

OPPORTUNITIES FOR OHIOANS WITH DISABILITIES COMMISSION

Testimony of Dr. Jack A. Licate, Chairman
May 3, 2016

Chairman Jordan and Members of the Committee:

I am Jack Licate, Chair of the Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities Commission. My fellow Commissioners elected me to this position last October. As an example of the bipartisan manner in which the Commission operates, I was first appointed to the Commission by Governor Strickland and re-appointed by Governor Kasich. I now live in Cuyahoga County, but was born and raised in Ashtabula County.

I come before you today to express opposition to a proposal that would create an advisory state rehabilitation council. Establishment of such a body would throw into disarray the State's efforts to partner with people with disabilities to find competitive employment. There are two reasons for my opposition: first, by disrupting the existing proven and productive working relationship between the Commission and the state agency and, second, by disempowering people with disabilities. Let me explain my two reasons.

First, creating a state rehabilitation council would destroy the current OOD Commission and its Consumer Advisory Committee, whose members the OOD Commissioners appoint. The vast majority of our membership is made up of people with disabilities, who hail from all parts of the State. Neither our Commission nor our Consumer Advisory Committee have as members state employees, spokespersons of organizations that represent people with disabilities, or nonprofit or for-profit entities who contract with the State to provide services to people with disabilities.

We are a bipartisan group and have a close working relationship with the Director and staff of the Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities agency.

It is that close working relationship and the resulting adoption of new management methods that is making our State a national leader in partnering

with people with disabilities to find competitive employment. Our major accomplishments in the last year include:

- Elimination of a waiting list of 5,000 persons with disabilities to access our services. This was the first time since 1991 that we were able to provide vocational rehabilitation services to all Ohioans with disabilities who sought our services;

- Partnering with 4,600 individuals with disabilities to find employment. We are on track to surpass the number by perhaps 50% this year;

- Establishing a strong and productive working relationship with Ohio's business community to hire people with disabilities through the 100 members of the rapidly expanding Ohio Business Leadership Network;

- Becoming a national leader in efficiency and accuracy of determining the eligibility of more than 200,000 applications for Social Security disability.

This is a promising time for Ohioans with disabilities seeking employment because of the implementation of the new federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act that will revolutionize the search for employment. In conformance with this law our Commission recently approved Ohio's new Vocational Rehabilitation Plan, and we are already establishing new working relationships with other State agencies, nonprofit organizations, local public entities, and, especially the private sector, in serving Ohioans with disabilities in seeking competitive work.

We all should be proud of Ohio's way of working to serve people with disabilities in their employment quest. We are unique among the states and the envy of many. Our Commission is an independent consumer-constituted body recognized under both federal and State law because, unlike other states, we have here a freestanding State agency in OOD entirely dedicated to working with people with disabilities to seek employment. And, unlike other states, the Commission's role is not only advising the OOD agency but also advocating for people with disabilities, and, most notably, approving the State Plan for Vocational Rehabilitation and parts of the State Plan for Independent Living. It is this oversight and approval process that empowers Ohioans with disabilities and enables them to have a say in how they can

live independently and become economically self-sufficient.

This brings up the second reason for opposition to the elimination of our current structure by creating a state rehabilitation council. Such a change would:

- deliver a major blow to Ohioans with disabilities since it would eliminate the oversight and approval role we now play in shaping employment policy and diminish the role people with disabilities now have in determining their future;

- upset the progress we have been making in increasing the number of Ohioans with disabilities seeking competitive employment because it would scramble existing working relationships and have the potential of turning positive working relationships into adversarial ones.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, this is not the time to disrupt the proven and productive working partnership between the OOD Commission, its Consumer Advisory Council, and the state agency working to secure competitive employment for people with disabilities.

Thank you very much for your consideration. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.