

OPINION EXCHANGE

Counterpoint: Some with disabilities would be harmed by minimum-wage changes proposed in Minnesota

Where does this leave those who will never be able to qualify for work outside of a highly structured sheltered workshop environment?

By Donna Hanbery : MARCH 14, 2023 — 5:45PM

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The Star Tribune has been a cheerleader and advocate for a law that would end sub-minimum wages for Minnesotans with disabilities. The paper's coverage, like the March 13 front page story "[Higher expectations](https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-disabilities-subminimum-wage-work-sheltered-workshop-civil-rights-federal-legislation/600258249/)," (<https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-disabilities-subminimum-wage-work-sheltered-workshop-civil-rights-federal-legislation/600258249/>) has featured people with disabilities who are able to perform jobs earning standard wages, as success stories. There is no mention of the "not so abled" that the law would leave behind.

The article reports that sheltered workshops "took advantage" of a loophole in the federal minimum wage law and exploited people with disabilities doing work where they are "stuck" in menial jobs, such as sorting garbage or packing boxes, and are paid in line with productivity.

The newspaper and disability advocates are championing a [bill](https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?view=chrono&f=HF2513&y=2023&ssn=0&b=house) (<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?view=chrono&f=HF2513&y=2023&ssn=0&b=house>) that would close all sheltered workshops as "outdated and discriminatory."

This coverage does not mention beneficiaries of these programs who will never be able to qualify for work outside of a highly structured, "sheltered" workshop environment.

I have a nephew with Angelman syndrome, a serious genetic disability. He is nonverbal and requires 24/7 care. But he is highly social. He loves being around "his people." If supervised and motivated, he can perform some of those "menial" tasks. Sheltered workshop environments gave him an opportunity to interact with others and to enjoy the benefits of meaningful work that suited his abilities. His work provided him social interactions with others of varying skills.



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"Between COVID and the closing of the few remaining work programs, my nephew now has few opportunities to get out of the house and

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I don't know the number of people who will forever lose such opportunities to get out of the house and to work in a safe and structured environment. For my nephew and his parents, it was never about the money. He made only \$70 one year. His parents put the money in his "fun money pouch." He knew it was money he had earned. His parents helped him spend it on fun activities.

The highly supervised work structure helped him be more responsive when he was with his personal care attendant. The program saved his parents thousands of dollars in paid professional care.

Between COVID and the closing of the few remaining work programs, my nephew now has few opportunities to get out of the house and be in society. The structured workshops had kind staff who labored diligently to provide individuals with serious disabilities some of the joys and rewards of work.

When everyone at the Star Tribune is finished patting one another on the back for supporting the law that would abolish these sheltered workshops, I would urge them to talk to some of the family members and program participants who will not benefit from the closing of these facilities. These families won't be celebrating the new law as a victory for the "not so able." The new law trades more isolation and no opportunities for some for minimum wage for others.

My nephew has been on the waitlists of several facilities for respite or adult care for years. The only thing longer than those waitlists is the wait for people willing to work in these facilities.

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Before our lawmakers rush to pass this legislation, it would be nice to see some coverage of the rest of the story.

Donna Hanbery, of Edina, is an attorney.