



Testimony of David J. DeNotaris, Executive Director of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation

Department of Labor & Industry

Before the Senate State Government Committee on SB 1037

April 16, 2018

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today about SB 1037, and to reflect on my ten years of experience working for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I am privileged to serve as the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR). Last year, OVR's staff of over 1000 worked with more than 70,000 customers, and assisted 9,333 Pennsylvania residents with disabilities find competitive integrated employment in their communities.

As OVR strives to ensure that the most qualified and caring professionals are serving our customers, we experience several difficulties working within the current state hiring processes. As baby boomers retire and other state and federal agencies compete for rehabilitation professionals, an agile, timely, and accommodating process is necessary to allow state agencies to attract, interview, and successfully onboard applicants.

The accessibility of applications and examinations is a critical matter, because if tests are inaccessible, many qualified applicants will never even be considered by state agencies. The inaccessibility of tests is a dead-end for qualified applicants who happen to have a disability and are interested in public service. The lack of professional experience in ensuring accessibility has caused significant delays in the identification and hiring of some qualified applicants.

Additionally, the current examination process requiring testing at designated locations discourages rural and other applicants who must travel. Since reliable transportation is a barrier to employment for some residents, this process unintentionally eliminates a viable candidate pool.

In my experience as OVR Executive Director, I attend numerous conferences, trainings, and public events. Our customers often ask, "Why

aren't Pennsylvania's civil service tests fully accessible?" "Why does it take so long to get an accommodation?" "Why was I denied for a job when it appears I am educationally qualified?"

One example stands out concerning an individual who was totally blind and experienced hearing loss. She had two master's degrees and extensive experience. She wanted to apply for a Business Analyst position to assist the Commonwealth in developing accessible materials, deliver trainings on assistive-technology, and educate staff and customers on the power and potential of assistive-technology. Unfortunately, the individual could not apply because the Business Analyst test had graphs and charts that according to staff at the SCSC could not be made accessible. The irony of this example is truly discouraging. The individual moved on, and the Commonwealth lost a qualified candidate.

The legislation before you, SB 1037, would provide the Office of the Administration (OA) with the important and necessary opportunity to improve our civil service application and examination process. I am extremely impressed by OA's demonstrated commitment to individuals that use assistive technology, and have worked with them in this capacity. For example, OA and OVR spearheaded an assistive technology learning community that meets quarterly. The purpose of this group is to leverage expertise, promote discussion, and provide training on the importance of accessibility as it relates to commonwealth software applications, public facing web content, and best practices for digital infrastructure that is useable and inclusive to all residents. Additionally, this partnership has led to the establishment of an online assistive technology learning community listserv. This list allows state agencies to ask questions, resolve issues, and collaborate on complex digital matters insuring that accessibility is considered and not an afterthought.

For these reasons, I believe that SB 1037 is consistent with OVR's mission of providing employment-related skills, services, and opportunities, and otherwise leveling the employment playing field for individuals with a disability. Therefore, OVR strongly supports SB 1037 and would urge enactment of it into law this year.

In the past three years, OVR has assisted more than 27,000 residents with disabilities in finding real jobs with real pay. Our statistics show that 200 of those were employed by a Commonwealth agency. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), one out of five Americans have a disabling condition. The goal of Governor Wolf's Employment First Executive Order is to make the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania a model state when it comes to creating a climate hospitable to workers with a disability. Diversity makes

the Commonwealth smarter, stronger, and more innovative, which helps us better serve the needs of customers, staff, and our communities.

Several stakeholder groups have contacted OVR in support of developing a flexible, responsive, and accessible examination process that would improve opportunities for people with disabilities and position the Commonwealth as a model employer. The current system of hiring, which many people find discouraging and frustrating, must be replaced with more modern practices that place a positive emphasis on an individual's abilities instead of disabilities.

If we may provide you with additional information, we would be honored to do so.