more than 19,000 adults with ASD in the Regional Center system. Most Regional Centers will see more than a 300% increase in the numbers of adults with ASD during the next decade. The annual expenditure by regional centers for adult consumers with ASD averages \$36,704. This amount is more than double the expenses for adults without ASD (annual average is \$15,935) and almost 6 times greater than the expenditure for children with ASD (annual average is \$6,993.) Thus, California faces a pending crisis that impacts not only numerous individuals and families, but also poses dire fiscal consequences.

Currently persons with ASD, and their families, face a very bleak future as they confront the challenges of transitioning to adulthood. A survey by the University of Miami (2008) provided alarming insights related to employment among individuals with ASD and their families that included the following:

- 67% have no knowledge of transition programs.
- 78% have no knowledge of job development agencies or professionals.
- 74% wanted to work but were unemployed.
- Of those employed, 74% worked < 20 hours per week.
- 85% lived with parents or family members.

Youths and adults with ASD in California are also confronting an uncertain future. California not only ranks 34<sup>th</sup> in disability employment, but regional center consumers suffer from an unemployment rate of over 84%. The unemployment rate among individuals with ASD exceeds 90%. Only 17,623 regional center consumers (less than 7% of the total regional center consumer population) have an earned income. This earned income averages a meager \$4,824 annually. Furthermore, only 9,297 of these individuals participate in supported employment programs.

One autism expert recently opined that vocational education and pre-employment training for many individuals with ASD should begin, “At kindergarten.” Although possibly a hyperbole, this statement underscores the importance of career technical education as a critical factor in achieving a successful outcome for transitional youths with ASD. Although programs such as “Workability” and “Project Search” currently afford prevocational educational opportunities for some students with ASD, transitional employment opportunities remain a serious unmet need. Furthermore, all too often, prevocational education remains underfunded and does not lead to specific jobs or career pathway prospects.

The recent establishment of the “Career Pathway Trust” (CPT) therefore provides an important new approach to employment education and training for students with ASD. The CPT is a \$250 million appropriation in the 2013-2014 California Budget Act to fund competitive grants for high schools, community colleges and their business partners to create pathways “in high-need and high-growth

economic sectors. The goal of the CPT is to establish stronger connections between businesses, California schools, and community colleges to better prepare our students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace. Grants will be available over a three-year period and may be spent by grantees through 2018. Examples of eligible grant activities/expenditures include:

- Work-based learning specialists who can act as brokers between businesses and schools/colleges seeking placements for students.
- Creation of regional career pathway partnerships involving businesses, schools, and colleges.
- Integration of academic and career-based learning, with a focus on career pathways in job-rich economic sectors.

The California Department of Education, who will be administering this program, expects to issue a “request for applications” (RFA) to potential applicants in January, 2014. The CPT is not specifically focused or “targeted” to students with ASD or other special needs. However, this program is open to all students. Therefore, it is a potential funding source for the goals and objectives that will be identified and discussed during the course of this informational hearing.

The issue of integrated and successful employment is a problem that is not confined to individuals with ASD but impacts individuals with a broad array of disabilities, learning differences, and special needs. However, because of the pervasive and extensive challenges and behavioral difficulties related to ASD, the approaches and supports that are effective with this disorder may also be effective in assisting individuals with other disabilities.

Respectfully submitted,

**Louis A. Vismara MD**

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*A “Springboard” to Successful Employment for  
Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder*

The glaring of lack of employment opportunities for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been written about extensively in numerous publications. Various theories have been offered as to why jobs for people with ASD are so abysmally rare. While there is no one catch-all reason that defines the problem, or points to an easy answer, our research, conversations, and experiences over the years reveals some patterns relevant to this issue that are worth mentioning. These “lessons learned” are reflected in the articles we’ve included in the employment hearing binder (please see Tab #6).

One major factor contributing to the dilemma is lack of social and interview skills. While professionally crafted resumes can help, most of the real “nut and bolts” of getting a job are found in the interview process. Individuals with ASD typically have extreme difficulty in this area, and therefore are at profound competitive disadvantage when measured against other candidates in obtaining gainful employment.

Another key component is a shortage of relevant work experience. For obvious reasons, people with ASD just generally don’t have the work history commonly seen with neurotypical job seekers.

As for employers, we have found many of them to be philosophically quite supportive of hiring people with ASD. However, their initial openness and enthusiasm is often tempered by concerns and legitimate questions: How much additional support will the ASD employee need? Does this make sense for me financially? What if things just don’t work out and I have to let the employee go?

These are just a few of the many hurdles individuals with ASD face in finding a job.

Even so, there is hope. Employers are finding creative ways to meet this growing need. Success stories can be found, and we have taken the liberty of offering some of them in this section.

We hope that this informational hearing is a springboard to achieving future employment opportunities for our friends, neighbors, and family members who are overcoming the challenges of Autism Spectrum Disorders.

Respectfully submitted,

**Bob Giovati**

Committee Consultant

Senate Select Committee on Autism & Related Disorders

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- State of California Developmental Disabilities System Employment Data Dashboard.
- Rhode Island Supported employment & Integrated Day Services Consent Decree.
- The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Overview of Title IV.
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- TransCen, Inc.'s WorkLink Program: A New Day for Day Services.
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